

Webster Frank V.

Airship Andy: or, The Luck of a Brave Boy



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Airship Andy; Or, The Luck of a Brave Boy

CHAPTER I – THE YOUNG CHAUFFEUR

“Hand over that money, Andy Nelson.”

“Not on this occasion.”

“It isn’t yours.”

“Who said it was?”

“It belongs to the business. If my father was here he’d make you give it up mighty quick. I represent him during his absence, don’t I? Come, no fooling; I’ll take charge of that cash.”

“You won’t, Gus Talbot. The man that lost that money was my customer, and it goes back to him and no one else.”

Gus Talbot was the son of the owner of Talbot’s Automobile Garage, at Princeville. He was a genuine chip off the old block, people said, except that he loafed while his father really worked. In respect to shrewd little business tricks, however, the son stood on a par with the father. He had just demonstrated this to Andy Nelson, and was trying his usual tactics of bluff and bluster. These did not work with Andy, however, who was the soul of honor, and the insolent scion of the Talbot family now faced his father’s hired boy highly offended and decidedly angry.

Andy Nelson was a poor lad. He was worse off than that, in fact, for he was homeless and friendless. He could not remember his parents. He had a faint recollection of knocking about the country until he was ten years of age with a man who called himself his half-brother. Then this same relative placed him in a cheap boarding school where Andy had to work for a part of his keep. About a year previous to the opening of our story, Dexter Nelson appeared at the school and told Andy he would have to shift entirely for himself.

He found Andy a place with an old farmer on the outskirts of Princeville. Andy was not cut out for hoeing and plowing. He was willing and energetic, however, and the old farmer liked him immensely, for Andy saved his oldest boy from drowning in the creek, and was kind and lovable to the farmer’s several little children. But one day the old man told Andy plainly that he could not reconcile his conscience by spoiling a bright future for him, and explained why.

“If I was running a wagon-shop, lad,” he said enthusiastically, “I’d make you head foreman. Somehow, you’ve got machinery born in your blood, I think. The way you’ve pottered over that old rack of mine, shows how you like to dabble with tools. The way you fixed up that old washing-machine for marm proves that you know your business. Tell you, lad, it’s a crying wrong to waste your time on the farm when you’ve got that busy head of yours running over with cogs, and screws, and wheels and such.”

All this had led to Andy looking around for other employment. The old farmer was quite right – Andy’s natural field was mechanics. He felt pretty happy the day he was accepted as the hired boy in Seth Talbot’s garage.

That position was not secured without a great deal of fuss and bother on the part of Talbot, however. The latter was a hard task-master. He looked his prospective apprentice over as he would a new tool he was buying. He offered a mere beggarly pittance of wages, barely enough to keep body and soul together, and “lodgings,” as he called it, on a broken-down cot in a dark, cramped lumber-room. Then he insisted on Andy getting somebody to “guarantee” him.

“I’ll have no boy taking advantage of me,” he declared; “learning the secrets of the trade, and bouncing off and leaving me in the lurch whenever it suits him. No sir-ree. If you come with

me, it's a contract for two years' service, or I don't want you. When I was a boy they 'prenticed a lad, and you knew where you could put your finger on him. It ought to be the law now."

Fortunately, Andy's half-brother happened to pass through the village about that time. He "guaranteed" Andy in some manner satisfactory to the garage proprietor, and Andy went to work at his new employment.

Talbot had formerly been in the hardware business. He seemed to think that this entitled him to know everything that appertained to iron and steel. When roller skating became a fad, he had sold out his business, built a big rink, and in a year was stranded high and dry. The bicycle fever caught him next, but he went into it just as everybody else was getting out of it. The result was another failure.

Now he had been in the automobile business for about six months. He had bought an old ramshackly paint-shop on the main street of the town, and had fixed it up so that it was quite presentable as a garage.

There were not many resident owners of automobiles in Princeville. Just at its outskirts, however, along the shore of a pretty lake, were the homes of some retired city folks. During the vacation months a good many people having machines summered at the town. Some of them stored their automobiles at the garage. Talbot claimed to do expert repairing, and as a good road ran through Princeville he managed to do some business with transient customers who came along.

Before he had been in the garage twenty-four hours, Andy was amazed and disgusted at the clumsy clap-trap repairing work that Talbot did. He half-mended breaks and leaks that would not last till a car reached its destination. He put in inferior parts, and on one occasion Andy saw his employer substitute an old tire for one almost new.

Andy tried to remedy all this. He was at home with tools, and inside of a week he was thoroughly familiar with every part of an automobile. He induced Talbot to send to the city for many important little adjuncts to ready repairing, and his employer soon realized that he had a treasure in his new assistant.

He did not, however, manifest it by any exhibition of liberality. In fact, as the days wore on Andy's tasks were piled up mountain high, and Talbot became a merciless tyrant in his bearing. Once when Andy earned a double fee by getting out of bed at midnight and hauling into town a car stuck in a mud-hole, he promised Andy a raise in salary and a new suit the next week. This promise, however, Talbot at once proceeded to forget.

It was Andy who was responsible for nearly doubling the income of his hard task-master. He heard of a big second-hand tourist car in the city, holding some thirty people, and told Talbot about it. The latter bought it for a song, and every Saturday, and sometimes several days in the week, the car earned big money taking visitors sight-seeing around the lake or conveying villagers to the woods on picnic parties.

Later Andy struck a great bargain in two old cars that were offered for sale by a resident who was going to Europe. He influenced Talbot to advertise these for rent by the day or hour, and the garage began to thrive as a real money-making business.

This especial morning Andy had arisen as usual at five o'clock. He cooked his own meals on a little oil-stove in the lumber room behind the garage, and after a cup of coffee and some broiled ham and bread and butter, went to work cleaning up three machines that rented space.

It was a few minutes before six o'clock, and just after the morning train from the city had steamed into town and out of it again, when a well-dressed man, carrying a light overcoat over one arm and a satchel, rushed through the open door of the garage.

"Hey!" he hailed. "They told me at the depot I could hire an automobile here."

"Yes, sir," replied Andy promptly.

"I want to cut across the country and catch the Macon train on the Central. There's just forty-five minutes to do it in."

“I can do it in twenty,” announced Andy with confidence. “Jump in, sir.”

In less than two minutes they were off, and the young chauffeur proved his agility and handiness with the machine in so rapid and clever a way, that his fare nodded and smiled his approval as they skimmed the smooth country road on a test run.

Andy made good his promise. It was barely half-past six when, with a honk-honk! to warn a clumsy teamster ahead of him, he ran the machine along the side of the depot platform at Macon.

“How much?” inquired his passenger, leaping out and reaching into his vest pocket.

“Our regular rate is two dollars an hour,” explained Andy.

“There’s five – never mind the change,” interrupted the gentleman. “And here’s a trifle for yourself for being wide-awake while most people are asleep.”

“Oh, thank you, sir!” exclaimed Andy, overjoyed, but the man disappeared with a pleasant wave of his hand before the boy could protest against such unusual generosity.

Andy’s eyes glowed with pleasure and his heart warmed up as he stowed the handsome five-dollar tip into his little purse containing a few silver pieces. He had never had so much money all his own at any time in his life. Once a tourist in settling a day’s jaunt with Talbot in Andy’s presence had added a two-dollar bill for his chauffeur, but this Talbot had immediately shoved into his money drawer without even a later reference to it.

Andy got back to the garage before seven o’clock. He whistled cheerily as he made a notation on the book of his fare and the collection, unlocked the desk, put the five dollars in the tin cash box, and relocked the desk.

Then he busied himself cleaning up the machine that had just made such a successful spin, for the roads were pretty dusty. As he pulled out the carpet of the tonneau to shake, something fell to the floor.

It was an old worn flat leather pocketbook. In a flash Andy guessed that his recent passenger had accidentally dropped it in the car.

He opened it in some excitement. It had a deep flap on one side. From this protruded the edges of a dozen crisp new banknotes. Andy ran them over quickly.

“Two hundred dollars!” he exclaimed.

“What’s that?” spoke a sharp, greedy voice at his ear.

It was Gus Talbot, his employer’s son, who had just appeared on the scene. It was pretty early for him, for Gus paraded as the cashier of his father’s business and stayed around the garage on an average of about three hours a day. Most of his time was spent at a village billiard room in the company of a bosom chum named Dale Billings.

Andy was somewhat taken off his balance by the unexpected appearance of his employer’s son. It was really the shock of recognizing in the face of the newcomer the manners and avarice that he shared with his father. Almost instinctively Andy put the hand holding the pocketbook behind him. Then he said simply:

“I took a quick fare over to Macon to catch a train. He paid me five dollars. It’s in the cash drawer.”

“Oh, it is,” drawled out Gus, “and what about all the money I just caught you counting over?”

“It’s a pocketbook containing two hundred dollars,” replied Andy clearly, disdaining the slur and insult in the tones of his low-spirited challenger. “It was dropped by the man I just took over in the machine. I’ve got to return it to him some way. I might get to the station here in time to notify him by telegraph before his train leaves Macon that I’ve found the pocketbook.”

“Hold on,” ordered Gus Talbot. “Hand over that money, Andy Nelson.”

And then followed the conversation that opens this chapter, and Andy had barely announced that the pocketbook would go back to its owner and to no one else, when Gus made a jump at him.

“Give up that money, I say!” he yelled, and his big, eager fist clutched the pocketbook.

CHAPTER II – BREAKING AWAY

“Let go of that pocketbook!” ordered Gus Talbot angrily.

“When I do, tell me,” retorted Andy.

The young chauffeur knew that once the money got into the hands of the Talbots, father or son, its return to its rightful owner would be extremely dubious. He had proven himself a match for Gus in more than one encounter in the past, and that was why Gus hated him. Andy reached out one hand not at all gently. He gave his opponent a push under the chin.

Gus Talbot went flat to the floor of the garage with a howl. He had not, however, let go his grip on the pocketbook. The result was that it had torn squarely in two. Andy directed a speedy glance at the half in his own hand. He was reassured, for he had retained the part holding the banknotes.

“You can keep what you have got,” he advised Gus, with a little triumphant laugh. “I’ll put this where you won’t get your paws on it.”

With the words Andy ran through the front open doorway of the garage and down the street in the direction of the business section of the village.

Primarily anxiety to bestow the money in a safe place impelled his flight. Three other reasons, however, helped to influence him in leaving the field ingloriously.

In the first place, Gus Talbot was a wicked terror when he got mad. It was nothing for him to pick up a hatchet, a wrench or an iron bar and sail into an enemy when his cowardly fists failed him. Andy might have remained to give the mean craven a further lesson, but chancing to glance through a side window he saw the chosen crony of Gus approaching. Dale Billings was the bully of the town. He had left Andy severely alone after tackling him once. With Gus and Dale both against him, however, Andy decided that there would be little show of retaining possession of the money.

The third reason was more potent and animating than any of the others. Just crossing lots from his home and headed for the garage direct was its proprietor. If Andy had had any confidence in the sense of justice and rectitude of Talbot he would have stood his ground. He had none, and therefore made a rash resolve. It was open defiance of his harsh employer, and there would be a frightful row later on, but Andy’s mind was made up. He had reached the next corner and flashed around it and out of sight before Gus Talbot had gained his feet.

Fifteen minutes later Andy Nelson reappeared at the end of a secluded street near the edge of the village. He was slightly breathless, and looked excited, and glanced back of him keenly before he sat down on a tree stump to rest and think.

“I’ve done my duty,” he murmured; “but it will make things so hot at the garage I don’t think I’ll go back there.”

Andy indulged in a spell of deep reflection. For some time he had realized that he was giving his best energies to a man who did not appreciate them. His work had grown harder and harder. Whenever a complaint came in about imperfect work, due to the sloppy methods of Talbot, the garage owner made Andy shoulder all the blame.

“He talks about a two-years’ contract, and tries to scare me about what the law will do to me if I leave him,” soliloquized Andy. “Has he kept his part of the bargain? Did he give me the increase in pay and the suit of clothes he promised? No, he didn’t. I’ve got something in me, but it will kill it all out to stay in this place. I’ve got five dollars as a nest-egg, and I’m going to start out on my own hook.”

Andy was fully determined on his course. Perhaps if the incident of the morning had not come up, he might have delayed his decision. He knew very well, however, that if he went back to the garage Talbot would raise a big row, and he would also get hold of the two hundred dollars if it were possible for him to do so. Some day Andy feared the Talbots would play one too many of their uncertain tricks and involve him in an imputation of dishonesty.

“It’s straight ahead, and never turn back,” declared Andy decisively, and started down the road.

“Hold on there, young man!” challenged a voice that gave Andy a thrill.

Running around the curve in the road Andy had just traversed, red-faced and flustered, Seth Talbot came bearing down upon him.

Andy might have halted, but the sight of Gus Talbot and Dale Billings bringing up the rear armed with heavy sticks so entirely suggested an onslaught of force that he changed his mind. He paid no attention whatever to the furious shouts and direful threats of Talbot.

Andy put ahead at renewed speed. At a second turn in the highway a man was raking up hay, and he suspended his work and stared at the fugitive and his pursuers, as Talbot roared out:

“Stop him, Jones – he’s a runaway and a thief!”

Farmer Jones was not spry enough to shorten the circuit Andy made, but he thrust out the rake to its full length. Andy’s foot caught in its tines, dragged, tripped, and the boy went flat to the ground.

“I’ve got him!” hailed Jones, promptly pouncing down upon him.

“Hold him!” panted Talbot, rushing to the spot, and his hard, knotty fingers got an iron clutch on Andy’s coat collar and jerked him to his feet.

“What’s the trouble, neighbor?” projected the farmer curiously.

“A thief isn’t the matter!” shot out Andy hotly, recalling the words of his employer.

“You’ll have to prove that,” blustered Talbot. “If you’re innocent, what are you running for?”

“I was running away from you,” admitted Andy boldly, “because I want to be honest and decent.”

“What’s that?” roared the irate Talbot. “Do you hear him, Jones? He admits he was going to break his contract with me. Well, the law will look to that, you ungrateful young cub!”

“Law! contract!” cried Andy scornfully, fully roused up and fearless now. “Have you kept your contract with me? You don’t want me, you want that two hundred dollars – ”

“Shut up! Shut up!” yelled Talbot, and he muzzled Andy with one hand and dragged him away from the spot. Farmer Jones grinned after them, and he shrugged his shoulders grimly as he noticed Gus Talbot and Dale Billings halted down the road, as if averse to coming any nearer.

“Pears to me you’re having a good deal of trouble with your boys, Talbot,” chuckled Jones. “That son of yours got a few cracks from my cane last evening when he was helping himself to some of my honey among the hives.”

Once out of hearing of the farmer, Gus Talbot edged up to his father.

“Has he got the money?” he inquired eagerly. “Make him tell, father, search him.”

“I’ll attend to all that,” retorted the elder Talbot gruffly. “Here, you two fall behind. There’s no need of attracting attention with a regular procession.”

Talbot did not relax his hold of the prisoner until they had reached the garage. He roughly threw Andy into the lumber room. Then, panting and irritated from his unusual exertions, he planted himself in the doorway. Gus and Dale hovered about, anxious to learn the outcome of the row.

“Now then, Andy Nelson,” commenced the garage owner, “I’ve just a few questions to ask you, and you’ll answer them quick and right, or it will be the worse for you.”

“It has certainly never been the best for me around here,” declared Andy bitterly, “but I’ll tell the truth, as I always do.”

“Did you find a pocketbook with some money in it in one of my cars?”

“I did,” admitted Andy – “two hundred dollars. It belonged to my fare, who lost it, and it’s going back to him.”

“Hand it over.”

“I can’t do that.”

“Why not?” demanded Talbot stormily.

“Because I haven’t got it.”

“Who has?”

“Mr. Dawson, the banker. I took it to him when I left the garage.”

“Oh, you did?” muttered Seth Talbot, looking baffled and furious.

“Yes, sir. I told him that it was lost money, explained the circumstances, and that if a certain Mr. Robert Webb called or telegraphed for it, to let him have it.”

“Is that the name of the man you took over to Macon?”

“That is the name written in red ink on the flap of the pocketbook,” and Andy drew out the former receptacle of the banknotes. “‘Robert Webb, Springfield.’ I shall write to him at Springfield and tell him where the money is.”

Seth Talbot fairly glared at Andy. He got up and wriggled and hemmed and hawed, and sat down again.

“Young man,” he observed in as steady tone of voice as he could command, “you’ve shown a sight of presumption in taking it on yourself to lay out my business system. Here you’ve gone and implied that I was not fit to be trusted.”

Andy was silent.

“I won’t have it; no, I won’t have it!” shouted the garage-keeper. “It’s an imputation on my honor! I’ll give you just one chance to redeem yourself. You go back to the bank and tell Mr. Dawson that we’ve got on the direct track of the owner of the money, and bring it back here.”

“That would be a lie,” said Andy.

“Don’t we know where he is?”

“In a general way, but so does the bank. It would be a cheat, too, for I don’t believe you want to get the money back to its rightful owner any more than you wanted to pay me the tip that passenger left here for me last week.”

Andy had been too bold. Talbot rose up, towering with rage. He sprang upon Andy, and threw him upon the cot, holding him there by sheer brute strength.

“Here, you Gus – Dale!” he shouted. “Off with his hat and shoes. And his coat – no, let me look that over first. Aha!”

Gus Talbot considered it high sport to assail a defenceless and outnumbered adversary. He and Dale snatched off cap and shoes without gentleness or ceremony. Talbot had got hold of Andy’s little purse and had brought to light the five dollars so carefully folded and stowed away there.

“Honest? Ha, ha! Decent? Ho, ho!” railed the old wretch. “Where did you get this five dollars without stealing it?”

“Bet he got ten dollars for the run to Macon and held back half of it,” chimed in Gus.

“My fare gave it to me for making good time,” explained Andy. “If you don’t believe it, write to him.”

“Yah!” jibed Talbot; “tell that to the marines!”

He kicked Andy’s shoes and cap under a bench in the outer room and threw his coat up among a lot of old rubbish on a platform under the roof.

“Get the strongest padlock and hasp in the place,” he ordered his son, “and secure that door. As to you, young man,” he continued to Andy, “I’ll give you till night to make up your mind to get back that money.”

“I never will,” declared Andy positively.

“Boy,” said Seth Talbot, fixing his eye on Andy in a way that made his blood chill, “you’ll do it, as I say, or I’ll thrash you within an inch of your life.”

CHAPTER III – RUNAWAY AND ROVER

The door of the lumber room was slammed shut on Andy and strongly locked, and the lad resigned himself to the situation. The Talbots, father and son, aided by brutal Dale Billings, had handled him pretty roughly, and he was content to lie on the cot and prepare for what was coming next.

“They’ve pretty nearly stripped me, and they’ve got all my money,” reflected Andy. “I wish now I had dropped a postal card to Mr. Robert Webb at Springfield. I’ll do it, though, the first thing, when I get out of this fix.”

Andy was bound to get out of it in some way. It would be rashness complete to try it right on the spur of the moment. However, he had till night to think things over, and the youth felt pretty positive that long before then he would hit upon some plan of escape.

In a little while Andy got up and took stock of his surroundings. The partition that shut in the lumber room was made of common boards. With a good-sized sledge, Andy could batter it to pieces, but he had no tools, and glancing through a crack he saw Talbot and his son in the little front office ready to pounce on him at a minute’s notice.

There was a long narrow box lying up against the inside surface of the partition boards. Andy had used this to hold his little kit of kitchen utensils. He removed these now, and lifted the box on end under the only outside aperture the lumber room presented. This was a little window, way up near the ceiling. When Andy reached this small, square hole, cut through a board, he discerned that he could never hope to creep through it.

Glancing down into the rear yard he made out Dale Billings, seated on a saw-horse, aimlessly whittling at a stick, and he decided that the ally of the Talbots was on guard there to watch out for any attempted escape in that direction.

However, when Andy had done a little more looking around in his prison-room, he made quite an encouraging discovery. Where the box had stood originally there was a broad, loose board. Dampness had weakened one end, and a touch pulled it away from the nails that held it. With one or two vigorous pulls, Andy saw he might rip the board out of place its entire length. This, however, would make a great noise, would arouse his captors, and he would have to run the gantlet the whole reach of the garage space.

“It’s my only show, though,” decided Andy, “and I’ll keep it in mind for later on.”

Towards noon Andy made a meal of some scraps of food he found in his little larder. It was not a very satisfying meal, for his stock of provisions had run low that morning and he had intended replenishing it during the day.

About two o’clock in the afternoon Andy fancied he saw his chance for making a break for liberty. Talbot was in the office. There was only one automobile in the garage. This was a car that the proprietor’s son had just backed in. Andy could figure it out that Gus had just returned from a trip. He leaped out of the machine, simply throwing out the power clutch, with the engine still in motion, as if intending to at once start off again.

Gus ran to the office, and through the crack in the partition Andy saw him scan the open page of the daily order book. Our hero determined on a bold move. He leaned down in the corner of the lumber room and seized the end of the loose plank at the bottom of the partition with both hands, and gave it a pull with all his strength.

R – r – rip – bang!

Andy went backwards with a slam. The board had broken off at the nail-heads of the first rafter with a deafening crack. He dropped the fragment and dove through the aperture disclosed to him. He could hear startled conversation in the office, but it was no time to stop for obstacles

now. Andy came to his feet in the garage room, made a superb spring, cleared the hood of the automobile, and, after a scramble, landed in the driver's seat.

With a swoop of his right hand, Andy grasped the lever, his left clutching the wheel. The car shot for the door in a flash. Gus Talbot had run out of the office. He saw the machine coming, and who manned it. Andy noticed him poising for a spring, snatched up the dust robe in the seat by his side, gave it a whirl, and forged ahead.

The robe wound around the face and shoulders of Gus, sending him staggering back, discomfited. Andy circled into the street away from town, turned down the south turnpike, and breathed the air of freedom with rapture.

"All I want is a safe start. I can't afford to leave the record behind me that I stole a machine," he reflected. "It's bad enough as it is now, with all the lies Talbot will tell. She's gone stale!"

The automobile wheezed down to an abrupt halt. It was just as it came to a curve near the Jones farm, and almost at the identical spot where Andy had been captured that morning. He cast a quick glance behind. No one was as yet visible in pursuit, and there was no other machine in the garage. One was handy not a square away from it, however. Andy had noticed a physician's car there as he sped along. The Talbots would not hesitate to impress it into service. At any rate, they would start some pursuit at once.

Andy guessed that some of Gus Talbot's careless tactics had put the magneto or carburetor out of commission. It would take fully five minutes to adjust things in running order. No one was in view ahead. There were all kinds of opportunities to hide before an enemy came upon the scene.

Right at the side of the road was the hayfield of the Jones farm. Andy leaped a ditch and started to get to the thin line of scrub oak beyond which lay the creek. He passed three haystacks and they now pretty well shut him out from the road. As he was passing the fourth one, he stumbled, hopped about on one foot with a sharp cry of pain, and dropped down in the stubble.

Andy had tripped over a scythe blade which the stubble had hidden from his view. His ankle had struck the back of the blade, then his foot had turned and met the edge of the scythe. A long, jagged gash, which began to bleed profusely, was the result. Andy struggled to his feet and leaned up against the side of the haystack in some dismay. He measured the distance to the brush with his eye.

"I've got to make it if I want to be safe," the boy decided, wincing with the pain of his injured foot, but resolute to grin and bear it till he had the leisure to attend to it.

A shout halted Andy. It came from the direction of the barn, and he fancied it was Farmer Jones giving orders to some of his men. Half decided to make a run of it anyway, he made a sudden plunge into the haystack and nestled there.

A clatter had come from the direction of the roadway he had just left. Glancing in that direction, through a break in the trees, Andy had caught a flashing view of Gus Talbot, bareheaded and excited, in a light wagon, and lashing the horse attached to it furiously.

Andy drew farther back in among the hay, nesting himself out a comfortable burrow. He ventured to part the hay as he heard a great commotion in the direction of the road. He could trace the arrival of Gus, his discovery of the stalled automobile, and the flocking of Farmer Jones and his men to the spot.

Then in a little while the garage-keeper and Dale Billings arrived in another machine. Some arrangement was made to take the various vehicles back to the village. Then Seth Talbot, his son, and two of the farm hands scattered over the field, making for the brush. They went in every direction. A vigorous hunt was on, and Andy realized that it would be wise for him to keep close to his present cover for some time to come.

His foot was bleeding badly, and he paid what attention to it he could. He removed his stockings, bound up the wound with a handkerchief, and drew both stockings over the injured member.

It was pretty irksome passing the time in his enforced prison, and finally Andy went to sleep. It was late dusk when he woke up. He parted the hay, and took as good a look around as he could. No one was in sight, apparently, but he had no idea of venturing forth for some hours to come.

"I'm going to leave Princeville," he ruminated, "but I can't go around the world hatless, coatless and barefooted. I don't dare venture back to the garage for any of my belongings. That place will probably be watched all the time for my return. Talbot, too, has probably telephoned his 'stop thief' description of me everywhere. It's the river route or nothing, if I expect to get safely away from this district. Before I go, though, I'm going to see Mr. Dawson."

This was the gentleman to whom Andy had entrusted the two hundred dollars. Andy had a very favorable opinion of him. The village banker was a great friend of the boys of the town. He had started them in a club, had donated a library, and Andy had attended two of his moving-picture lectures. After the last one, Mr. Dawson had taken occasion to pass a pleasant word with Andy, commending his attention to the lecture. When Andy had taken the two hundred dollars to him that morning, the banker had placed his hand on his shoulder, with the remark: "You are a good, honest boy, Nelson, and I want to see you later."

"I'll wait until about nine o'clock," planned Andy, "when most of the town is asleep, and go to Mr. Dawson's house. There's a lecture at the club to-night, I know, and he won't get home till after ten. I'll hide in the garden and catch him before he goes into the house. I'll tell him my story, and ask him to lend me enough to get some shoes and the other things I need. I know he'll do it, for he's an honest, good-hearted man."

This prospect made Andy light of heart as time wore on. It must have been fully half-past eight when he began to stir about, preparatory to leaving his hiding-place. He moved his injured foot carefully. It was quite sore and stiff, but he planned how he would line the timber townwards and stop at a spring and bathe and dress it again. He mapped out a long and obscure circuit of the village to reach the home of the banker unobserved.

Andy was just about to emerge from the haystack when the disjointed murmur of conversation was borne to his ears. He drew back, but peered through the hay as best he could. It was bright moonlight. Just dodging from one haystack to another at a little distance, Andy made out Gus Talbot and Dale Billings.

"Come on," he heard the latter say – "now's our chance."

"They must be still looking for me," he told himself.

There was no further view nor indication of the proximity of the twain during the next hour, but caution caused Andy to defer his intended visit to the banker.

"The coast seems all clear now," he told himself at last, and Andy crept out of the haystack, but promptly crept back again.

Of a sudden a great echoing shout disturbed the silence of the night. Some one in the vicinity of the farmhouse yelled out wildly:

"Fire!"

CHAPTER IV – DOWN THE RIVER

“Fire – fire!”

The cry that had rung out so startlingly was repeated many times. Andy could trace a growing commotion. His burrow in the haystack faced away from the buildings of the Jones farm, but in a minute or two a great glare was visible even through his hay shield.

Andy did not dare to venture out from his hiding-place. From increasing shouts and an uproar, he could understand that the Jones household, and then the families of neighbors were thronging to the fire. Some of these latter, making a short cut from the road, passed directly by the haystack in which he was hiding.

“It’s the barn,” spoke a voice.

“That’s what it is, and blazing for good,” was responded excitedly, and the breathless runners hurried on.

Andy made up his mind that he would have to stay where he was for some time to come, if he expected to avoid capture. Very soon people from the village came trooping to the scene. He could trace the shouts of the bucket brigade. He heard one or two automobiles come down the road. The glare grew brighter and the crowd bigger. Soon, however, the stubble-field began to get shadowed again, he noticed.

It must have taken the barn an hour to burn up. People began to repass the haystacks on their return trips. Andy caught many fragments of conversation. He heard a man remark:

“They managed to save the livestock.”

“Yes,” was responded; “but Jones says a couple of thousand dollars won’t cover his loss.”

“What caused it, anyhow?”

“It was a mystery to Jones, he says, until Talbot came along. They seemed to fix up a theory betwixt them.”

“What was that?”

“Why, Jones was sort of hot and bitter about some boys who have bothered him a lot of late. He walloped one or two of them. Young Gus Talbot was among them. Jones was hinting around about the fire being set for revenge, when Talbot spoke up and reminded him that he had headed off that runaway apprentice of Talbot’s this morning.”

“Oh, the boy they’re looking for – Andy?”

“Yes, Andy Nelson. He’s the one that set the fire, Talbot declares, and Jones believes it, and they’re going to start a big hunt for him. Talbot says he’s beat him out of some money, and Jones says he’s just hung around before leaving for good to get even with him for stopping him from getting away from Talbot.” And, so speaking, the men passed on.

“Well, this is a pretty kettle of fish!” ruminated Andy. “What next, I wonder?”

The refugee felt pretty serious as he realized the awkward and even perilous situation he was in. As he recalled the fact that Gus and Dale Billings had crossed over the field an hour before the fire broke out, he was pretty clear in his own mind as to the identity of the firebugs.

“It’s no use of thinking about seeing Mr. Dawson now,” decided Andy. “It’s too late in the evening, and too many people will be looking for me. There’s so much piling up against me, that maybe Mr. Dawson wouldn’t believe a word I say. No, it’s a plain case. They haven’t any use for me in Princeville, and the sooner I get out of the town and stay out of it, the better for me.”

Andy’s foot was in no condition for a long tramp. He realized this as he stretched it out and tested his weight upon it. He was not seriously crippled, but he was in no shape to run a race or kick a football.

“It’s going to be no easy trick getting safely away from Princeville and out of the district,” the boy told himself. “I’ll wait until about midnight, then I’ll make for the river. There’s boats

going and coming as far as the lake, and I may get a lift as far as the city. I can lose myself there, or branch out for new territory.”

Everything was still, and not a sign of life visible anywhere on the landscape, when Andy at length ventured to leave his hiding-place. There was a smell of burned wood in the air, and some smoke showed at the spot where the barn had stood, but the town and the farmer’s household seemed to have gone to bed.

No one appeared to see or follow him while crossing the stubble field, but Andy felt a good deal easier in mind as he gained the cover of the brush.

The boy was entirely at home here – along the river as well. He had found little time for recreation while working for Talbot, but whenever a spare hour had come along he had made for the woods and the creek as a natural playground. Now he went from thicket to thicket with a sense of freedom. He knew a score of good hiding-places, if he should be suddenly surprised.

Andy looked up and down the creek when he reached it. He hoped to locate some barge ready to go down the river with some piles of tan bark, or a freight boat returning from the summer camps along the lake. Nothing was moving on the stream, however, and no water craft in view.

“I’ll get below the bridge. Then I’ll be safe to wait until daylight. Something is bound to come along by that time,” he reflected.

Andy reached and passed the bridge about a mile below Princeville. There was no other bridge for ten miles, and if he had to foot it on his journey to the city, he would be out of the way of traversed roads. He walked on for about half a mile and was selecting a sheltered spot to rest in, directly on the stream, when, a few yards distant, he noticed a light scow near shore.

Andy proceeded towards this. It resembled many craft of its class used by farmers to carry grain and livestock to market. Andy noticed that it was unloaded and poles stowed amidships. He stepped aboard. No one was in charge of it.

“I might find some of the abandoned old skiffs or rafts the boys play with, if I search pretty hard,” soliloquized Andy, stepping ashore again.

“Hey!”

Andy was startled. Tracing the source of the short, quick hail, he discovered a man seated on a boulder near a big hazel bush. Andy was startled a little, and slowly approached his challenger.

The man who had spoken to him sat like a statue. He was a pale-faced individual, with very large bright eyes, and his face was covered with a heavy black beard. A cape that almost covered him hung from his shoulders, completely hiding his hands. He looked Andy over keenly.

“Did you call me, mister?” inquired Andy.

“Yes, I did,” responded the man. “I was wondering what you were doing, lurking around here at this unearthly hour of the night.”

Andy mentally decided that it was quite as much a puzzle to him what the stranger was doing, sitting muffled up at two o’clock in the morning in this lonely place.

“I was looking for a boat to take me down stream,” explained Andy.

“Are you willing to work for a lift?” inquired the man.

“I should say so,” replied Andy emphatically.

“Do you know how to manage a craft like this one here?”

“Oh, that’s no trick at all,” said Andy. “The river is clear, and there’s nothing to run into, and all you have to do is to pole along in midstream.”

“Where do you want to get to?”

“The city.”

“I’m not going that far. I’ll tell you what I’ll do, though,” said the stranger – “you pole me down to Swan Cove – ”

“That’s about fifteen miles.”

“Yes. You take me that far, and I’ll make it worth your while.”

“It’s a bargain, and I’m delighted!” exclaimed Andy with spirit.

“All right,” said the man; “get to work.”

He never got up from his seat while Andy cast free the shore hawser. When everything was ready he stepped aboard rather clumsily. Andy thought it very strange that the man never offered to help him the least bit. His passenger seated himself in the stern of the barge, the cloak still closely enveloping his form, his hands never coming into sight.

It was welcome work for Andy, propelling the boat. It took his mind off his troubles, and every push of the pole and the current took him away from the people who had injured his good reputation and were bent on robbing him of his liberty.

The grim, silent man at the stern of the craft was a puzzle to Andy. He never spoke nor stirred. Our hero wondered why he kept so closely covered up and in what line of transportation he used the barge.

They had proceeded about two miles with smooth sailing when there was a sudden bump. The boat had struck a snag.

“Gracious!” ejaculated Andy, sent sprawling flat on the deck.

The contact had lifted the stranger from his seat. He was knocked to one side. Andy, scrambling to his feet, was tremendously startled as his glance swept his passenger.

The man struggled to his feet with clumsiness. He was hasty, almost suspicious in his movements. The cloak had flown wide open, and now he was swaying his arms around in a strange way, trying to cover them up.

“Why!” said the youth to himself, with a sharp gasp, “the man is handcuffed!”

CHAPTER V – TRAMPING IT

“Gracious!” said Andy, and made a jump clear into the water.

The pole had swung out of his hands when the barge struck the snag. He got wet through recovering it, but that did not matter much, for he had little clothing on.

By the time he had got back on deck his mysterious passenger had resumed his old position. The cloak again completely enveloped the upper portion of his body and his hands were out of sight. Andy acted as though his momentary glance had not taken in the sight of the handcuffs.

“Sorry, mister, we struck that snag, but the moon’s going down and a fog coming up, and I couldn’t help it.”

“Don’t mind that,” was all that the man at the stern vouchsafed in reply.

The moon had gone down as Andy had said, but enough of its radiance had fallen on the squirming figure of the stranger a few minutes previous to show the cold, bright glint of the pair of manacles. Andy was sure that the man’s wrists were tightly handcuffed. A sort of a chill shudder ran over him as he thought of it.

“An escaped convict?” Andy asked himself. “Maybe. That’s bad. I don’t want to be caught in such company, the fix I’m in.”

The thought made the passenger suddenly repellant to Andy. He had an idea of running close to the shore and making off.

“No, I won’t do it,” he decided, after a moment’s reflection, “I’m only guessing about all this. He’s not got a bad face. It’s rather a wild and worried one. I’m a runaway myself, and I’ve got a good reason for being so. Maybe this man has, too.”

Andy applied himself to his work with renewed vigor. It must have been about five o’clock in the morning when the stranger directed him to navigate up a feeder to the stream, which, a few rods beyond, ran into a swamp pond, which Andy knew to be Swan Cove.

A few pushes of the pole drove the craft up on a muddy slant. It was getting light in the east now. Andy came up to the man with the question:

“Is this where you land, mister?”

“Yes,” nodded his passenger. “Come here.”

Andy drew closer to the speaker.

“I told you I’d make it worth your while to pole me down the river,” he said.

“Oh, that’s all right.”

“I haven’t got any money, but I want to pay you as I promised you. Take that.”

“What, mister?” and then Andy learned what the man meant. The latter hunched one shoulder towards the timber on which he sat, and there lay a small open-faced silver watch.

Andy wondered how he had managed to get it out of his pocket, but he had, and there it lay.

“It’s worth about eight dollars,” explained the man. “You can probably get four for it. Anyhow, you can trade it off for some shoes and clothes, which you seem to need pretty badly.”

“Yes, I do, for a fact,” admitted Andy, with a slight laugh. “But see here, mister, I don’t want your watch. I couldn’t ask any pay, for I wanted to come down the creek myself, and I was just waiting to find the chance to work my way when you came along.”

“You’ll take the watch,” insisted the stranger in a decided tone, “so say no more about it, and put it in your pocket. There’s only one thing, youngster – I want to ask a favor of you.”

“Yes, sir.”

“Forget you ever saw me.”

“That will be hard to do, but I will try.”

“What’s your name?”

“Andy Nelson.”

“I’ll remember that,” said the man, repeating it over twice to himself. “You’ll see me again some time, Andy Nelson, even if I have to hunt you up. You’ve done me a big favor. You said you were headed for the city?”

“Yes, sir.”

“Well, if you’ll follow back to the river, and cut south a mile, you’ll come to a road running in that direction.”

“Aren’t you going to use the barge any farther, mister?” inquired Andy.

“No, and perhaps you had better not, either,” answered the man, with a short nervous laugh.

“Well, this is a queer go!” ruminated Andy, as the man started inland and was soon lost to view. “I wonder who he is? Probably on his way to some friends where he can get rid of those handcuffs. Now, what for myself?”

Andy thought things out in a rational way, and was soon started on the tramp. His prospective destination was the city. It was a large place, with many opportunities for work, he concluded. He would be lost from his pursuers in a big city like that, he theorized.

Andy soon located the road his late passenger had indicated. He looked at the watch a good many times. It was a plain but substantial timepiece. It was the first watch Andy had ever owned, and he took great pleasure in its possession.

“I don’t think I’ll part with it,” he said, as he tramped along. “I feel certain I can pick up enough odd jobs on my way to the city to earn what clothing I need and enough to eat.”

It was about seven o’clock when Andy, after a steep hill climb, neared a fence and lay down to rest in the shade and shelter of a big straw stack. He was asleep before he knew it.

“What in the world is that!” he shouted, springing up, wide awake, as a hissing, flapping, cackling hubbub filled the air, mingled with shouts of impatience, excitement and despair.

“Head ’em off – drive ’em in! Shoo – shoo!” bellowed out somebody in the direction of the road.

“Geese!” ejaculated Andy – “geese, till you can’t rest or count them! Where did they ever come from? Hi, get away!”

As Andy stepped out of range of the straw stack, he faced a remarkable situation. The field he was in covered about two acres. It was enclosed with a woven-wire fence, and had a gate. Through this, from the road, a perspiring man was driving geese, aided by a boy armed with a long switch.

Andy had never seen such a flock of geese before. He estimated them by the hundreds. Nor had he ever viewed such a battered up, dust-covered, crippled flock. Many, after getting beyond the gate, squatted down as if exhausted. Others fell over on their sides, as if they were dying. Many of them had torn and bleeding feet, and limped and hobbled in evident distress.

The man and the boy had to head off stupid and wayward groups of the fowls to get them within the enclosure. Then when they had closed the gate, they went back down the road. Andy gazed wonderingly after them. For half a mile down the hill there were specks of fluttering and lifeless white. He made them out to be fowls fallen by the wayside.

The man and boy began to collect these, two at a time, bringing them to the enclosure, and dropping them over the fence. It was a tiresome, and seemed an endless task. Andy climbed the fence and joined them.

“Hello!” hailed the man, looking a little flustered; “do you belong around here?”

“No; I don’t,” replied Andy.

“I don’t suppose any one will object to my penning in those fowls until I find some way of getting them in trim to go on.”

“They can’t do much harm,” suggested Andy. “I say, I’ll help you gather up the stray ones.”

“I wish you would,” responded the man, with a sound half-way between a sigh and a groan. “I am nigh distracted with the antics of those fowls. We had eight hundred and fifty when we started. We’ve lost nigh on to a hundred in two days.”

“What’s the trouble? Do they stray off?” inquired Andy, getting quite interested.

“No; not many of them. The trouble is traveling. I was foolish to ever dream I could drive up to nearly one thousand geese across country sixty miles. The worst thing has been where we have hit the hill roads and the highways they’re ballasting with crushed stone. The geese get their feet so cut they can’t walk. If we try the side of the roads, then we run into ditches, or the fowls get under farm fences, and then it’s trouble and a chase. I say, lad,” continued the man, with a glance at Andy’s bandaged foot, “you don’t look any too able to get about yourself.”

“Oh, that isn’t worth thinking of,” declared Andy. “I’ll be glad to help.”

He quite cheered up the owner of the geese by his willingness and activity. In half an hour’s time they had all the disabled stray fowls in the enclosure. Some dead ones were left where they had fallen by the wayside.

“I reckon the old nag is rested enough to climb up the rest of the hill now,” spoke the man to his companion, who was his son. “Fetch Dobbin along, Silas, and we’ll feed the fowls and get a snack ourselves.”

Andy curiously regarded the poor crowbait of a horse soon driven into view attached to a ramshackly wagon. The horse was put to the grass near the enclosure, and two bags of grain unearthed from a box under the seat of the wagon and fed to the penned-in geese.

Next Silas produced a small oil-stove, a coffee-pot and some packages, and, seated on the grass, Andy partook of a coarse but substantial breakfast with his new friends.

“There’s a town a little ahead, I understand,” spoke the man.

“Yes,” nodded Andy; “Afton.”

“Then we’ve got twenty miles to go yet,” sighed the man. “I don’t know how we’ll ever make it.”

Andy gathered from what the man said that he and his family had gone into the speculation of raising geese that season. The nearest railroad to his farm was twenty miles distant. His market was Wade, sixty miles away. He had decided to drive the geese to destination. Two-thirds of the journey accomplished, a long list of disasters spread out behind, and a dubious prospect ahead.

“It would cost me fifty dollars to wagon what’s left to the nearest railroad station, and as much more for freight,” said the man gloomily.

Andy looked speculative. In his mechanical work his inventive turn of mind always caused him to put on his thinking-cap when he faced an obstacle.

“I’ve got an idea,” declared Andy brightly. “Say, mister, suppose I figure out a way to get your geese the rest of the way to market quite safely and comfortably, and help drive them the balance of the distance, what will you do for me?”

“Eh?” ejaculated the man eagerly. “Why, I’d – I’d do almost anything you ask, youngster.”

“Is it worth a pair of shoes, and a new cap and coat?” asked Andy.

“Yes; a whole suit,” said the man emphatically, “and two good dollars a day on top of it.”

“It’s a bargain!” declared Andy spiritedly. “I think I have guessed a way to get you out of your difficulties.”

“How?”

“I’ll show you when you are ready to start.”

Andy set to work with vigor. He went to the back of the wagon and fitted two boards into a kind of a runway. Then he poured corn into the trough, and hitched up the old horse.

Конец ознакомительного фрагмента.

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