

Ellis Edward Sylvester

The Campers Out: or, The Right Path and the Wrong



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Edward S. Ellis

The Campers Out; Or, The Right Path and the Wrong

CHAPTER I – THE PLOTTERS

Jim McGovern was poring over his lesson one afternoon in the Ashton public school, perplexed by the thought that unless he mastered the problem on which he was engaged he would be kept after the dismissal of the rest, when he was startled by the fall of a twisted piece of paper on his slate.

He looked around to learn its starting point, when he observed Tom Wagstaff, who was seated on the other side of the room, peeping over the top of his book at him. Tom gave a wink which said plainly enough that it was he who had flipped the message so dexterously across the intervening space.

Jim next glanced at the teacher, who was busy with a small girl that had gone to his desk for help in her lessons. The coast being clear, so to speak, he unfolded the paper and read:

“Meat Bill Waylett and me after scool at the cross roads, for the bizness is of the utmoast importants dont fale to be there for the iurn is hot and we must strike be4 it gits cool.

Tom.”

The meaning of this note, despite its Volapük construction, was clear, and Jim felt that he must be on hand at all hazards.

So the urchin applied himself with renewed vigor to his task, and, mastering it, found himself among the happy majority that were allowed to leave school at the hour of dismissal. A complication, however, arose from the fact that the writer of the note was one of those who failed with his lesson, and was obliged to stay with a half-dozen others until he recited it correctly.

Thus it happened that Jim McGovern and Billy Waylett, after sauntering to the crossroads, which had been named as the rendezvous, and waiting until the rest of the pupils appeared, found themselves without their leader.

But they were not compelled to wait long, when the lad, who was older than they, was seen hurrying along the highway, eager to meet and explain to them the momentous business that had led him to call this special meeting.

“Fellers,” said he, as he came panting up, “let’s climb over the fence and go among the trees.”

“What for?” asked Billy Waylett.

“It won’t do for anybody to hear us.”

“Well, they won’t hear us,” observed Jim McGovern, “if we stay here, for we can see any one a half mile off.”

“But they might sneak up when we wasn’t watching,” insisted the ringleader, who proceeded to scale the fence in the approved style of boyhood, the others following him.

Tom led the way for some distance among the trees, and then, when he came to a halt, peered among the branches overhead, and between and behind the trunks, to make sure no cowens were in the neighborhood.

Finally, everything was found to be as he wished, and he broke the important tidings in guarded undertones.

“I say, boys, are you both going to stick?”

“You bet we are,” replied Billy, while Jim nodded his head several times to give emphasis to his answer.

“Well, don’t you think the time has come to strike?”

“I’ve been thinking so for two – three weeks,” said Billy.

“What I asked you two to meet me here for was to tell you that I’ve made up my mind we must make a move. Old Mr. Stearns, our teacher, is getting meaner every day; he gives us harder lessons than ever, and this afternoon he piled it on so heavy I had to stay after you fellers left. If Sam Bascomb hadn’t sot behind me, and whispered two or three of them words, I would have been stuck there yet.”

“He come mighty nigh catching me, too,” observed Jim McGovern.

“You know we’ve made up our minds to go West to shoot Injuns, and the time has come to go.”

The sparkle of the other boys’ eyes and the flush upon their ruddy faces showed the pleasure which this announcement caused. The bliss of going West to reduce the population of our aborigines had been in their dreams for months, and they were impatient with their chosen leader that he had deferred the delight so long. They were happy to learn at last that the delay was at an end.

“Now I want to know how you fellers have made out,” said Tom, with an inquiring look from one to the other.

“I guess you’ll find we’ve done purty well,” said Jim; “anyways I know *I* have; I stole my sister’s gold watch the other night and sold it to a peddler for ten dollars.”

“What did you do with the ten dollars?”

“I bought a revolver and a lot of cartridges. Oh! I tell you I’m primed and ready, and I’m in favor of not leaving a single Injun in the West!”

“Them’s my idees,” chimed Billy Waylett.

“Well, how have *you* made out, Billy?”

“I got hold of father’s watch, day before yesterday, but he caught me when I was sneaking out of the house and wanted to know what I was up to. I told him I thought it needed cleaning and was going to take it down to the jeweler’s to have it ’tended to.”

“Well, what then?”

Billy sighed as he said, meekly:

“Father said he guessed I was the one that needed ’tending to, and he caught me by the nape of the neck, and, boys, was you ever whipped with a skate strap?”

His friends shook their heads as an intimation that they had never been through that experience.

“Well, I hope you never will; but, say,” he added, brightening up, “mother has a way of leaving her pocket-book layin’ round that’s awful mean, ’cause it sets a fellow to wishing for it. Pop makes her an allowance of one hundred dollars a month to run things, and last night I scooped twenty dollars out of her pocket-book, when it laid on the bureau in her room.”

“Did she find it out?” asked Tom Wagstaff.

“Didn’t she? Well, you had better believe she did, and she raised Cain, but I fixed things.”

“How?” asked his companions, deeply interested.

“I told her I seen Kate, our hired girl, coming out of the room on tip-toe, just after dark. Then mother went for Kate, and she cried and said she wouldn’t do a thing like that to save her from starving. It didn’t do no good, for mother bounced her.”

No thought of the burning injustice done an honest servant entered the thought of any one of the three boys. They chuckled and laughed, and agreed that the trick was one of the brightest of the kind they had ever known. Could the other two have done as well, the party would have been on their Westward jaunt at that moment.

"I've sometimes thought," said Tom Wagstaff, "that the old folks must have a 'spicion of what's going on, for they watch me so close that I haven't had a chance to steal a dollar, and you know it will never do to start without plenty of money; but I've a plan that'll fetch 'em," he added, with a meaning shake of his head.

"What is it?"

"I'll tell you in a minute; you see I've got everything down fine, and I've made some changes in our plans."

His companions listened closely.

"You know that when we got through reading that splendid book, 'Roaring Ralph, the Cyclone of the Rockies,' we made up our minds that we must have two revolvers and a Winchester repeating rifle apiece before we started?"

The others nodded, to signify that they remembered the understanding.

"I was talking with a tramp the other day, who told me that he spends each winter among the Rocky Mountains killing Injins, and it's the biggest kind of fun. He says he steals up to a camp where there's 'bout fifty or a hundred of 'em, and makes a noise like a grizzly bear. That scares 'em so they all jump up and run for the woods. He takes after them and chases 'em till they climb the trees. Then, when they are all trying to hide among the limbs, beggin' for their lives, he begins. He takes his place in the middle, and keeps popping away until he has dropped 'em all. He says he has to stop sometimes to laugh at the way they come tumbling down, a good many of 'em falling on their heads. One time he treed forty-seven of 'em where the ground was soft and swampy. Twelve of the bravest Injin warriors turned over in falling through the limbs and struck on their scalps. The ground bein' soft, they sunk down over their shoulders, and stayed there wrong-side up. He said he almost died a-laughing, to see their legs sticking up in air, and they kicking like the mischief. When he got through there was twelve Injins with their legs out of the ground and their heads below. He said it looked as though some one had been planting Injins and they was sproutin' up mighty lively. He tried to pull 'em out, so as to get their scalps, but they was stuck fast and he had to give it up."

"And didn't he get their scalps?" asked Jimmy McGovern.

"No; it almost broke his heart to leave 'em, but he had to, for there was some other Injins to look after. Well, this tramp told me that all we needed was a revolver apiece."

"Oh! pshaw!" exclaimed Billy, "we can't get along without rifles of the repeating kind."

"Of course not, but we must wait till we arrive out West before we buy 'em. If each of us has a gun on our shoulder we're liable to be stopped by the officers."

"Well, if the officers git too sassy," suggested Billy, "why we'll drop *them* in their tracks and run."

"That might do if there wasn't so many of 'em. We don't want to bother with them, for we're goin' for Injins, and now and then a grizzly bear."

"I'm willing to do what you think is best; but who is this tramp that told you so much?"

"He said he was called Snakeroot Sam, because he rooted so hard for rattlesnakes. He tells me what we want is plenty of money, and it was our duty to steal everything we can from our parents and keep it till we get out West, where we can buy our Winchesters. If the people charge too much or act sassy like we can plug them and take the guns away from 'em."

This scheme struck the listeners favorably, and they smiled, nodded their heads, and fairly smacked their lips at the prospect of the glorious sport awaiting them.

"Snakeroot Sam is a mighty clever feller, and he says he will help us all he can. When we get enough money we are to let him know, and he will take charge of us. That will be lucky, for he can be our guide. He isn't very clean-looking," added Tom, with a vivid recollection of the frowsy appearance of the individual; "but he tells me that after we cross the Mississippi it's very dangerous to have our clothing washed, 'cause there's something in the water that don't agree with

the people. That's the reason why he has his washed only once a year, and then he says he almost catches his death of cold."

"Gracious!" said Billy, "if he knows so much about the West, we must have him for our guide. Injin slayers always have to have a guide and we'll hire him."

"That's my idee exactly. I spoke to Sam about it, and he said he would like to oblige us very much, though he had two or three contracts on hand which was worth a good many thousand dollars to him, but he liked my looks so well he'd throw them up and join us."

"How much will he charge?"

"I didn't ask him that; but he's a fair man and will make it all right. What I don't want you to forget, boys, is that we've got to raise a good deal more money."

"What a pity I didn't steal all there was in mother's pocket-book when I had such a good chance," remarked Billy, with a sigh; "if I get another chance I'll fix it."

"I think I can slip into father's room tonight after he's asleep," added Jim McGovern, "and if I do, I'll clean him out."

"You fellers have a better chance than me," said Tom, "but I'm going to beat you both and have twice as much money as you."

This was stirring news to the other boys, who were seated on the ground at the feet, as may be said, of their champion. They asked him in awed voices to explain.

"You've got a pistol, Jimmy?"

"Yes; a regular five-chambered one, and I've got a lot of cartridges, too."

"There's going to be a concert at the Hall to-night," added Tom, peering behind, around, and among the trees again to make sure no one else heard his words, "and father and mother are going. They will take all the children, too, except me."

"How's that?"

"He says I was such a bad boy yesterday that he means to punish me by making me stay at home, but that's just what I want him to do, and if he feels sort of sorry and lets up, I'll pretend I'm sick so he will leave me behind. I tell you, fellows, Providence is on our side and we're going to win."

His companions shared the faith of the young scamp, who now proceeded to unfold his astounding scheme.

CHAPTER II – HOW THE SCHEME WORKED

“The folks will leave the house,” said Tom Wagstaff, “about half-past seven, and there will be no one home but me and Maggie, the girl. I’ll be up in my room and Maggie down-stairs. When I lean out the window and wave my hand I want you, Jim, to fire two or three charges out of your revolver through the winders of the dining-room.”

“What for?” asked the startled Jim.

“Wait, and I’ll tell you; the noise of the pistol and the breaking of the glass will scare Maggie half to death: she will run out of the house, and you and Billy must then slip inside, hurry up-stairs, tie me to the bed-post, and put a gag in my mouth. I’ll have all the money and jewelry ready in a handkerchief, and you can scoot with it. Maggie will run down to the Hall and tell father and mother, and they’ll hurry home and be so scared they won’t know what to do. They’ll untie me, and I’ll pretend I’m almost dead, and they’ll call in the police, and when I come to, I’ll have a story to tell about robbers with masks on their faces, and all that sort of thing, and they’ll hunt for ’em, and never smell a mouse. What do you think of it, fellers?”

It was a scheme which, in its vicious cunning, was worthy of older scamps than these three young school-boys; but their minds were poisoned by pernicious reading, and they eagerly entered into its spirit. Everything promised success, and Tom, the originator of the plan, found his companions as eager as himself to lend a hand in carrying it out.

It seemed as if fate had arranged to help the boys. When the three climbed over the fence again into the highway, and separated to their homes, Tom, in order that there should be no miscarriage of the programme, took pains to be particularly ugly and impudent to his parents. His kind-hearted father was disposed at first to recall the threat made in the morning that his son should not go with the rest to the concert in the Town Hall, but he was so irritated by the behavior of the lad that he not only carried out his threat, but was on the point of chastising him before leaving home.

It followed, therefore, that when eight o’clock came, the condition of the household was just what Tom prophesied and wished. Maggie, the hired girl, was busy at her duties below-stairs, when he stole softly to the upper story and began his work of ransacking the bureau-drawers. He found considerable jewelry belonging to his mother and sisters, besides over seventy dollars in money which his father had left within easy reach.

All this was gathered into a handkerchief, which was securely tied and placed on a chair beside the window, where the gas was burning at full head. Then, everything being in readiness, he quietly raised the window and looked out.

The night was dark, without any moon, and even his keen eyes could detect nothing among the dense trees which surrounded the fine residence of his father. But, when he whistled, there was a reply from under the branches which he recognized as coming from his allies, who were on the lookout.

Tom waved his hand, lowered the sash, and stepped back from the window.

Maggie was singing below-stairs and, with that exception, everything was still. His heart beat fast as he knew that the opening of the drama, as it may be called, was at hand.

Suddenly the sharp report of a pistol rang out on the night, followed by a second and third shot, mingled with the crash and jingle of glass. Jim McGovern was doing his part with unquestioned promptness.

The singing of Maggie ceased as if she were paralyzed by the shock; but with the third report her scream pierced every nook in the building, and she was heard running to and fro as if in blind terror. She would have dashed up-stairs to escape, but a noise on the rear porch caused her to believe the burglars were about entering the building, and she was certain to be killed if she remained.

Through the front door she went in the darkness, her screams stilled through fear that the dreaded beings would be guided by them; and, recovering her senses somewhat when she reached the street, she hurried in the direction of the Town Hall to acquaint Mr. and Mrs. Wagstaff with the awful goings-on at home.

Billy Waylett and Jim McGovern were on the watch, and the moment she vanished they entered through the rear door, which remained unlocked, and hastened up-stairs to the room where the gas was burning and from which Tom had signalled to them.

“Quick, fellers!” he said, as they burst into the apartment, “father will soon be back.”

“Where’s the rope?” asked Jim.

“There on the chair.”

“What’s that handkerchief for?”

“The money and jewelry is in it; tie me first and then hurry out with that, and take good care of it till to-morrow, when we will fix things; hurry up!”

Billy had the rope in hand, and both boys set to work to bind the young rogue to the bed-post. Since the victim gave all the aid he could, the task was completed with less delay and difficulty than would have been supposed.

This was due also to the preparations which Tom had made for the business. A strong bed-cord, cut in several pieces, was at hand. His wrists were bound together behind his back; then his ankles were joined, and finally the longest piece of rope was wound several times around his waist and made fast to the bed-post. This rendered him helpless, and he could not have released himself had his life been at stake.

But the shrewd boy knew that something more must be done. Though tied securely, his mouth was at command, and it was to be expected that he would use his voice with the fullest power the moment his captors left him alone.

But with all the cunning displayed by Tom, and with all his perfect preparations in other respects, and after having referred to the necessity of the gagging operation, he had forgotten to be ready for it.

“What shall we put in your mouth?” asked Jim, pausing and looking round after the binding was finished.

“Golly! I forgot all about that,” was the reply.

Billy darted to the bureau and caught up a large hair-brush.

“How’ll this do?” he asked, holding it up to view.

“It won’t do at all,” was the disgusted reply; “it’s too big for my mouth.”

“I don’t know ’bout that; you’ve got the biggest mouth in school.”

“We’ll take a sheet off the bed,” said Jim, beginning to tug at the coverlets.

“What’s the matter with you?” asked Tom; “do you think you can cram a whole sheet in my mouth?”

“Why not?”

“’Cause you can’t; that’s the reason.”

“I have it,” exclaimed Billy, running to the corner of the room and catching up a porcelain cuspidor; “this will just fit. Open your mouth, Tom, and give me a chance.”

But at this juncture, when the perplexity threatened to upset everything, Billy Waylett solved the difficulty by whisking out his linen pocket-handkerchief.

“Now you’re talking,” remarked the pleased Tom; “why didn’t we think of that before?”

It was curious, indeed, that they did not, and it was curious, too, in view of the cunning shown in other directions, that all three forgot a precaution which ought to have occurred to them.

A handkerchief was just the thing to be used to seal the mouth of the victim, but it should have come from the pocket of Tom Wagstaff instead of from Billy Waylett’s.

Perhaps had the boys felt that abundance of time was at command, they would have thought of this necessity; but they were well aware that Maggie, the servant, was making good speed to the Town Hall, and that Mr. Wagstaff would not let the grass grow under his feet on his way home. Besides, too, the screams of the girl were likely to bring others to the spot before the coming of the owner of the house. The boys, therefore, had not a minute to throw away, and they did not idle their time.

The twisted handkerchief was pushed between the open jaws of the victim, like the bit in a horse's mouth, and then knotted and tied behind his head. Billy, who took charge of this little job, was not over-gentle, and more than once the victim protested. Little heed, however, was paid to him, and his words were but feeble mumblings when sifted through the meshes of the handkerchief.

"There! I guess that'll do," said Billy, stepping back and surveying his work; "how do you feel, Tommy?"

The latter nodded his head, mumbled, and tried to speak. He was urging them to leave, but his words were unintelligible.

Meanwhile Jim had picked up the other handkerchief, tied at the corners, and was surprised to find how heavy it was. It contained much valuable property.

The boys were reminded of their remissness by the sound of voices on the outside. Neighbors were at hand.

"We're caught; it's too late; what shall we do?" gasped Jim, dropping the handkerchief with its precious contents.

"They will hang us for bigamy," replied Billy, turning pale and trembling in every limb.

Tom Wagstaff tried hard to utter a few words, and was struggling to free himself, but succeeded in neither attempt.

"Come on!" whispered Jim, catching up his load again; "they haven't got in, and we may have a chance."

He whisked through the open door, and scurried down the carpeted stairs, with Billy so close on his heels that both narrowly escaped bumping and rolling to the bottom.

The voices were louder, and it looked as if the youngsters were caught.

And such would have been the case, but for the timidity of the parties out-doors. They had been drawn thither by the out-cries of the servant, and were convinced that some fearful tragedy was going on, or had been completed within the dwelling.

These people were unarmed, and it was only natural that they should shrink from entering where several desperate men were supposed to be at bay. They consulted with each other and decided to await the arrival of re-enforcements.

This was the golden opportunity of the young scamps. The rear door was ajar and they noiselessly drew it inward far enough to allow them to pass through.

Before venturing forth they peeped out in the darkness. They could see nothing, though, for that matter, there might have been a dozen persons within a few feet without being visible; but the room in which the lads stood was also without a light, so that the advantage was equal.

The sound of the voices showed that the new arrivals were at the front, and the way was open for the flight of the amateur burglars, who still hesitated, afraid that men were lying in wait to nab them.

More than likely they would have tarried too long, but for a movement on the part of the newcomers. They were increasing so fast that they became courageous, and one of them pushed open the front door.

The creaking of its hinges and the tramping in the adjoining room spurred Jim and Billy, who hesitated no longer. Through the door they stole on tip-toe, and a few steps took them across the porch to the soft ground, where the soft earth gave back no sound. The trees, too, seemed to spread

their protecting branches over them, and inspired them with such courage that, after hurrying a few rods, they came to a stop and looked back and listened.

“By George! that was the luckiest thing that ever happened to us!” whispered Jim McGovern, with a sigh of relief.

“That’s so,” assented his companion; “I thought we was goners sure, and we come mighty nigh it.”

“I wonder whether that gag is too tight in Tom’s mouth?”

“No, of course not; can’t he breathe through his nose?”

“But mebbe he has a cold.”

“That won’t make any difference, for he knows how to breathe through his ears; Tom’s too smart to die yet. Besides, if he *is* dead, it’s too late for us to help him; them folks are upstairs by this time, and they’ll get the handkerchief out of his mouth in a jiffy, unless, mebbe, he has swallowed it.”

“I say, Billy,” said Jim, “this thing in my hand weighs more than a ton!”

“It must have lots of gold in it; shall I help you carry it?”

“No, I can manage it; but what shall we do with the thing? It won’t do to take it home, for our folks might find it.”

“We’ll bury it under that stump back of our barn.”

“Is that a good place?”

“There aint any better in the world, for nobody wouldn’t think of looking there for it.”

“I seen our dog Bowser pawing under the stump the other day.”

“But he wasn’t pawing for money; we’ll hide it there till we’re ready to use it.”

The two moved off, when they heard another cry from the house behind them. They recognized it as the voice of Mrs. Wagstaff, who had arrived on the scene with her husband, and was probably overcome at sight of the woful plight of her boy.

CHAPTER III – A STARTLING OCCURRENCE

Mr. Wagstaff, on receiving word at the Town Hall from the janitor who brought the message of the terrified servant to him, forgot, in his excitement, to tell his wife of the fearful news, and rushed out-of-doors without a word.

Mrs. Wagstaff knew it must be something awful that had called him away in that style, and she lost no time in following, while the children scrambled after them at varying distances.

The husband entered the door through which several of the neighbors had timidly passed, only a few paces ahead of his wife, who was upstairs almost as soon as he.

“Oh! my dear Tommy,” she wailed, as she caught sight of the silent figure fastened at the foot of the bed; “have they killed you?”

The sight was enough to startle any parent. The father had just jerked the handkerchief loose and flung it to the floor, and the lad’s head was drooping over on one shoulder, his eyes half-closed, and his tongue protruding. The parent caught up a pitcher of water and dashed it in his face, while the mother frantically strove to unfasten the cruel thongs at the wrists and ankles.

The unexpected shock of the water startled Tommy into gasping and opening his eyes, but his look was dazed and aimless. His father whipped out his pocket-knife and quickly cut the thongs. The released boy would have fallen had not both parents seized and laid him on the bed, where he moaned as if suffering greatly.

“Send for the doctor at once,” said the mother.

“And call in the police,” added the father; “a dastardly outrage has been committed; it may prove murder.”

By this time the room was filled with horrified and sympathizing neighbors. The solicitude of the parents for their child caused them to pay no heed to the visitors until the father, seeing a friend at his elbow, begged him to clear the house of intruders, and to admit no one except the physician or an officer of the law.

It took but a few minutes to comply with this request, and the parents were left to give undivided attention to their suffering child, who continued to moan and roll his eyes as if he were at his last gasp.

The father was anxious, silent, and watchful; the mother demonstrative and weeping. She rubbed her boy’s hands, chafed his limbs, gazing lovingly the meanwhile in his face, and begging him to speak to her. Maggie, the servant, had regained her senses, now that she was sure she was alive and the precious heir had not been killed. She took upon herself to fasten the doors and keep out intruders, finding time to make a search up-stairs, which needed to be extended only a few minutes to learn that an extensive robbery had been committed.

“Of course,” remarked Mr. Wagstaff, when the amount of his loss, as well as that of his wife, was reported to him, “I knew what had been done the moment I saw my poor boy.”

“Don’t tell me,” said the mother, waving the servant away, “I don’t care if they have taken everything in the house, so long as my darling Tommy lives.”

Her heart was kept in a state of torture by the alarming symptoms of her heir. At times he seemed about to revive, a look of intelligence coming into his eyes, but, after several gasping efforts to speak, he sank back on his pillow and gave it up as a failure.

By and by, in the midst of the trying scene, the physician arrived and took charge of the patient. He was a wise old gentleman of wide experience, and his cheerful words did much to awaken hope in the parents, who hung on his words and watched his manner.

It required but a few minutes for him to make known that their child was not seriously hurt. During his examination he gleaned the particulars of the outrage, and succeeded in getting Tommy

into a sitting posture. Then he expressed the belief that if the boy's senses did not come to him very soon he would have to bore a hole through his crown with a large auger.

This astounding declaration was meant for the benefit of Tommy alone, a sly wink at the parents preventing them from taking alarm. It was noteworthy that the boy began to pick up at once, and in the course of a few minutes was entirely himself.

When the chief of police arrived the urchin was able to talk with something of his usual facility, and imparted to his awed listeners his account of the daring outrage and crime.

He said he did not feel very well after his folks left for the concert, and he went up-stairs to lie down on his parents' bed. He thought it strange that the gas was lit, though it was turned down, but he supposed it had been done by Maggie.

Just as he lay down he fancied he heard a man moving softly about the room. He rose from the bed and was about to call out, when he became sure that there were two persons near him. Before he could give the alarm he was seized and told that if he made any noise he would be instantly killed.

Still the brave boy tried to shout, when he was gagged, bound, and tied to the bed-post, where he remained while the robbery went on around him.

The doctor having pronounced Tommy out of danger, his parents became more composed, and listened quietly to the questioning of the chief of police, who was one of the shrewdest members of his profession.

He listened gravely until the questions of the others were finished, when he asked Tommy to describe the appearance of the criminals so far as he could. The lad did so quite glibly. Both of the intruders were masked, wore soft, slouch hats, long dark coats buttoned to their chins, had gruff voices, and one of them took a dreadful-looking revolver from his side pocket, and seemed to be on the point of discharging several of the chambers at the captive.

Chief Hungerford asked the latter about the shots that had broken the glass down-stairs, and given the servant such a fright. At first Tommy declared he did not hear them, but upon being questioned further, recalled that he did hear something of the kind just after he was bound.

"Is this the handkerchief with which he was gagged?" asked the officer, picking up the article from the floor.

"Yes, that's it," replied the father, who had snatched it from the head of his son the instant he reached the room.

The chief continued talking without looking further at the linen, but when the attention of the couple was diverted he slipped it into his pocket. Then he asked liberty to make an examination of the house. Permission was cheerfully accorded, and he spent a half-hour in going through the lower story in his own peculiar but thorough manner.

At the end of that period he came back to the room where the parents, brothers, and sisters were coddling poor Tommy, who was muffled up in a rocking-chair, sipping lemonade, sucking oranges, and nibbling the choicest candy. Now and then he would start convulsively and beg them to take away those bad men, and not let them hurt him. Then, when he was reassured by the kind words of the loving ones around him, he complained of his throat, and found it helpful to swallow more lemonade and take an additional suck or two at one of the oranges pressed upon him.

Chief Hungerford stood in the door of the room, hat in hand, and looked fixedly at the lad for a minute or two before speaking. Even then it was only in answer to the question of Mr. Wagstaff.

"What have you found?"

"Nothing special, sir; there have been so many people in the house tramping back and forth, that they have destroyed what clues we might have discovered. Then, too, the job was so easy that there was no need of leaving any traces."

"How was that?"

“Why the doors were unlocked, so that they had only to open and enter without forcing a window or fastening anywhere. After they got inside they found you were kind enough to leave keys wherever they were needed, and consequently no violence was required up-stairs.”

“But why did they fire those shots through the window down-stairs?”

“That was to frighten away the servant.”

“It seems a strange proceeding when the reports were sure to be heard and bring people here, while the servant herself was certain to raise the alarm. They might have bound and scared her into quiescence.”

The chief of police had thought of all this before, and looked upon it as one of the peculiar features of the business; but he smiled, and said, in his off-hand fashion:

“It may strike us both as a little odd, but the best proof of the wisdom of what the scamps did is the fact that they got off with the plunder and have not left the first clew behind. Well, good-evening all; I will report as soon as I pick up anything worth telling.”

And courteously saluting the family he descended the stairs and passed out of the door. Before doing so he questioned the servant on what seemed unimportant points. Finally he entered the street and was obliged to answer the innumerable questions that were asked him at every turn. He had found it necessary to station a couple of his men on the premises to keep away the curious people, who persisted in crowding forward through the grounds and even into the house itself.

The rumors on the streets did not astonish him, even though they were to the effect that Tommy (everybody called him “Tommy” since his mishap) had been strangled to death, his last breath leaving him just as he was caught in his mother’s arms, and that Maggie the servant had been attacked and badly wounded, but escaped by leaping from the second story window and running to the Town Hall, where the family were attending a concert.

When the chief entered his private room he drew the handkerchief from his pocket, spread it out on his desk under a strong gaslight and carefully examined it.

He had little hope of finding anything worth knowing, but he was too wise to neglect the least step. He carefully went over the somewhat soiled piece of linen and smiled to himself when he observed that a name was written in the corner in indelible ink.

“Burglars aint apt to carry handkerchiefs around even with their initials written on them, but one of these gentry has been kind enough to give us his whole name. It is written so legibly, too, that I can read it without my glasses. Ah, ‘*William Waylett!*’ there it is as plain as print.

“It strikes me,” continued the chief, following the train of thought, “that I’ve heard that name before. Jim Waylett was my classmate in college, and he has three daughters and one boy. The name of the youngster is William, generally called Billy. That chap is the owner of this handkerchief as sure as a gun.”

By this time, as the reader will perceive, the sagacious officer was not only on the right trail, but advancing rapidly to the correct conclusion. He had not heard all of Tommy Wagstaff’s story before he began to grow suspicious. His experience enabled him to detect more than one inconsistency despite the skill of the tremendous falsifier who built up the structure.

Investigation and further questioning confirmed this suspicion until, when he left the house, all doubt was gone. He knew that no man had visited the Wagstaff home that night or taken any part in the indignities to which Master Tommy was subjected.

But it was equally clear that the young rogue had had partners in his shameless trick, and the chief meant to learn who they were.

He was confident that he could find them out from Tommy himself, whom he could handle in such a way as to force a confession, but while the parents, especially the mother, were in such a state of excitement, they would be indignant at the first hint of the boy’s trickery, and would defeat what advantage he might gain if left alone with him.

“They will come to it in the course of a few days,” reflected the officer, who had seen similar scenes before, “and it won’t do any harm to wait until then. I will get a chance at the boy before long, and, if I don’t force it out of him, then I’ll resign my office and take to the woods.”

The chief was desirous also of sparing the feelings of the parents of the boy, whom he liked. They would feel much worse if compelled to admit the truth after first refusing to listen to his suggestion. Then, too, he had another boy to work upon. Billy Waylett must know something of the affair. At any rate, he could tell how it was his handkerchief came to be used to gag one of his playmates, and *that* little piece of information was likely to give him just the clew that was needed.

“I’ll wait until things get cool,” concluded the chief, who happened to have other matters pressing upon his attention just then.

Accordingly he gave his whole energies to the business which took him out of Ashton for a part of two days. When he returned it was with the resolve to take hold of the matter in earnest, but to his dismay, when he came to make inquiry, he was told that Tommy Wagstaff, Jimmy McGovern, and Billy Waylett had disappeared.

CHAPTER IV – THE RUNAWAYS

That fate which had seemed to favor the three audacious youngsters did not desert them when the critical point in their enterprise arrived.

The chief of police was wise in restraining any hint of what was in his mind to the parents of Tommy Wagstaff. It would have been repelled with wrath and made them enemies – all the more bitter, perhaps, when it should appear that the wise officer was right.

The youngster, having suffered so cruelly, received every compensation his friends could give him. His father reproved himself for making him stay home from the concert. Had he taken him with him, the outrage never could have occurred.

The mother heaped favors upon her darling Tommy, who might have luxuriated for weeks on the general sympathy felt for him. He was visited by several newspaper reporters, who took down the thrilling account from his own lips. The chief trouble in these cases was the wide variance in the versions given by the lad. In some instances he insisted there were three burglars, in others only two, while to one young man in spectacles, he solemnly averred that there were seven by actual count, and that they were all armed with tomahawks and scalping knives. These wild statements were attributed to the lad's nervousness instead of to the real cause.

But on the next afternoon, or rather evening, Tommy did not make his appearance at supper. The mother was greatly frightened and believed the robbers had returned to revenge themselves upon her darling for telling the truth about them.

Before the evening was late, Mr. Wagstaff learned that Tommy, accompanied by Billy Waylett and Jimmy McGovern, had been seen hurrying in the direction of the railway station. Inquiry there revealed the fact all three had bought tickets for New York.

About this time a dim suspicion took shape in the mind of Mr. Wagstaff. He gave no hint to his wife, but he telegraphed the authorities in the metropolis to look out for three boys, and to arrest them at once and communicate with their parents, Messrs. Waylett and McGovern having joined in the request.

New York was so near Ashton that the runaways arrived there more than an hour before the telegram was sent, otherwise they would have been returned to their homes the same evening.

Their fathers next held a conference, and on the following day applied to the chief of police for counsel. That gentleman listened grimly to them, and then quietly said that the robbery of Mr. Wagstaff's home had been planned and carried out by the three lads without help from any one else. They were shocked, but when he showed Billy Waylett's handkerchief, which had been used to check the utterance of Tommy, and pointed out the numerous tell-tale slips made by the boys, especially the shooting through the windows, they were convinced, and became eager to capture them at the earliest possible moment, each parent declaring that the instant his son was brought within reach, he would give him a trouncing that he would remember to his dying day.

It was arranged that Chief Hungerford should undertake to hunt them up, and he readily agreed to do so, for the gentlemen were warm friends of his, for whom he was ready to make any reasonable sacrifice.

And now that a pursuer is on the trail of the runaways, let us see how they got along.

The indulgence shown Tommy by his parents gave him just the opportunity he wanted. He was able to hold several meetings with his intended partners, without any one suspecting what was going on, and the arrangements were made for starting for New York on the afternoon following the supposed robbery.

In one respect, the lads showed a wisdom beyond their years. Knowing that prompt search would be made for them, and that they were likely to be looked upon with suspicion, they decided to leave the stolen jewelry where it had been placed beneath the old stump. If worse came to worse,

they could return and draw upon it, but if they should try to sell the valuables in New York, they would be arrested on suspicion.

So they wisely left the jewelry behind, and took with them only a single gold watch, which Tommy wore, since it was the property of his father. They found that they had fully a hundred dollars in money, which, as nearly as they could learn, would carry them most of the distance they wished to go, when such bright chaps would have no trouble in hitting upon the means for raising the wind.

Since they expected to meet Snakeroot Sam, it was intended to send him back to Ashton, to sell the plunder for them, inasmuch as he could readily do it without danger, and was so honest that he would turn over every penny of the proceeds to them.

Reaching New York ahead of the telegram, they were too wise to linger around the large station at Forty-second Street. More than likely, all three of their irate fathers would be there in the course of an hour or two, and it was, therefore, no place for them.

Since it was growing dark, they decided to put up at some obscure hotel, under assumed names, and make an early start for the West. The wisdom shown by the lads was astonishing – the oldest of whom had not seen fourteen years. They had talked and discussed the venture for months, and stored their minds with all the information obtainable. Consequently, when they sauntered out on the street, and, after some inquiries, reached Broadway, they attracted no special attention. They were well dressed, and the additional revolvers which they speedily bought were carried out of sight, so that there was no noticeable difference between them and the hundreds of other boys who may be met on any day in the great metropolis of our country.

Billy Waylett, being the youngest, needed some coaching, but he was tractable, and the lads were fortunate enough to escape the sharks that are always waiting in the large cities for just such prey as they would have proved.

The only thing that worried Tommy Wagstaff was the fact that he did not know how to find Snakeroot Sam. That worthy had been told of the intended start for the West, but, of course, the leader could not give him the precise date of their departure. It was known, however, that he spent a good deal of his time in New York city, and the leader of the party instructed his companions to keep a sharp lookout for him. They did so, but though they pointed out several persons who answered his description, none of them proved to be the individual they were so anxious to meet, and who, doubtless, would have blessed his lucky stars could he have met them.

Tommy Wagstaff was satisfied that the crisis in their enterprise would come when they reached the ferry to buy their railway tickets. Officers would be on the watch for them, and if the three should present themselves at the office and pay their fare to Chicago or some other Western point, they were quite sure to be stopped and compelled to give an account of themselves.

Accordingly, he arranged the matter with the shrewdness he had shown from the first. They separated at the foot of Cortlandt Street and made their way into the railway office, as though they were strangers to each other. Billy had enough money to buy a ticket to New Brunswick, and Jimmy to procure one to Trenton, while Tommy, who had taken charge of the entire funds, paid his fare to Philadelphia. Then they passed through the narrow gateway upon the ferryboat.

The three were alarmed by the sight of a blue-coated policeman, standing at the broad entrance to the ferry, and who scrutinized them sharply as they joined the swarm hurrying upon the boat. The officer followed Billy with his eyes, and seemed on the point of starting after him. The youngster's heart was in his throat, and he wished that something would blow up and scatter everybody so far apart that no policeman could see him.

So guarded were the boys they did not speak to each other while crossing the ferry, indulging in only an occasional sly glance, as they stepped off the boat and passed up the slip.

Here they were startled again, for the big policeman near the passageway to the trains, after one keen look at Billy, asked him where he was going.

"To New Brunswick," was the slightly tremulous reply.

"Let me see your ticket," was the gruff command.

Billy fished out the pasteboard and showed it to the terrible fellow, who was not yet satisfied.

"What are you doing in New York?"

"I aint in New York; I am in Jersey City."

The officer smiled at the manner in which he had tripped, and asked:

"Where are the other two boys that came with you?"

Billy came nigh breaking down. He saw Tommy and Jimmy watching him from a little way, and his naturally quick wit came to his relief.

"What two boys are you talking 'bout? Don't you see there's nobody with me, and if you keep me much longer, I'll miss the train, and father will be mad, 'cause he expects me to be home as soon as I can get there."

The urchin made as if to move forward, and the officer, satisfied he was not the one for whom he was looking, allowed him to pass on.

After entering the car, Tommy Wagstaff saw no risk in their companionship. Since the train was not crowded, he and Billy sat together, while Jimmy McGovern placed himself on the seat in front, where no one shared it with him.

There was a bustle and novelty about this business which kept the boys in such a constant state of excitement that they had felt nothing as yet like homesickness. In fact, they were eager to get forward, and though there was much to see that was new and strange, they would have been glad could the cars have traveled with double the speed.

"The way I figure it out," said the leader, feeling now that he could talk freely, since they were well under way, "is that we shall reach Philadelphia before noon. Jiminy! but that is traveling fast; shall we get off there and stay over till to-morrow?"

"What would we do that for?" demanded young McGovern.

"There's so much to see that I didn't know but what you would like to stop and look around."

"Not much," replied Jimmy, with a disgusted shake of his head; "we can't get out West soon enough to suit me; I feel hungry for Injins and grizzly bears: how is it with you, Billy?"

"That's me, clear through; you know we've got to get a Winchester apiece, and then we'll be ready to begin popping over Injins; that'll be more fun than anything else in the world, and what do I care for all the cities and strange things that's between us and the West?"

Tommy laughed, for he was pleased.

"That's just the way I feel, but I didn't know whether you two was right up to the handle yet; I'm glad you are; it proves that we are bound to win, like real brave American boys."

All three smiled approvingly on each other, and, glancing out of the window, wished the cars would run at the rate of two miles a minute, for the rest of the distance.

The conductor came through, punched the tickets, and took up Billy's, because it entitled him to ride only to New Brunswick. He intended to slip off there and buy one to Philadelphia, while Jimmy would do the same at Trenton. If the Quaker City were reached without mishap, they would conclude that all danger of being stopped was over, and from that point would travel openly and without fear.

The little party chatted and discussed their plans, sometimes speaking so loud in their ardor that the gentleman sitting just across the aisle overhead their words and looked curiously at them more than once, over the top of his paper.

Just before reaching the long trestle-work which spans the Raritan, Billy said:

"We must be pretty near New Brunswick, Tom, and I guess you had better give me enough money to buy a ticket: how much will it be?"

"I don't know; I s'pose two or three dollars; you ought to travel on half fare, but it aint worth bothering about; we'll gather in all the funds we want in Chicago."

“It strikes me,” remarked McGovern, “that we might as well divide up the money, so that if any one loses his share, we won’t be in a bad fix.”

“I guess that would be a good plan,” replied Tommy, who reached in his trousers pocket for the roll of bills which he had placed there.

He started and turned pale the next moment, and hurriedly ran his hand in his other pocket. Then he sprang to his feet and frantically searched the pockets of his coat and vest.

“What’s the matter?” asked Jimmy, with a sinking of the heart.

“The money is gone!” was the alarming answer.

“No; that can’t be!” faintly exclaimed Billy; “it must be somewhere about you.”

“I put the roll in *that*, pocket,” replied Tommy, who kept up his search, through all the receptacles, again and again. Then he stooped down, and hunted under the seats with a nervous distress which was fully shared by his companions.

Finally he straightened up and said, despairingly:

“My pocket has been picked, and we haven’t a dollar among us.”

He spoke the truth.

CHAPTER V – THE WAY OF THE TRANSGRESSOR

Three more miserable lads could not be imagined than our young friends when the train stopped at the station in New Brunswick, and they knew that the total amount of their joint funds was less than a dollar.

No one spoke, but they sat pale, woebegone and staring helplessly at each other, undecided what to do.

The conductor, who was an alert official, said to Billy:

“This is where you get off; come, step lively.”

The lad rose to his feet without a word, and started down the aisle for the door. His companions glanced at him, and, feeling that it would not do for them to separate, also rose by common impulse and followed him out on the platform, where they stood silent and wretched until the train left.

Jimmy McGovern was the first to speak, and it was with the deepest sigh he ever drew:

“Well, boys, what’s to be done?”

“Let’s go back home,” said Billy, “and get the jewelry under the stump, sell that and start over again; I guess we’ll know enough to take care of our money next time.”

“But we haven’t enough to pay our fare,” remarked Tommy.

“We can walk to Jersey City; we’ve got a little money, and we’ll sell a revolver there: that will take one of us to Ashton, and he can get the jewelry.”

It was a most repellent course, and they spent a half-hour in discussing it; but it really seemed that nothing else was possible, and the proceeding was agreed upon.

Few words were spoken as they walked down the slope from the station, made their way to the bridge a short distance below the trestle-work, and walked across to the other side. Inquiry showed them that they had almost thirty miles to walk to Jersey City, and since the forenoon was well advanced, they could not expect to reach their destination before the morrow.

But it was the spring of the year, the weather was mild, and they concluded they could beg something to eat. If the farmers refused them permission to sleep in their houses, they could take refuge in some barn, after the manner of ordinary tramps.

But an unexpected series of adventures was before them.

After crossing the Raritan and walking a short distance, they turned into a stretch of woods, where they sat down to discuss further what ought to be done. With the elastic spirits of childhood, all had rallied somewhat from the extreme depression following the discovery of the loss of their funds. The leader was especially hopeful.

“I don’t know but what it is best this happened,” said he, “for we hadn’t enough money to see us through, and one of us might have to come back after we got to Chicago, and that would have been bad.”

“But we expected to get money there,” said Jimmy.

“I don’t believe it would be as easy as we thought; now I will leave you two in New York, after we reach there, go back to Ashton, get the jewelry and bring it with me. We can sell it for two or three thousand dollars, and we’ll be fixed.”

The others caught the infection of hope and rose to their feet, eager to reach the metropolis as soon as possible.

They were about to resume their journey, when they heard voices near them. Looking around, two frowzy men were observed walking slowly toward them. One was munching a sandwich, while the other had a short black pipe between his teeth.

The reader may not know that the woods, on the northern bank of the Raritan, is the spot where the numerous tramps of New Jersey have their general rendezvous. Several hundred of these

nuisances are sometimes gathered there, and they are held in great dread by the neighbors, for they are lazy, thievish, and lawless, and have perpetrated so many outrages that more than one descent has been made upon their camp by the authorities, while the law-abiding citizens have been on the point, at times, of taking severe measure against them.

Unsuspecting of the fact, the boys had approached close to the camp of the tramps.

The two tousled specimens caught sight of the boys at the same moment that the latter discovered them. The one munching a sandwich stopped, stared a second, and then, speaking as well as he could, with his mouth full of food, exclaimed:

“Well, I’ll be shot if this doesn’t beat the bugs!”

“Why, Snakeroot Sam!” called the delighted Tommy Wagstaff, “if this isn’t the luckiest thing that could happen!”

“Where did you come from?” asked that worthy, swallowing what was in his mouth, and indulging in a grin which disclosed a double row of large black teeth. His companion pulled his pipe and looked on in silence.

“Why, didn’t I tell you we was going to start for the West about this time?” asked the happy leader of the little party.

“So you did; I jotted it down in my notebook, but seein’ as how you didn’t give me the precise date, I couldn’t be on hand to wish you good-bye; but what are you doin’ *here*?”

“We’ve had bad luck,” was the disconsolate reply; “we’ve been robbed of all our money.”

“And are goin’ to hoof it back?”

“That’s what we’ll have to do, but we mean to take a new start.”

“How did this unfortinit misfortune come to overtake ye?”

Tommy gave the history of their mishap, the two tramps listening with much interest.

“This is my friend, Ragged Jim,” said Sam, when the narrative was finished, “and he’s true blue.”

Ragged Jim nodded his head and grunted, without taking the black clay pipe from between his teeth, while Snakeroot Sam munched his sandwich at intervals.

“So you’ve no money with you?”

“Not a dollar,” replied Tommy.

“How ’bout your shootin’ irons?”

“They’re all right; we’ve got a good revolver.”

“Let me look at ’em; I’d like to be sure that they’re the right kind to plug redskins with.”

The boys promptly produced their weapons, and passed them over to Sam, who examined each in turn, and then handed a couple to his companion.

“I obsarve a watch-chain onto ye,” continued Sam; “I hope you aint so dishonorable es to carry a chain without a watch at t’other end to sorter balance it.”

“I’ve got my father’s time-piece with me,” replied Tommy, producing the fine chronometer, and passing it to the tramp, who extended his hand for it.

Sam turned it over in his hand with the same attentive interest he had shown in the case of the revolvers. The single weapon he had shoved in his hip-pocket. He held the timepiece to his ear, listened to its ticking, surveyed the face, and then deliberately slipped it into his trousers pocket, catching the chain in the hole through which he had previously run a ten-penny nail to give his garments the right fit.

“How does that look on me?” he asked, with a grin, of his friend.

“It fits you bootiful,” replied Ragged Jim, “which the same is the case with these weapons and myself.”

“Good-day, sonnies,” said Snakeroot Sam, doffing his dilapidated hat with mock courtesy.

“But,” said the dismayed Tommy, “that’s my watch.”

“Why, sonny, you shouldn’t tell a story; that’s wicked.”

“But it *is* mine; I want it.”

“Didn’t you just tell me it was your father’s?”

“Yes – but I want it.”

“Give my lovin’ respects to your governor, and tell him when I come his way I’ll stop and pass it over to him.”

With tears in his eyes, Tommy rushed forward as the tramp began moving off, and caught his arm.

“Sam, you must let me have that!”

“What! are you goin’ to commit highway robbery?” he demanded, as if frightened: “do you want it bad?”

“Of course I do, and I mean to get it.”

“All right.”

Snakeroot Sam turned about, seized the boy by the nape of his coat, and delivered a kick which sent him several paces and caused him to fall on his face. Then he wheeled as if to serve Jimmy and Billy in the same manner, but they eluded him by running out of the woods to the highway. Ragged Jim stood laughing at the scene, and Sam made again for Tommy; but he had leaped to his feet and hurried after his companions.

“By-by,” called Sam; “when you get that money call on me again and I’ll take charge of it.”

When the three came together in the road, each was crying. Tommy suffered from the pain of his ill-usage, while all were in despair. Neither could say a word to comfort the others, and they tramped wearily along, beginning to feel for the first time that their good fortune had deserted them at last.

Not one would confess it, but he would have given anything at command could he have been safely at home at that moment, with the deeds of the past few days wiped out and undone forever.

The sky, which had been sunshiny in the morning, was now overcast, and they had not gone far when drops of rain began falling.

“We’re going to get wet,” ventured Billy Waylett.

“I don’t care,” replied Tommy, “I can’t feel any worse than I do now.”

A few minutes later a drizzling rain began falling, but, although they passed a house near the road, they did not stop, and kept on until their clothing was saturated. They were cold, chilly, and hungry, for noon had gone and all ate lightly in the morning.

“I’m tired out,” said Billy, at last; “let’s stop yonder and warm ourselves; maybe the folks will give us something to eat.”

The dwelling stood a little way from the road, with which it communicated by means of a lane lined on both sides with tall trees. No one was visible around it, but they turned through the broad gate and hurried through the rain, which was still falling, with its cold, dismal patter, every drop of which seemed to force its way through the clothing to their bodies.

About half the distance was passed when Tommy, who was slightly in advance of his companions, wheeled about and dashed for the highway again.

“There’s a dog coming!” was his exclamation.

The others heard the threatening growl, and descried an immense canine coming down the lane like a runaway steam engine.

Nothing but a hurried flight was left to them, and they ran with the desperation of despair. Billy, being the younger and shorter, was unable to keep up with the others. His dumpy legs worked fast, but he fell behind, and his terrified yells a moment later announced that the dog had overtaken him and was attending to business.

His horrified companions stopped to give what help they could, but the dog, having extracted a goodly piece from Billy’s garments, was satisfied to turn about and trot back to the house

to receive the commendation of his master, who was standing on the porch and viewing the proceedings with much complacency.

An examination of Billy, who was still crying, showed that the skin had only been scratched, though his trousers had suffered frightfully. All had received such a scare that they determined to apply to no more houses for relief, even if the rain descended in torrents and they were starving.

And so they tramped wearily onward through the mud and wet, hungry and utterly miserable. It seemed to them that their homes were a thousand miles distant and they would never see them again.

They could not help picturing their warm, comfortable firesides, where their kind parents denied them nothing, and where they had spent so many happy days, with no thought of what they owed those loving ones whom they were treating with such ingratitude.

Tears were in the eyes of all three, and, though they grew so weary that they could hardly drag one foot after the other, they plodded along until the gathering darkness told them night was closing in.

They had met wagons, horsemen, and several persons on foot. From some of the last they made inquiries and learned that, although they had passed through several towns, they were yet south of Rahway. Their hunger became so gnawing that Tommy spent all their money in buying a lot of cakes, which they devoured with the avidity of savages, and felt hungry when none was left to eat.

To the inquiries made of them they returned evasive answers, and when they reached any one of the numerous towns and villages between New Brunswick and the Hudson, they hurried through them and into the open country, where the people viewed them with less curiosity.

When the darkness became so deep that they could not very well see their way, it was necessary to decide where and how they were to spend the night. The drizzling rain was still falling; they were chilled to the bone, and so tired that they could hardly walk.

In the gathering gloom, they observed a barn near the highway, in which they concluded to take refuge, for it was impossible to walk farther, and no better shelter was likely to present itself.

But for the cruel reception received at the first house earlier in the afternoon, they would have asked for charity of some of the neighbors, and doubtless would have received kind treatment, for it would be unjust to describe all the people of that section as unfeeling and heartless.

Had they made their predicament known in any one of the towns, they would have been taken care of until their families could be communicated with; but they were too frightened to think of anything of that nature.

Halting a short way from the barn, Tommy cautiously advanced to make a reconnoissance. He walked timidly around it, but discovered nothing of any person, nor did he hear the growl of a watch-dog. The dwelling-house stood so far off that it was distinguished only by the lights twinkling from within.

When Tommy came to try the main door, however, it was locked, and he feared they were barred out. He persevered, and with a thrill of hope found the stable-door unfastened – a piece of carelessness on the part of the owner, unless he meant to return shortly.

The lad whistled to his companions waiting in the road, and they hurried to his side. Telling them the cheering news, he let them pass in ahead of him, after which he carefully closed the door as it was before.

Then followed several minutes of groping in the dark, during which Jimmy narrowly missed receiving a dangerous kick from one of the horses, and at last the hay-mow was located. With considerable labor they crawled to the top, covered their shivering bodies as best they could, and, nestling close together, to secure what warmth they could, sank almost immediately into deep slumber.

They were so utterly worn out that neither opened his eyes until the sun was above the horizon. The storm had cleared away, the air was cool, and though their bodies were stiffened and half-famished, they were in better spirits than when they clambered into the refuge.

When all had fully awakened and rubbed their eyes, they sat for a moment or two on the hay, considering what could be done.

“I’m so hungry,” said Billy Waylett, “that I feel as though I could eat this hay.”

“And I’ll chew some of the meal if we can’t do any better,” added Jim.

“Both of you together aint half as hungry as *I* am,” said Tommy, “and I’m going to the house to ask for something to eat.”

“Maybe they’ve got a dog,” suggested Billy, with a shudder.

“I don’t care if they have; I’ll kill and eat *him*.”

From this it will be seen that the young Indian slayers were in a sorry plight indeed.

“You fellers stay here,” said Tommy, “while I fix things, and then I’ll send for you; I’m bound to do something or die, for I can’t stand this any longer – ”

Just then the barn door opened, and several persons entered.

“I think we’ll find them in here,” remarked one; “they couldn’t have traveled much farther.”

“But I don’t see how the young rascals could get in my barn.”

“We’ll take a look through that haymow.”

And the next minute the head and shoulders of a burly man rose to view, and the runaways were discovered.

CHAPTER VI – SOWING SEED

Two men remained standing on the floor below, and the one who climbed the hay-mow was Hungerford, Chief of Police of Ashton. He had struck the trail of the runaways in Jersey City, and when he learned of three boys that had left the train at New Brunswick, he was certain they were the young rogues whom he was looking for.

He hired a horse and wagon in the city, secured the help and guidance of an officer well acquainted with the country, and by judicious inquiry retained the trail. He was so far behind the boys, however, that it was growing dark when he was only half a dozen miles out of the city, and he was obliged to put up for the night.

He was at it again before daylight, and the couple used their wits with such effect that before long they fixed upon the barn where the boys had taken refuge. An examination of the road and damp earth revealed the tell-tale footprints, and they applied to the farmer for his aid in searching the barn.

That gentleman was surprised to find he had forgotten to lock the stable-door, but such was the fact, and a brief search brought the runaways to light.

When they recognized the chief of police, they broke down and cried so pitifully that the heart of the officer was touched. He cheered them as best he could, and after they were taken to the house, given a warm breakfast and their clothing was dried, they felt, as may be said, like giants refreshed with new wine.

All were eager to be taken home. They had had enough of adventure, and were willing to face any punishment awaiting them, if they could only see Ashton again. Mr. Hungerford was confident that the three would receive the chastisement they merited, but he gave no hint of his belief, and prepared to take them thither.

He paid the farmer for the meal, and then decided to drive back to New Brunswick, and make the real start from that point.

He had learned of the robbery the boys suffered, and he was determined to recover the valuable watch of Mr. Wagstaff from thieving Snakeroot Sam. His brother officer offered to give him all the help possible, though he warned him that the task would be both difficult and dangerous, because of the large number of vicious tramps in that section.

The first thing done, upon reaching New Brunswick, was to telegraph to Mr. Wagstaff that the runaways were found, with no harm having befallen them, and they might be expected home that evening. Then, leaving the boys by themselves, the officers set out for the tramp rendezvous, where better fortune than they anticipated awaited them.

Snakeroot Sam was well known to the New Brunswick officer, and they were fortunate enough to come upon him in the highway, where he had no companions. He was collared before he suspected their business, and the watch and chain were found on his person. Inasmuch as it would have involved considerable delay to bring the scamp to trial and conviction, besides getting the names of the runaways in the papers, Chief Hungerford took his satisfaction out of the tramp personally. The kick administered to Tommy Wagstaff was repaid with interest. Indeed, there is reason to believe that Sam felt the effects throughout most of the following summer. Certain it is that he never received such a shaking up in his life.

Just as it was growing dark, the boys arrived in Ashton and were at their respective homes to supper.

And then and there was made a mistake, so serious in its nature and so far-reaching in its consequences that it forms the basis of the narrative recorded in the following pages.

It will be remembered that each father concerned declared that, upon their return home, the boys should receive severe punishment for their flagrant offenses. Such was their resolve, and yet only one of the gentlemen carried it out.

Mr. Wagstaff and his wife were so grateful for the restoration of their son that they accepted his promise to be a better boy, and, after a mild reproof, he was restored to their grace and favor.

It was the same with the parents of Jimmy McGovern. He professed great contrition for his wrong-doing, and several days were devoted to a consideration of the matter, when he, too, was allowed to escape all punishment.

Billy Waylett, the youngest and least guilty, was the only one who suffered at the hands of his father. The latter loved his child as much as any parent could, and he felt more pain in inflicting the chastisement than did the lad in receiving it. But it was given from a sense of duty, and, as is always and invariably the case, the boy respected his parent for what he did. He knew he deserved it, and that it was meant for his own good.

What was the consequence? It marked a turning-point in the life of the lad. He comprehended, as never before, his narrow escape from disgrace and ruin, and from that time forward became obedient, studious, and pure in thoughts, words, and deeds. He gave his parents and teachers no trouble, and developed into a worthy young man, who became the pride and happiness of his relatives.

Tommy and Jimmy chuckled together many times over their good fortune. They saw how indulgent their parents were, and enjoyed the mock heroism which attended a full knowledge of their exploit.

They did not give up their hopes of a life of adventure, and became dissatisfied with the dull humdrum routine of Ashton. They were content, however, to bide their time, and to wait till they became older before carrying out the projects formed years before. The seed unwittingly sown by their thoughtless parents was sure to bring its harvest sooner or later.

Two years after the runaway incidents the parents of Tommy Wagstaff and Jimmy McGovern removed to the city of New York, and in that great metropolis the boys were not long in finding bad associates. The preliminary steps were taken in their education which eventuated in the incidents that follow.

CHAPTER VII – ONE AFTERNOON IN AUTUMN

The lumbering old stage-coach that left Belmar one morning in autumn was bowling along at a merry rate, for the road was good, the grade slightly down-hill, and the September afternoon that was drawing to a close cool and bracing.

The day dawned bright and sunshiny, but the sky had become overcast, and Bill Lenman, who had driven the stage for twenty-odd years, declared that a storm was brewing, and was sure to overtake him before he could reach the little country town of Piketon, which was the terminus of his journey.

A railway line had been opened from this bright, wide-awake place, and, though the only public means of conveyance between Piketon and Belmar was the stage, its days were almost numbered, for the line was branching and spreading in nearly every direction.

Bill had picked up and set down passengers, on the long run, until now, as the day was closing, he had but a single companion, who sat on the seat directly behind him, and kept up a continuous run of questions and answers.

This gentleman's appearance suggested one of the most verdant of countrymen that ever passed beyond sight of his parent's home. He was fully six feet tall, with bright, twinkling-gray eyes, a long peaked nose, home-made clothing, and an honest, out-spoken manner which could not fail to command confidence anywhere.

He had made known his name to every person that had ridden five minutes in the coach, as Ethan Durrell, born in New England, and on a tour of pleasure. He had never before been far from the old homestead, but had worked hard all his life, and had some money saved up, and his parents consented to let him enjoy his vacation in his own way.

"You see, I could have got to Piketon by the railroad," he said, leaning forward over the back of Lenman's seat and peering good-naturedly into his face, "but consarn the railroads! I don't think they ever oughter been allowed. I read in the *Weekly Bugle*, just afore I left home, that somewhere out West a cow got on the track and wouldn't get off! No, sir, *wouldn't get off*, till the engine run into her and throwed her off the track, and likewise throwed itself off, and some of the folks on board come mighty nigh getting hurt."

The driver was naturally prejudiced against railways, and was glad to agree with Ethan's sentiments.

"Yas," he said, as he nipped a fly off the ear of the near horse, by a swing of his long lash, "there ought to be a law agin them railroads; what's the use of folks being in such a hurry, that they want to ride a mile a minute! What good does it do 'em? Why aint they content to set in a coach like this and admire the country as they ride through it?"

"Them's been my sentiments ever since I knowed anything," replied the New Englander, with enthusiasm, "but it looks as everbody is fools except us, Bill, eh?" laughed Ethan, reaching over and chucking the driver in the side; "leastways, as we can't bender 'em from doing as they please, why, we won't try."

"I guess you're 'bout right," growled Bill, who could not see the stage-coach approaching its last run without a feeling of dissatisfaction, if not sadness.

"Helloa!" exclaimed Ethan, in a low voice, "I guess you're going to have a couple more passengers."

"It looks that way; yes, they want to ride."

The coach had reached the bottom of the hill, and was rumbling toward the small, wooden bridge, beyond which the woods stretched on both sides of the highway, when two large boys climbed over the fence and, walking to the side of the road, indicated that they wished to take passage in the coach.

These young men were our old friends, Tom Wagstaff and Jim McGovern, and they were dressed in sporting costume, each carrying a fine rifle, revolver, and hunting-knife. Although they had not yet executed their plan of a campaign against the aborigines of the West, they were on a hunting jaunt, and were returning, without having met with much success.

The young men had hardly taken their seats in the stage when Wagstaff produced a flask and invited the driver and Ethan Durrell to join him and his friend. The invitation being declined, McGovern drew forth a package of cigarettes, and he and Tom soon filled the interior of the coach with the nauseating odor. But for the thorough ventilation, Ethan declared he would have been made ill.

Tom and Jim were not long in finding a subject for amusement in the person of the New Englander. He was as eager as they to talk, and Bill, sitting in front with the lines in hand, turned sideway and grinned as he strove not to lose a word of the conversation.

Конец ознакомительного фрагмента.

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