

Castlemon Harry

The Haunted Mine



Harry Castlemon
The Haunted Mine

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CHAPTER I THE SALE OF "OLD HORSE."

"Going for twenty-five cents. Going once; going twice; going – "

"Thirty cents."

"Thirty cents! Gentlemen, I am really astonished at you. It is a disgrace for me to take notice of that bid. Why, just look at that box. A miser may have hidden the secret of a gold-mine in it. Here it is, neatly dovetailed, and put together with screws instead of nails; and who knows but that it contains the treasure of a lifetime hidden away under that lid? And I am bid only thirty cents for it. Do I hear any more? Won't somebody give me some more? Going for thirty cents once; going twice; going three times, and sold to that lucky fellow who stands there with a uniform on. I don't know what his name is. Step up there and take your purchase, my lad, and when you open that box, and see what is in it, just bless your lucky stars that you came to this office this afternoon to buy yourself rich."

It happened in the Adams Express office, and among those who always dropped around to see how things were going was the young fellow who had purchased the box. It was on the afternoon devoted to the sale of "old horse" – packages which had lain there for a long time and nobody had ever called for them. When the packages accumulated so rapidly that the company had about as many on hand as their storeroom could hold, an auctioneer was ordered to sell them off for whatever he could get. Of course nobody could tell what was in the packages, and somebody always bought them by guess. Sometimes he got more than his money's worth, and sometimes he did not. That very afternoon a man bought a package so large and heavy that he could scarcely lift it from the counter, and so certain was he that he had got something worth looking at that he did not take the package home with him, but borrowed a hammer from one of the clerks and opened it on the spot, the customers all gathering around him to see what he had. To the surprise of everybody, he turned out half a dozen bricks. A partner of the man to whom the box was addressed had been off somewhere to buy a brickyard, and, not satisfied with the productions of the yard, had enclosed the bricks to the man in St. Louis, to see how he liked them. The purchaser gazed in surprise at what he had brought, and then threw down the hammer and turned away; but by the time he got to the door the loud laughter of everybody in the office – and the office was always full at the sale of "old horse" – caused him to arrest his steps. By that time he himself was laughing.

"I'll tell you what it is, gentlemen," said he; "those bricks, which are not worth a nickel apiece, cost me just two dollars."

He was going on to say something more, but the roar that arose caused him to wait until it was all over. Then he went on:

"I have spent fifty dollars for 'old horse,' and if anybody ever knows me to spend another dollar in that way I will give him my head for a football. A man who comes here to squander his money for anything like that is a dunce, and ought to have a guardian appointed over him. I wish you all a very good day."

But in spite of this man's experience, Julian Gray had invested in this box because he thought there was something in it. He did not care for what the auctioneer said to him, for he talked that way to everybody; but Julian knew there were no bricks in it, for it was done up too neatly. The box was not more than twelve inches long and half as wide, and by shaking it up and down the

boy became aware that there were papers of some kind in it. He paid the clerk the amount of his bid upon it, picked up his purchase, and started for the door, paying no heed to the remarks that were offered for his benefit. There he met another boy, dressed in a uniform similar to the one he himself wore, and stopped to exchange a few words with him.

"Well, you got something at last," said the boy. "It is not bricks, I can swear to that."

"No, sir, it is not," said Julian. "Lift it. It contains papers of some kind."

"Why don't you open it, and let us see what is in it?"

"I won't do that, either. I am not going to have the whole party laughing at me the way they served that man a little while ago. Come up to my room when Jack comes home, and then I will open it."

"I would not be in your boots for a good deal when Jack sees that box," said the boy, hurrying away. "He says you have no business to spend the small earnings you get on such gimcracks as 'old horse.'"

"I don't care," said Julian, settling the box under his arm and going away in the opposite direction. "I've got the box, and if Jack does not want to see what is in it, he need not look."

Julian broke into a run, – he knew he had no business to spend as much time in that express office as he had done, – and in a few minutes reached the headquarters of the Western Union Telegraph Company, in whose employ he was. He laid down his book of receipts for the dispatches he had delivered, then picked up his box again and stowed it away under the counter, where he was sure it would be out of everybody's way.

"I don't care," Julian repeated to himself, when he recalled what his older companion, Jack Shelden, would have to say to him when he found that he had been investing in "old horse." "I don't know that I expect to make anything out of it, but somehow or other I can't resist my curiosity to know what is in those bundles. When you can get the packages for little or nothing, where's the harm? But that is no way to save my money. I will never go near that express office again."

With this good resolution, Julian took his seat among the other boys and waited in silence for the operator to call upon him to deliver a dispatch. It came at last, and during the rest of the afternoon Julian was kept busy. When six o'clock came he put his box under his arm and started for home. His duties were done for that day.

The place that Julian called home was a long way from the office, for, being a poor boy, he was obliged to room where he could get it as cheaply as possible. He passed along several streets, turned numerous corners, and finally sprang up the stairs in a sorry-looking house which seemed almost ready to tumble down, and when he reached the top he found the door of his room open. There he met his chum, who had already returned from his work, going about his preparations for supper, and whistling as though he felt at peace with himself and all the world.

"Halloo!" he exclaimed, as Julian came in. "What's the news to-day? Well, there. If you haven't been to that old express office again!"

These two boys were orphans – or at least Jack was. Julian had a stepfather who, when his mother died, told the boy that he could not support him any longer, and that he must look out for himself. He no doubt expected that the boy would find himself in the poorhouse before he had been long out of his care; but Julian was not that sort of a fellow. He wandered aimlessly about the streets, looking for something to do, sleeping in dry-goods boxes or on a plank in some lumber-yard; and one morning, while passing along the street, wondering where he was going to get something to eat, he saw a scene that thrilled him with excitement. A span of horses was running away, and a telegraph operator – Julian knew that he was an operator from the uniform he wore – in making an attempt to stop them, lost his footing and fell on the ground right in front of the frantic team. Julian was nearer to him than anybody else, and acting upon the impulse of the moment, but scarcely knowing why he did so, he dashed forward, seized the young man by the shoulders, and pulled

him out of the way. It was all done in an instant, and Julian shuddered when he thought of what he had done.

"Thank you, my lad," said the man, when he got up, brushed the dust from his clothes, and looked after the flying horses. "You saved my life, but you couldn't save the man in the buggy. Now, what can I give you?"

"I don't want anything, sir," said Julian. The man was neatly dressed, and looked as though he had some money, and Julian had more than half a mind to ask him for enough with which to get some breakfast. But he concluded that he would not do it; he would look farther, and he was sure that he could get something to do, such as sweeping out a store, and earn some breakfast in that way.

"You don't want anything?" exclaimed the man. "Well, you are the luckiest fellow I ever saw!"

The man now turned and gave Julian a good looking over. It was not necessary that he should ask any questions, for poverty was written all over him.

"Where's your home?" he asked.

"I haven't any, sir."

"Have you had any breakfast?"

"No, sir."

"Well, here's enough to enable you to get a good fill-out," said the man, pulling out a dollar. "Get the very best breakfast you can, and then come down to the Western Union Telegraph office and ask for Wiggins. I will see what I can do for you."

The man hurried away, and Julian looked at the dollar he held in his hand, then gazed in the direction in which his benefactor had gone, and could hardly believe that he was awake. A dollar was a larger sum of money than he had ever had before.

Of course Julian followed the operator's instructions. When he reached the Western Union Telegraph office he was asked several questions about his habits, and what he knew about the city, and it finally ended by his being offered employment. Julian jumped at the chance. He had no money with which to purchase a uniform, but Wiggins got around that, and he had been there ever since, trying hard to do his duty, except in one particular, and his highest ambition was to become an operator.

Long before this time he made the acquaintance of Jack Sheldon, who finally came to room with him, and they had been fast friends ever since. Jack had formerly gained a good living by shining boots and shoes around the St. Louis foundry-works, until one day the master mechanic, who had taken a wonderful shine to him, offered to take him away from his blacking-brush and give him a position where he could make a man of himself. Jack was waiting for this, and he promptly closed with it. Of course his wages were small now, but he wanted to get away from the bootblacks and mingle with persons more like himself, and when Julian made him a proposition to take him in as a roommate, Jack was only too glad to agree to it. He was but a year older than Julian, but he often took it upon himself to advise him; and one thing he could not stand was Julian's longing to find out what was concealed in those packages that every once in a little while were sold in the express office. Being economical himself, and never spending a cent unless absolutely necessary, he wanted to make his companion so, too.

"That is no way for you to save money, Julian," said Jack. "To go to that express office when you ought to be at your work, and spending money for 'old horse' when you don't know what is in the bundle you bid on, is the very way for you to wear a poor man's clothes the longest day you live. I want to go into business myself some time, and I should think you would, too."

This was the way he talked to Julian every time he brought home a bundle of "old horse," and he was ready to talk to him now in the same way.

CHAPTER II

CASPER IS DISGUSTED

"Well, you have been to that old express office again and invested some of your hard earnings in 'old horse,' haven't you?" repeated Jack, placing his hands on his hips and looking sullenly at the box, which Julian placed upon the table. "Is that any way for you to save your money?"

"No, it is not; but, Jack, I've got something in this," said Julian. "See how nicely this box is done up –"

"I don't care to know anything about it," said Jack, turning away and going on with his preparations of getting supper. "That is the only thing I have against you. What do you care what is in those bundles? If they were worth anything don't you suppose that the people to whom they were addressed would have come after them? How much money have you got in bank, anyway?"

"About forty dollars, I guess, including tips and everything."

"Well, I've got a hundred," said Jack. "You will never be able to go into business by doing this way."

"Lend me your knife and talk about it afterward. I want to get these screws out."

"Take your own knife. I don't want to have mine broken."

"Well, I want you to remember one thing, Jack. If I get anything out of this box, it is mine entirely. You will have no interest in it."

"All right – I will agree to that."

Seeing that he must depend entirely upon himself to get his box open, Julian took his knife from his pocket and went to work upon the screws; but they had been put there to stay, and he finally gave it up in disgust. Then Jack relented and came to his assistance. The strong blade of his knife presently worked the screws loose, and the inside of the box was revealed to them. There was nothing but a mass of papers, which looked so ancient that Jack declared they had been through two or three wars. He took one look at them, and then went on with his work of getting supper.

"What's the use of fooling away your time with that stuff?" said he. "That's all your 'old horse' amounts to. If you are going to spend money in that way, I wish you would get something that is of some use."

Julian did not reply. He took his box to an out-of-the-way corner where he would not be in Jack's way, and devoted himself to the reading of the first paper he took up.

"Who's Haberstro?" said he.

"Don't know him," said Jack.

"Here's a letter addressed to him."

"What is in it?"

"Oh, you want to know something about it, now, don't you?"

"Of course I do. If we can find out who Haberstro is, we must take the letter to him."

Julian began and read the letter, which was written in a very plain hand, and before he had read a page of it he stopped and looked at Jack, while an expression of astonishment came to his face.

"Go on with it," said Jack; "we might as well know it all."

Julian "went on with it," and when he got through he had read a very good description of a gold-mine located somewhere out West, and inside the letter was a map which would lead anyone straight to it. There was one thing in it that did not look exactly right, and here is the passage that referred to it:

"They have got the story around that the mine is haunted, but don't you believe it. I worked for almost six months in that mine alone after my partner took sick and died, going down into it and shovelling the dirt in, coming up and hoisting

the bucket out, and went through the process of washing, and I never found anything to scare me yet. I took out, with every bucketful I washed, anywhere from ten to fifty dollars; anyway, I got fifty thousand dollars out of it. There is one thing about it: the mine is fully five miles from anybody's place, and in all that region you won't find a man who will prospect anywhere near you. It shows that all the country about Dutch Flat is not played out yet."

A little farther on the letter spoke of the manner in which the miner came to turn his claim over to Haberstro:

"You know that very shortly after we got there my partner died, and was buried near the mine. Perhaps that has something to do with the story of the mine's being haunted. I went to work and dug in the claim alone, not knowing anything about mining, until I made the sum that I told you of. Finally I received a letter from some lawyer in Europe, who told me that my father had died and left me heir to all his wealth. He urged me to come home and settle my claim at once, and who should my mind revert to but to you, old fellow, who stood by me when I was sick unto death. I know that we did not have the stamps to buy a mule-halter, but that did not make any sort of difference to you. You stayed at my back until I got well; and as I can't pay you in any other way I give you this mine, hoping it will make you as rich as it did me. More than that, for fear that the mine may play out on you, which I don't believe, I give you the deeds of several little pieces of property located in Denver and vicinity, which you will find will be more than enough to run you, even if you don't choose to go mining. For me, nothing would suit me. You know how you used to rail at me because I wanted to go from one thing to another. After I had accumulated that property in Denver, I had to go and look for claims, and that is the way I come to have this mine.

"I send all these things to you by express, for I am in New York, now, and all ready to sail. By the time you get them I shall be on the deep sea. I forgot to say that the property which I have given to you for your kindness to me is worth, in round numbers, one hundred thousand dollars. Take it, and live happily with it. I don't know that I shall ever see you again; but if I do not, remember that my blessing always goes with you."

"Well, sir, what do you think of that?" said Julian, as he folded up the letter.

Jack Sheldon did not know what to say. He sat with a case-knife in his hand and with one leg thrown over the table, his mouth open, and listening with all his ears to the contents of the letter.

"I tell you that auctioneer uttered a prophecy when he said that some miser had hidden the secret of a gold-mine inside the lid of that box," said Julian. "He told me that when I got home and opened this thing I would bless my lucky stars that I had come to that office to buy myself rich."

"But there is one thing that you don't think of, Julian," replied Jack.

"What's that?"

"That we must make every effort to find this man Haberstro."

"Yes," said Julian, with a sigh, "I did think of that. But it seems hard to have so much money in our grasp, and then to have it all slip away."

"Of course it does. But that is the honest way of going at it."

"Here's the deeds for a block of buildings that cost this man twenty-five thousand dollars," said Julian, continuing to examine the papers in the box.

"Oh, put the box away," said Jack. "And he gives it all to this man Haberstro. We must find him, Julian, the first thing we do. Who's that coming upstairs, I wonder?"

The boys turned toward the door, which opened almost immediately, admitting Casper Nevins, the boy who had met Julian at the express office. There was something about the boy that Jack did not like. He could not have told what it was, but there are those we meet in every-day life who have certain traits of character that excite our suspicions. Jack had often warned Julian to keep away from him, and the latter did not cultivate his acquaintance any more that he could help; but, being employed in the same office that Casper was, of course he was thrown into his company oftener than he desired.

"Good-evening, boys," said Casper. "I was on my way home, and I thought I would drop in and see what Julian bought to-day at the express office. You promised to show me if I would come up," he added, turning to Julian.

"I did, and there it is," said Julian, passing over the letter. "Sit down in this chair. We are so poor just now that we have only one chair apiece, but when we get out to our gold-mine we shall have two chairs."

"Ah! You have a gold-mine, have you?" said Casper, with a smile. "When do you start?"

"Read the letter, and you will think we ought to start right away," said Julian, while Jack got up and proceeded with his supper. "We think of starting to-morrow morning."

"I would like to have my hand on your coat-tail about the time you get out there," said Casper. "Now, the question is, does the mine pay anything?"

"Read the letter, and you will understand as much as we do."

Casper began the letter, and he had not gone far with it before he broke out with "Jerusalem!" and "This beats me!" and "Fifty thousand dollars!" When he had got done with the letter, he folded it up and passed it back to Julian without saying a word.

"And that is not all of it," said the latter. "Do you see the rest of the papers there in that box? Well, they are deeds of property which amount to one hundred thousand dollars."

"Whew!" whistled Casper. "By gracious! You're lucky – are you not? When do you start?"

"Laying all jokes aside, we don't intend to start at all," said Jack.

"You don't?" exclaimed Casper. "Have you got something better on hand?"

"No, I don't know that we have; but our first hard work must be to find this man Haberstro. It would not be right for us to keep what is in that box without turning the city upside down in order to locate him."

"Why, the box was sold to you, was it not?" said Casper, turning to Julian.

"Of course it was. Didn't I pay thirty cents of my hard earnings for it?"

"Did you agree to hunt up this man Haberstro?"

"No, because the clerks did not know where he was."

"Then I say the box and everything in it belongs to you. Undoubtedly the man does not live here any more. He has gone somewhere else. I would not make a precious fool of myself, if I were you. Take the money and say nothing to nobody."

"And go out there and take possession of that property while there is another man waiting for it?" asked Jack, with some heat.

"Yes, sir; that's what I would do."

"Then, sir, you are not honest. I am glad you don't train in my crowd."

"I don't call it dishonest in holding fast to what you have. A hundred thousand dollars! You would not need to go mining at all."

"We are well aware of that; but we must find out where that man lives, if we can. After having exhausted every means to find out, then I would consider that the property belongs to us. Julian, we will have to see a lawyer about that."

"That's what I was thinking," said Julian.

"Well, of all the plumb dunces that ever I saw, you are the beat!" said Casper, getting up and putting on his hat. "I tell you that if that property was mine I would never let anyone know that I

had it. I would throw up my position to-morrow, borrow money, go out there and take possession; and you are fools if you don't do it."

And Casper went out, slamming the door behind him.

CHAPTER III

JULIAN IS ASTONISHED

"Well, sir, what do you think of that?" asked Julian, when he heard the noise the telegraph boy made in running down the stairs. "He really acts as though he were mad about it."

"He is a dishonest fellow," said Jack, once more coming up to the table and throwing his leg over it. "You don't believe everything he said, do you?"

"Not much, I don't," replied Julian, emphatically. "I could not go out there and work the mine as he talks of doing. I should think it was haunted, sure enough."

"Well, put the papers away, and then let us have supper. While we are doing that, we will decide what we are going to do with the box."

"I say, don't let us do anything with it. We will put it up there on the mantel, and when we are through supper one of us will write an advertisement calling upon Mr. Haberstro to come up and show himself. I guess the *Republican* is as good a paper as any, isn't it?"

"But Haberstro may be a Democrat, instead of a Republican," said Jack.

"Well, then, put it in both papers. That will cost us two dollars – seventy-five cents for the first insertion and a quarter for the second."

It did not take the boys a long time to get their supper. They had nothing but bacon, baker's bread, tea, and a few cream cakes which Jack had purchased on his way home; but there was an abundance, they were hungry, and they did full justice to it. After supper came something that everybody hates – washing the dishes; but that was something the two friends never neglected. The dishes must be washed some time, and the sooner it was done the sooner it would be over with. Then one picked up the broom and went to sweeping, while the other lighted the lamp and brought out the writing materials.

"I have already made up my mind what I want to say," said Julian, who, being a better scribe than his companion, handled the pen. "Wait until I get the advertisement all written out, and then I will read it to you."

The pen moved slowly, and by the time that Jack had finished sweeping and seated himself in a chair ready to listen, Julian read the following:

"Information wanted regarding the whereabouts of S. W. Haberstro, formerly of St. Louis. If he will communicate with the undersigned he will hear of something greatly to his advantage. Any relative or friend of his who possesses the above information will confer a favor by writing to the name given below."

"There; how will that do?" said Julian. "By the way, whose name shall I sign to it – yours or mine?"

"Sign your own name, of course. Your place of business is much handier than mine."

"I tell you, Jack, it requires something besides a knowledge of penmanship to write out an advertisement for a newspaper. I have worried over this matter ever since we were at supper, and then I didn't know how you would like it. Now, the next thing is to put it where it will catch the public eye in the morning."

The boys did not intend to let the grass grow under their feet. They put on their coats and turned down the lamp, but before they went out they took particular pains to put the box where they knew it would be safe. They opened the closet, pushed the box as far back as they could on the top shelf, and threw some clothing in front of it to hide it from anyone who might look in there. Burglaries were common in the city, and the boys never left anything in their room that was worth stealing.

The friends did not ride on the street cars, for they believed that five cents was worth as much to them as it was to the conductor, but walked all the distance that lay between them and the business part of the city. They reached the newspaper offices at last, paid for two insertions in each paper, and went away satisfied that they had done all in their power to find Mr. Haberstro.

"Now we have done as we would be done by," said Julian, "and I believe a glass of soda water would help me sleep easier. Come in here."

"We don't want any soda water," exclaimed Jack, seizing Julian by the arm and pulling him away from the drug store. "We don't need it. When we get home we will take a glass of cold water, and that will do just as well as all the soda water in town."

"I suppose I shall have to give in to you," said Julian, continuing his walk with Jack, "but I think we deserve a little credit for what we have done. Here we are with a fortune of one hundred thousand dollars in our pockets, and yet we are anxious to give it up if Mr. Haberstro shows himself. I tell you, it is not everybody in the world who would do that."

"I know it, but that is the honest way of doing business. I never could look our master mechanic in the face again if I should go off and enjoy that money without making an effort to find the owner."

In due time the boys reached home and went to bed, but sleep did not visit their eyes before midnight. They were thinking of the fortune that was in their grasp. No one would have thought these boys very guilty if they had kept silent about the contents of that box and had gone off to reap the pleasure which good luck or something else had placed in Julian's hands; but such a thought had never entered their heads until Casper Nevins had suggested it to them. By being at the sale of "old horse" Julian had stumbled upon something that was intended for Mr. Haberstro, and he was just as much entitled to the contents of it as anybody.

"But I would be dishonest for all that," said he, rolling over in his bed to find a more comfortable position. "I never could enjoy that money, for I should be thinking of Mr. Haberstro, who ought to have it. No matter whether he is alive or dead, he would come up beside me all the while, and reach out his hand to take the money I was getting ready to use for my own pleasure. No, sir. We will do the best we can to find Mr. Haberstro, and if he does not show up within any reasonable time, then Jack says the money belongs to us. I can spend it, then, to get anything I want, with perfect confidence."

When Julian got to this point in his meditations he became silent, and thought over the many things he stood in need of, and which he thought he could not possibly get along without, until finally he fell asleep; but the next morning, when he arose and returned Jack's hearty greeting, that fortune came into his mind immediately.

"I tell you what it is, Jack," said he. "If, after waiting a few days, we don't hear from Mr. Haberstro or any of his kin, suppose I go to Mr. Wiggins with it? He will know exactly what we ought to do."

"All right," said Jack. "That will be better than going to a lawyer, for he won't charge us anything for his advice."

"And shall you keep still about this?"

"Certainly. Don't lisp it to anybody. We don't want somebody to come along here and claim to be Haberstro, when perhaps he don't know a thing about what is in the box."

"Of course he would not know a thing about it," said Julian, in surprise. "Haberstro himself don't know what there is in the box. He has got to prove by outside parties that he is the man that we want, or we can put him down as a fraud."

"That's so," said Jack, after thinking a moment. "We must be continually on the lookout for breakers."

Why was it that Jack did not go further, and say that they must be continually on the lookout for the safety of the box when they were not there to watch over it? It was not safe from anybody

who knew it was there, and it would have been but little trouble for them to have taken it with them and put it into the hands of Mr. Wiggins. If they had thought of this, no doubt they would have lost no time in acting upon it.

Long before the hands on Jack's watch had reached the hour of half-past six the two friends were on their way toward their places of business, and when Julian reached the office almost the first boy he saw was Casper Nevins, who had denounced them for trying to find out what became of Mr. Haberstro.

"Good-morning, Julian," said he. "Have you advertised for that man of yours yet?"

"What do you want to know for?" said Julian, remembering what Jack had said about keeping the matter still.

"Oh, nothing; only I want to tell you that if you get yourselves fooled out of that fortune you can thank yourselves for it. What is there to prevent some sharper from coming around and telling you that he is Haberstro? You didn't think of that, did you?"

"Yes, we thought of it," said Julian, with a smile. "Do you suppose we will take any man's word for that? He must prove that he is the man we want, or else we won't have anything to do with him."

"Pshaw! That is easy enough. I can find fifty men right here in this town who will prove that they are President of the United States for half of what that box is worth. Say!" he added, sinking his voice almost to a whisper, "you haven't said a word to anybody about advertising for him, have you?"

"No; and I have not said a word to you about it either," said Julian.

"That's all right, but you can't fool me so easy. I want to tell you right now that there are a good many here who know about it, and that they are bound to have that box. Ah!" he added, noting the expression that came upon Julian's face, "you didn't think of *that*, did you?"

"Who are they?" asked Julian.

"There were men in the express office yesterday who know all about it. You needn't think you are going to keep that express box hid, for you can't do it. Where did you put it?"

"It is safe. It is where nobody will ever think of looking for it."

"Then you are all right," said Casper, who was plainly very much disappointed because he did not find out where the box was. "But you had better keep an eye out for those fellows in the express office, for, unless the looks of some of them belied them, they will steal that box from you as sure as you are a foot high."

"If they thought so much of the box, why didn't they buy it in the first place?"

"That is for them to tell. I don't know but they have somehow got an idea that there is something in it. You are going to get fooled out of it, and it will serve you just right for advertising for Haberstro."

That day was a long one to Julian, for he could not help turning over in his mind what Casper had said to him. When he reached home after his day's work was done he went straight to the closet, paying no sort of attention to Jack, who looked at him in surprise, took a chair with him, and hunted up the box. It was where he put it, and he drew a long breath of relief.

"Now, then, I would like to have you explain yourself," said Jack, after he had waited some little time for Julian to say what he meant by his actions.

"It is there," said Julian, "but I have been shaking in my shoes all day. Did it ever occur to you that some of those people who saw me buy the box at the express office would come up here to take it?"

"No; and I don't believe they will do it."

"Well, Casper said they would."

"You tell Casper Nevins to keep his long, meddlesome nose out of this pie and attend strictly to his own affairs," said Jack, in disgust. "It is ours, and he has nothing to do with it. If anybody comes into this room when we are not here, it will be Casper himself."

"He can't; he has not got a key."

"I know that. If he had, we would have trouble with that box. What did he say to you?"

Julian then repeated the conversation he held with Casper that morning, and Jack nodded his head once or twice to say that he approved of it.

"You did perfectly right by declining to answer his question about advertising for our man," said Jack. "What did he want to know that for? If they wanted the box, why did they not buy it in the first place?"

During the next few days the two friends were in a fever of suspense, for they did not want somebody to come and take their fortune away from them. Every man who came into the telegraph office Julian watched closely, for he had somehow got it into his head that Haberstro must be a German; but every German who came in there had business of his own, and as soon as it was done he went out. No one came to see Julian about the box, and, if the truth must be told, he began to breathe easier. Of late he had got out of the habit of looking for the box as soon as he came home, and perhaps the sport that Jack made of him for it was the only thing that made him give it up.

"One would think you owned that fortune," said he. "I don't believe a miser ever watched his gold as closely as you watch that box."

"I don't care," said Julian. "The fortune is ours, or rather is going to be in a few days. Now you mark my words, and see if I don't tell you the truth."

"There's many a slip. We will never have such luck in the world."

"Well, I am going to look at it now. It seems to me that if Haberstro is around here he ought to have put in an appearance before this time. We have waited a whole week without seeing anything of him."

"A whole week!" exclaimed Jack, with a laugh. "If you wait a month without seeing him you may be happy. If we keep the box for three months without the man appearing, then I shall think it belongs to us."

Julian did not believe that. He thought that the contents of the box would belong to them before that time. He made no reply, but took a chair to examine the closet. He moved the clothing aside, expecting every minute to put his hand upon the box, and then uttered an exclamation of astonishment and threw the articles off on the floor.

"What's the matter?" asked Jack, in alarm.

"The box is gone!" replied Julian.

CHAPTER IV

WHERE THE BOX WAS

This startling piece of information seemed to strike Jack Sheldon motionless and speechless with astonishment. His under jaw dropped down, and he even clutched the back of a chair, as if seeking something with which to support himself. The two boys stood at opposite sides of the room looking at each other, and then Jack recovered himself.

"Gone!" he repeated. "You are mistaken; you have overlooked it. I saw it night before last myself."

"I don't care," said Julian, emphatically; "I have taken the clothes all out, and the box is gone. Look and see for yourself."

Julian stepped down from the chair and Jack took his place. He peered into every nook and corner of the dark shelf, passed his hands over it, and then, with something like a sigh, got down and began to hang the clothes up in their proper places. Then he closed the door of the closet, took a chair, and gazed earnestly at the floor.

"Well, sir, what do you think of that?" said Julian.

"Didn't I tell you that if anybody came in here to look for that box while we were not here it would be Casper Nevins, and nobody else?" said Jack.

"You surely don't suspect him!" exclaimed Julian.

"I *do* suspect him; if you could get inside his room to-night you would find the box."

"Why, then he is a thief!" said Julian, jumping up from his chair and walking the floor. "Shall we go down to No. 8 Station and ask the police to send a man up there and search him?"

"I don't know whether that would be the best way or not," said Jack, reflectively. "Has Casper got many friends among the boys of your office?"

"I don't believe he's got one friend there who treats him any better than I do. The boys are all shy of him."

"And well they may be. That boy got a key somewhere that will fit our door, and came in here and took that box. You say he has not any friends on whom he can depend in the office?"

"Not one. If he has any friends, none of us know who they are."

"Then he must be alone in stealing the box from us. He has it there in his room, for he has no other place to hide it. Do you know what sort of a key he has to fit his door?"

"Of course I do. I was with him when he got it. It is a combination key; one that he folds up when he puts it into his pocket."

"Do you believe you can buy another like it?"

"By George! That's an idea. Let us go down and find out. Then to-morrow, if I can get away, I will come up here and go through his room."

That was Jack's notion entirely. He wanted to see "the biter bit" – to know that he would feel, when he awoke some fine morning and found his fortune gone, just how they were feeling now. They put on their coats and locked the door, – it seemed a mockery to them now to lock the door when their fortune was gone, – and, after walking briskly for a few minutes, turned into the store where Casper had purchased his key. When Julian told the clerk that he wanted to see some combination keys, he threw out upon the counter a box which was filled to overflowing.

"Do you remember a telegraph boy who was in here several months ago and bought a combination lock to fit his door?" asked Julian. "I was in here at the time, and I know he bought the lock of you."

"Seems to me that I *do* remember something about that," said the clerk, turning around to the shelves behind him and taking down another box, "and we have got just one lock of that sort left."

"Are you sure this key will open his door?" asked Julian.

"I am sure of it. If it don't open his door, you can bring it back and exchange it for another."

Julian told him that he would take the lock, and while the clerk was gone to another part of the store to do it up he whispered to Jack.

"I have just thought of something. He has not any closet in his room that I know of, and who knows but that he may have put that box in his trunk? I had better get some keys to his trunk while I am about it."

"Do you remember how the key looked?" asked Jack.

"I guess I can come pretty close to it," answered Julian.

The work of selecting a key to the trunk was not so easy; but Julian managed to satisfy himself at last, and the boys left the store. Julian did not say anything, but he was certain that the box would be in his own possession before that time to-morrow. That would be better than calling the police to search his room. In the latter case, Casper would be held for trial, and Julian did not want to disgrace him before all the boys in the office.

"I will give Mr. Wiggins the box as soon as I get my hands on it, but I shan't say anything to him about Casper's stealing it," said he. "Would you?"

"You are mighty right I *would*," exclaimed Jack, who looked at his friend in utter surprise. "He stole it, didn't he? He was going to cheat Haberstro out of it if he showed up, and, failing that, he would leave us here to work all our lives while he lived on the fat of the land. No, sir; if you get the box you must tell Mr Wiggins about it."

For the first time in a long while the boys did not sleep much that night. Jack was thinking about Casper's atrocity, – for he considered that was about the term to apply to him for stealing their box, – and Julian was wondering if he was going to get into Casper's room and recover the fortune which he was attempting to deprive them of.

"I tell you, that boy is coming to some bad end," said Jack. "I would not be in his boots for all the money he will ever be worth."

"I don't care what end he comes to," said Julian, "but I was just thinking what would happen to us if this key did not open his door. We would then have to get the police, sure enough."

Morning came at length, and at the usual hour Julian was on hand in the telegraph office, waiting to see what his duties were going to be. As usual, he found Casper Nevins there. He looked closely at Julian when he came in, but could not see anything in the expression of his face that led him to believe there was anything wrong.

"Good-morning, Julian," said he.

"Good-morning," said Julian. "How do you feel this morning?"

"Right as a trivet. I feel much better than you will when you find that that box is gone," added Casper to himself. "He hasn't found it out yet, and I hope he will not until I get my pay. I have waited and watched for this a long time, and, thank heaven! I have found it at last. I wish I knew somebody who would take that box and hide it for me; but I can't think of a living soul."

All the fore part of that day Julian was kept busy running to the lower part of the city with messages, and not a chance did he get to go up past Casper's room. Two or three times he was on the point of asking Mr. Wiggins to excuse him for a few minutes, but he always shrunk from it for fear of the questions that gentleman would ask him. "Where did he want to go?" "What did he want to go after?" "What was he going to do when he got there?" and Julian was quite certain that he could not answer these questions without telling a lie. While he was thinking it over he heard his name called, and found that he must go right by Casper's room in order to take the message where it was to go. He seemed to be treading on air when he walked up to take the telegraphic dispatch.

"Do you know where that man lives?" asked the operator.

"I know pretty nearly where he lives," answered Julian.

"Well, take it there, and be back as soon as you can, for I shall want to send you somewhere else. What's the matter with you, Julian? You seem to be gay about something."

"I don't know that I feel any different from what I always do," replied Julian. "I will go there as soon as I can."

When Julian got into the street, his first care was to find his keys. They were all there; and, to gain the time that he would occupy in looking about the room, Julian broke into a trot, knowing that the police would not trouble him while he had that uniform on. At the end of an hour he began to draw close to Casper's room, and there he slackened his pace to a walk.

"Ten minutes more and the matter will be decided," said Julian, his heart beating with a sound that frightened him. "That boy has the box, and I am going to have it."

A few steps more brought him to the stairs that led up to Casper's room. It was over a grocery store, and the steps ran up beside it. He turned in there without anybody seeing him, and stopped in front of the door. The combination key was produced, and to Julian's immense delight the door came open the very first try.

"I guess I won't lock it," muttered Julian. "I might lock myself in. He does not keep his room as neat as we do ours."

Julian took one glance about the apartment, taking in the tumbled bedclothes, and the dishes from which Casper had eaten his breakfast still unwashed on the table, and then turned his attention to what had brought him there. There was no closet in the room, and the box was not under the bed; it must therefore be in his trunk. One after another of the keys was tried without avail, and Julian was about to give it up in despair, when the last key – the one on Jack's bunch – opened the trunk, which he found in the greatest confusion. He lifted off the tray, and there was the box, sure enough. Julian took it, and hugged it as though it was a friend from whom he had long been separated.

"Now the next question is, are the papers all here?" thought he. "There were seven of them besides the letter, and who knows but that he has taken a block of buildings away from us."

But the papers were all there. However much Casper might have been tempted to realize on some of the numerous "blocks of buildings" which the box called for, he dared not attempt the sale of any of them. It was as much as he could do to steal the papers. Julian placed the tray back and carefully locked the trunk, and then looking around, found a paper with which to do up his box. Then he locked the door, came down, and went on to deliver his message.

"That boy called us foolish because we advertised for Mr. Haberstro," said Julian, as he carefully adjusted the box under his arm. "I would like to know if we were bigger fools than he was. We could have found the police last night as easy as not, and it would have been no trouble for them to find the box. He ought not to have left it there in his trunk. He didn't think that we could play the same game on him that he played upon us."

Julian conveyed his message and returned to his office in less time than he usually did, and, after reporting, told Mr. Wiggins in a whisper that he would like to see him in the back room.

"I know what you want," said Mr. Wiggins, as he went in. "You have been up to the express office, buying some more of that 'old horse.' Some day I am going to give you fits for that. It is the only thing I have stored up against you."

"Can you tell when I did it?" asked Julian, slowly unfolding the box which he carried under his arm. "Haven't I carried my telegraphic dispatches in as little time as anybody? Now, I have something here that is worth having. Read that letter, and see if it isn't."

Mr. Wiggins seated himself on the table and slowly read the letter which Julian placed in his hands, and it was not long before he became deeply interested in it. When he had got through he looked at the boy with astonishment.

"I declare, Julian, you're lucky," said he. "Now, the next thing for you to do is to advertise for Haberstro."

"We have already advertised for him. We have put four insertions in the papers."

"And he doesn't come forward to claim his money? Put two other advertisements in, and if he don't show up the money is yours."

"That is what I wanted to get at," said Julian, with a sigh of relief. "Now, Mr. Wiggins, I wish you would take this and lock it up somewhere. I don't think it safe in our house."

"Certainly I'll do it. By George! Who would think you were worth a hundred thousand dollars!"

"It isn't ours yet," said Julian, with a smile. "About the time we get ready to use it, here will come Mr. Haberstro, and we will have to give it up to him."

"Well, you are honest, at any rate, or you would not have advertised for him. This beats me, I declare. I won't scold you this time, but don't let it happen again."

"I'll never go into that express office again while I live," said Julian, earnestly. "I have had my luck once, and I don't believe it will come again."

When Julian went out into the office he saw Casper there, and he was as white as a sheet. Julian could not resist the temptation to pat an imaginary box under his arm and wink at Casper.

"What do you mean by that pantomime?" said he.

"It means that you can't get the start of two fellows who have their eyes open," said Julian. "I've got the box."

"You have?" gasped Casper. "You've been into my room when I was not there? I'll have the police after you before I am five minutes older!"

Casper jumped to his feet and began to look around for his hat.

CHAPTER V

CASPER THINKS OF SOMETHING

Julian stood with his hands in his pockets looking at Casper, and something that was very like a smile came into his face.

"I know what you went in there with Mr. Wiggins for," said Casper; and having found his cap by that time, he jammed it spitefully on his head, "and I just waited until you came out so that I could ask you. I don't need to ask you. I tell you once for all – "

"Well, why don't you go on?" asked Julian. "You will tell me once for all – what?"

Casper had by this time turned and looked sternly at Julian, but there was something about him which told him that he had gone far enough.

"Go and get the police," said Julian. "Right here is where I do business. Look here, Casper: you came into our room and stole that box out of our closet."

"I never!" said Casper, evidently very much surprised. "So help me – "

"Don't swear, because you will only make a bad matter worse. I found the box in your trunk, just where you had left it. The way I have the matter arranged now, there's nobody knows that you took it; but you go to work and raise the police, and I will tell all I know. If you keep still, I won't say one word."

Casper backed toward the nearest chair and sat down. This conversation had been carried on in whispers, and there was nobody, among the dozen persons who were standing around, that had the least idea what they were talking about. If Casper supposed that he was going to scare Julian into giving up the box, he failed utterly.

"I won't give up that fortune," said he, to himself, when Julian turned away to go to his seat. "A hundred thousand dollars! I'll have it, or I'll never sleep easy again."

During the rest of the day Julian was as happy as he wanted to be. The box was now safe in the hands of Mr. Wiggins, and he would like to see anybody get hold of it. Furthermore, Mr. Wiggins had told him to put two more advertisements in the papers, and, if Mr. Haberstro did not show himself in answer to them, the money was his own.

"I do hope he won't come," said Julian. "I don't believe in giving up that fortune."

The boy was glad when the day was done, and the moment he was safe on the street he struck a trot which he never slackened until he ran up the stairs to his room. Jack was there, as he expected him to be, and he was going about his work of getting supper. He looked up as Julian came in, and he saw at a glance that he had been successful.

"I've got it!" shouted Julian; and, catching Jack by the arm, he whirled him around two or three times. "It was in the trunk, just as I told you it was. Mr. Wiggins has it now, and he will take care of it, too."

"That's the best news I have heard in a long time," said Jack, throwing his leg over the table. "Did you tell Mr. Wiggins about the way Casper acted?"

"No, I did not. Somehow, I couldn't bear to see the boy discharged. I simply told Mr. Wiggins that it wasn't safe in our room."

"Well, I don't know but that was the best way, after all," said Jack, looking reflectively at the floor. "But I tell you, if I had been in your place I would have let it all out. Now tell me the whole thing."

Julian pulled off his coat, and, while he assisted Jack in getting supper, told him all that passed between Mr. Wiggins and himself, not forgetting how the latter had promised to scold him at some future time for going to the express office and investing in "old horse."

"I hope he will tell you some words that will set," said Jack. "All I can say to you has no effect upon you."

"I will never go near that express office again – never!" said Julian, earnestly.

"I hope you will always bear that in mind."

"I've had my luck, and if I live until my head is as white as our president's I never shall have such good fortune again. I will get bricks the next time I buy."

"You had better sit down and write out that advertisement for two more insertions, and after supper we'll take it down and put it in. If Haberstro does not appear in answer to them the money is ours. That's a little better fortune than I dared to hope for."

Anybody could see that Jack was greatly excited over this news, but he tried not to show it. If he had gone wild over it, he would have got Julian so stimulated that he would not have known which end he stood on. He had to control himself and Julian, too. He ate his supper apparently as cool as he ever was, and after the room had been swept up and the dishes washed he put on his coat and was ready to accompany his friend to the newspaper offices.

"Remember now, Julian, we don't want any soda water to-night," said Jack. "If you want anything to drink, get it before you start."

Julian promised that he would bear it in mind, and during the three hours that they were gone never asked for soda water or anything else.

"Just wait until I get that fortune in my hands, and then I will have all the soda water I want," said Julian to himself. "But, after all, Jack's way is the best. I don't know what I should do without him."

In due time the boys were at home and in bed; and leaving them there to enjoy a good night's rest, we will go back to Casper Nevins and see what he thought and what he did when he found that he had lost the box he had risked so much to gain. He was about as mad as a boy could hold when he ran down the stairs after his interview with them in their room, and he straightway began to rack his brain to see if he could not get that box for himself.

"Of all the dunces I ever saw, those two fellows are the beat!" said he, as he took his way toward his room. "They have got the fortune in their own hands; no one will say a word if they use it as though it was their own; and yet they are going to advertise for the man to whom it was addressed. Did anybody ever hear of a fool notion like that? I was in hopes that I could get them to go partners with me, but under the circumstances I did not like to propose it. Why didn't I happen into that express office and bid on that box? Gee! What a fortune that would be!"

Casper was almost beside himself with the thought, and he reached his room and cooked and ate his supper, still revolving some plan for obtaining possession of that box. He had suddenly taken it into his head that he ought to go into partnership with the two boys in order to assist them in spending their money, although there was not the first thing that he could think of that induced the belief. Julian had always been friendly with him, – much more so than any of the other boys in the office, – although he confessed that he had not always been friendly with Julian.

"Of course I have little spats with him, but Julian isn't a fellow to remember that," said Casper to himself. "I've had spats with every boy, and some of them I don't want anything more to do with. But Julian ought to take me into partnership with him, and I believe I'll ask him. But first, can't I get that box for my own? That is an idea worth thinking of."

It was an idea that had suddenly come into Casper's head, and he did not think any more about the partnership business just then. Of course their advertising for Haberstro knocked all that in the head; but then if he had the box he could do as he pleased with it. The next day, at the office, he did say something about partnership, but Julian laughed at him. He said that he and Jack could easily spend all that money, and more too, if they had it. It was made in a joking way, and Julian had not thought to speak to Jack about it.

"It is no use trying you on," said Casper to himself, getting mad in a minute. "You can spend all that money yourselves, can you? I'll bet you don't. There must be some keys in the city that will fit your door, and I am going to have one."

From that time forward Casper had but just one object in view, and that was to get the box. He spent three days in trying the different keys which he had purchased to fit the lock, and one time he came near getting himself into difficulty. He was out a great deal longer than he ought to have been with a message, and when he got to the office Mr. Wiggins took him to task for it.

"How is this, Casper?" said he. "You have been gone three-quarters of an hour longer than you ought to have been."

"I went just as soon as I could," replied Casper, who was not above telling a lie. "The man wasn't at his place of business, and so I went to his home."

"Then you are excusable. It seems strange that he should be at home at this hour."

Casper did not say anything, but he was satisfied that he was well out of that scrape. He had not been to the man's home at all. He was trying the lock on Julian's door.

Although he made two attempts without getting in, he succeeded on the third. The door came open for him, and after searching around the room in vain for the box, he looked into the closet.

"Aha! I've got you at last!" said he, as he drew the clothing aside and laid hold of the object of his search. "Now I wish I had my money that is due me from the telegraph office. To-morrow would see me on my way toward Denver."

Hurriedly locking the door, Casper made the best of his way down the stairs and to his room, and put the box into his trunk. Then he broke into another run and went to the office, where he arrived in time to avoid a second reprimand.

"Oh, you feel mighty well now," said Casper, watching Julian, who was talking and laughing with some of the boys, "but I bet you you will feel different in a little while. Now who am I going to get to hide that box for me? None of the boys in here will do it, so I must go elsewhere."

During the rest of the week Casper was as deeply interested in watching the persons who came there as Julian was. He did not advertise for Haberstro, because he did not want to give up the box. He was more than half inclined to go to Mr. Wiggins and tell him he was going to leave when his month was out, but some way or other he did not. Something compelled him to wait, and in three days more he found out what it was. He was in the office waiting for a message to deliver, when Julian came in with a bundle wrapped up in a newspaper under his arm. Casper was thunderstruck, for something told him that Julian had played the same game that he had. He had been to his room and got the box. His face grew as pale as death when he saw Mr. Wiggins follow Julian into the back room, and his first thought was to leave the office before he came out.

"It is all up with me now," said he, rising to his feet and looking around for his cap, which, boy fashion, he had tossed somewhere, on entering the room. "He will tell Mr. Wiggins that I stole the box, and I will be discharged the first thing. I'll deny it," he added, growing desperate. "I haven't seen his box. He did not find it in my room, but got it somewhere else. I will make a fight on it as long as I can."

So saying, Casper sat down to await Julian's return; but the boy came out alone, and the antics he went through drove Casper frantic.

"I've got the box," said Julian, when Casper asked him what he meant by that pantomime.

The guilty boy was given plenty of opportunity to "deny it all," but he gave it up in despair when he found that Julian was not to be frightened into giving up the box. The latter was perfectly willing that the police should come there, but if they did, he would tell all Casper had done. He might get Julian in a scrape, but he would get into a worse one himself. He was glad when Julian moved off to his chair and left him alone.

"I guess it is the best way as it is," said Casper, getting upon his feet and looking out into the street. "If he sets the police onto me – good gracious, what should I do? So that plan has failed, and now the next thing is something else. I'll have that box, or die trying to get it."

All that day, while he was in the office or carrying his telegraphic dispatches around the street, Casper thought of but one thing, and that was, how was he going to get that box again? He did not have much to say to anybody, and when six o'clock came he lost no time in getting home. He had evidently determined upon something, for he ate a very scanty supper, changed his clothes, and hurried out again. His changing his uniform for a citizen's suit was something that would have brought him his instant discharge if his company officers had found him in that fix. He could mingle with loafers about the pool-rooms, and no one could have told that he was any different from anybody else. He could drink his beer, too, and no one would suspect that he was going back on the pledge he made to the company. But, then, Casper was used to such things, and he thought nothing of it. More than that, he had an object to gain, and he had already picked out the person whom he hoped to induce to enter into a scheme to possess that box.

"Claus is the fellow I am going to try," said he, as he hurried along toward a pool-room which he often frequented. "He is a German, he is well along in years, and I know he isn't above making a dime or two whenever he gets the chance. Now for it. It is make or break."

CHAPTER VI

A MR. HABERSTRO APPEARS

As Casper Nevins uttered these words he turned into an entry, ran up a flight of stairs, and opened the door of the pool-room. The apartment was always crowded at night, and the players were mostly young men who ought by rights to have been somewhere else. One end of the room was occupied with pool-tables, and the other was taken up by billiards, which were in full blast. Casper gave out among the players that he was a broker's clerk, and the story seemed to satisfy the young men, who asked no further questions. There was no chance for him in a pool game, and consequently he did not look for it. He looked all around, and finally discovered his man Claus, who was sitting near one of the tables, watching the game.

This man was one of the loafers about the pool-rooms. He always dressed very neatly, but he was never known to have any money. He was a German, and that fitted the name of the man to whom the box was addressed.

"I am living on the interest of my debts," said he, when some one asked what his occupation was. "I never have any money. I don't need it. I can get along without it. You fellows have to work every day, while I do nothing but sit around the pool-room and wait for some one to challenge me for a game."

"But you must make some money sometime, or else you couldn't play pool as often as you do."

"Oh, as to that, I make a dollar or two when I find the right man who can play a little, and sometimes I make more. If I could get a chance to make a hundred thousand dollars I would take it in a minute. After that, I would not be obliged to work."

These remarks were made in the presence of Casper Nevins, who remembered them. After he had stolen the box, and before Julian had got it back again, he thought it best to try him on a new tack.

"Supposing you didn't get a hundred thousand dollars the first time trying," said he. "Would not fifty thousand do you?"

"Well, I think I could live on that much. Fifty thousand would tempt me awfully. I wish I had a chance to try it."

"There is Claus, and I am going to speak to him the first thing I do," said Casper. "If there is anybody who can play the part of the missing Haberstro, he is the man."

"Ah! Good-evening, Casper," he exclaimed, as the boy approached him. "How is the brokerage business to-day? Have you made any money?"

"I don't make any. The boss does all that."

"Well, why don't you pick up some money and go in yourself? You will never be a man in the world as long as you stay in the background. Do you want to see me? Here I am, and all ready for business. Is there any money in this thing you have to propose?"

Claus, following Casper's lead, occupied an arm-chair in a remote corner of the room, away from everybody, and Casper sat down alongside of him. It was not any work for him to begin the conversation, for Claus "had given himself away" every time the subject of money was introduced.

"Were you in earnest the other day when you said that if you had a chance to steal a hundred thousand dollars you would try it on?" said Casper. "I want you to deal fairly with me now. I want to know just how you feel about it."

"My dear boy, I was never more in earnest in my life," said Claus emphatically. "Just give me a chance, and you will see whether or not I meant what I said."

"Well, I have got a chance for you to make something," said Casper.

"You have? Let her rip. I am all attention. But hold on a bit. Let us get a cigar. Have you any money?"

"I have ten cents."

"That is enough. Anything to keep our jaws puffing. I can listen a great deal better with a cigar than I can without it."

The two arose from their seats and made a trip to the bar. They lighted their cigars, and Casper paid ten cents for them. It made no difference to Claus that Casper had paid out some of his hard earnings and wondered where his next morning's breakfast was coming from. As long as he got the cigar, it mattered little to him whether Casper had any more money or not.

"Now I am all ready to listen," said Claus, seating himself in his arm-chair once more. "Be explicit; go into all the minutiae, so that I may know what I have to do."

There was no need that Claus should tell Casper this, and for the next fifteen minutes Claus never said a word, but listened intently. He told about Julian's habit of going to the express office on the day that "old horse" was offered for sale, until finally he bought the secret of a gold-mine which was hidden away in a box that came near being sold for twenty-five cents. The box was addressed to S. W. Haberstro, and the boys had put four advertisements in the papers asking that man to show himself; and, if he did not show up in reasonable time, the money was to be theirs.

"Here is a copy of the *Democrat*, with a copy of the advertisement in it," said Casper. "I knew you would want to know everything, and so I brought it along. A hundred thousand dollars! Now, why couldn't I have bid on that box? That little snipe does not get any more money than I do, and yet he had to go and buy himself rich."

"Then it seems that you are not a broker's clerk after all," said Claus. "I don't know as I blame you."

"You see I would get discharged if any of the company officers should find me dressed up in citizen's rig," said Casper. "I can go among the boys, now, and have a good time."

"I don't know that I blame you," repeated Claus. "I will keep your secret. Well, go on. I begin to understand the matter now."

"I tell you I was mad when I found out that they were going to advertise for old man Haberstro," said Casper. "I called them everything but decent boys, and went to work to conjure up some plan for getting the box for my own. I got it, too –"

"You did? Then you are all right."

"Not so near right as you think I am. Julian got some keys that would fit my door, and went in and stole it."

"Whew! They are a desperate lot; ain't they?"

"That is just what they did; and, furthermore, Julian gave the box into the hands of Mr. Wiggins, our chief telegraph operator. Now, I want you to come down there, pass yourself off for Haberstro, and claim that box. Can you do it?"

Mr. Claus did not answer immediately. He stretched his legs out before him and slid down in his chair until his head rested on the back of it. He was thinking over the details of the plan. Casper did not interrupt him, but waited to see what he was going to say about it.

"And you are willing to give me half the contents of that box if I will get it for you?" said he. "You have given me the hardest part of the work. Where do you suppose that man Wiggins keeps the box?"

"In the bank, of course. He's pretty sharp, and you must look out for that. If we can get that box, I won't go near the mine. I am not going to handle a pick and shovel when I have fifty thousand dollars to fall back upon. I am not going to work every day when I am afraid that something will come up and scare me to death. I will take half the block of buildings described there, and you can take the other half. That is fair, isn't it?"

"Yes, it is fair enough, but I am afraid of that man Wiggins. What sort of a looking man is he?"

"The worst part about him is his eyes. They are steel-gray, and when he turns them on a culprit in the office you would think he was going to look him through. You will have to be pretty sharp to get around him."

"Well, suppose I go and see Julian first. If I can get around him, that will be so much gained."

This was the beginning of a long conversation between Casper and Claus, and when it was done the latter felt greatly encouraged, and told himself that he was nearer getting the box for his own than he ever was before. Casper told him everything he could think of that related to the matter, and when Claus got up, removed his hat and wiped his face with his handkerchief, Casper said that if he would just act that way in the presence of Mr. Wiggins, he would carry the day.

"You act more like a German than I ever saw you act before," said he. "If you will just do that way to-morrow, I will answer for your success."

"I can act the German all over, if that is what he wants," said Claus, with a laugh. "You haven't got another ten cents, have you? Well, let it go. I will go home and sleep upon it."

"But look here," said Casper, earnestly. "If you come to that telegraph office you must not know me. You never saw me before."

"Of course not. I won't give you away. That money is worth trying for. What is the reason that you and I have not some good friends to leave us that amount of money?"

"Because we are not honest enough," said Casper, bitterly.

"Honesty has nothing to do with it. We ain't sharp; that is what's the matter with us. Well, good-night. I will go and see Julian to-morrow night, and the next day I may be down to the telegraph office. I want to go easy, because I don't want to spoil the thing by being too brash."

As it was already late, Casper did not attempt to enter any game that night. He went home and tumbled into bed, and for a long time he lay thinking over what he had said to Claus. There was another thing that came into his mind every once in a while, and that was, where was his breakfast to come from?

"I was not going to get any cigars to-night, because ten cents was all I had left," said Casper. "But I could not well refuse Claus. No matter. If he succeeds in getting that box, I will have all the cigars I want."

The next morning Casper went to the office without any breakfast; but the first message he had to carry took him to a saloon where they set a free-lunch table. There he took the edge off his appetite and ate enough to last him until supper-time, when he was to get his pay. Julian was there, looking as happy as ever. Casper did not blame him for that. If he had a box with that amount of money in it, he would be happy, too.

"By George! It is six o'clock," said Casper, at length. "In two hours more I will know what Julian says to Claus. Till then, I must have patience."

Casper received his money when the others did, and without saying a word to anybody set out for home. Julian was not in quite so big a hurry. He walked along with his hands in his pockets, and once, when passing by a baker's shop, he went in and bought some cakes with which to top off their supper. Jack Sheldon always reached home before he did, and Julian found him in his usual act of getting supper. In reply to his ordinary greetings, he answered that there had been nothing unusual going on in the telegraph office, and that no man who said his name was Haberstro had been there to see about the advertisement that had appeared in the papers.

"I tell you, Jack, that fortune in the box is ours," said Julian. "That man has had ample time to show up, and it won't be long before we will be on our way to Denver."

"Don't be too sure of that," said Jack. "Haberstro may be off on a vacation somewhere. I shall believe we are in Denver when we get there, and not before."

Almost as Jack said the words there was a sound of somebody coming up the stairs. He stopped in front of the door, and called out to somebody he left below.

"Does Mr. Julian Gray live here? Thank you;" and a moment afterward his rap sounded upon the door.

"What did I tell you?" whispered Jack. "That's Haberstro, as sure as you live."

For an honest boy, Julian's heart fell. His fortune was gone, and there were no two ways about it. He stepped to the door and opened it, and there stood Claus, more neatly dressed than ever.

"Good-evening," said he, while his eyes roved from one boy to the other. "Which one of you is Julian Gray?"

"I am, sir."

"I am delighted to meet you," said he; and he thrust out his hand, into which Julian put his own. Then he put his hand into his pocket and pulled out a card on which the name S. W. Haberstro was engraved. "I got belated in my hotel while waiting for the train, and I picked up this paper and saw this advertisement in it. As it happened to be my name, I read it through."

"Come in, sir," said Jack, placing a chair for him. "It is one of four advertisements that we put into the daily papers. Your name is Haberstro, I believe?"

"That is my name. You said you had something of great value to tell me. What is it?"

Julian could not have opened his mouth to save him. He was obliged to let Jack do all the talking.

CHAPTER VII

A PLAN THAT DIDN'T WORK

Julian Gray took his stand in one corner of the room, with his hands in his pockets and his feet spread out, and looked at this man who called himself Haberstro. He was a German, there were no two ways about that; and he had a habit of taking out his handkerchief and wiping his face with it that nobody but a pompous and well-to-do German ever imitated.

"Do you know of a man of the name of Winkleman?" asked Jack.

"Know him?" exclaimed the German. "Of course I do. He was living here in St. Louis with me, but all on a sudden he took the gold fever and went out to Denver. I was engaged in pretty good business, and so I did not go with him. I never heard what he was doing out there. He – he isn't dead, is he?"

"Oh, no. He accumulated some property while he was out there. He got a notice that his father had died in Europe and left all his property to him, and he has gone home to take possession of it."

"Then that accounts for his not writing to me. He always said that his folks were immensely rich, and that some day he would have more than he wanted. What property did he collect out there?"

"He is worth several buildings which are worth a hundred thousand dollars. Furthermore, he has given them to you."

"To me?" cried the German, rising to his feet.

"Yes, to you. And, more than that, he has a mine out of which he took fifty thousand dollars, and you come into possession of that, also."

"Lord bless my soul!" exclaimed the German. "I don't remember that I ever did anything to him to give him so good an opinion of me."

"Did you not nurse him while he was sick?"

"Did you not care for your mother when she was sick?" returned the German. "Of course that did not amount to anything. He was my chum, and I had to stand by him."

"Well, he gave you the property for it, anyway. He sent you the deeds by express, and Julian bought them for thirty cents."

"Well, sir, that is a heap of money. I don't know anybody that needs it more than I do. Where is the box now?"

"It is safe in the hands of Mr. Wiggins. We were not going to have somebody come along here and claim to be Haberstro. Have you anybody here in St. Louis to whom you can recommend us? We want to know who you are before we give up the box."

"That is perfectly right and proper. You see, my home is in Chicago, and I know but few persons here. If you think this Mr – what do you call him?"

"Wiggins?" said Jack.

"Yes; if you think he will want somebody to vouch for me, I can give him the names of all the Germans in the city. Where does he hang out?"

"The Union Telegraph office. You know where that is?"

"I can easily find it, for I have a tongue in my head. I don't believe I will go near that mine at all. I will sell it."

"You had better not. The miners have a story around that it is haunted."

The German threw back his head and laughed heartily.

"I am not afraid of that. If he took fifty thousand dollars out of it, it is surely worth as much more. Well, if you have told me everything, I guess I had better go back to my hotel. I was going back to my home to-night, but now I am glad I did not go."

"I guess we have told you everything that pertains to the matter," said Jack. "Do you think of any questions you would like to ask us?"

"No; but I may think of some to-morrow. Good-night."

"By the way," said Jack, as if he had just thought of something. "Where were you when this man Winkleman was sick? You were out in the mines, I suppose?"

"Oh, no, we were not; we were here in St. Louis. If we had been out at the mines, where no doctor could have been reached, he would have gone up on my hands. Look here – I don't want you to do this for nothing. Make up your minds what you ought to have and I will give it to you. If it had not been for you I would never have seen the box. Good-night."

The German bowed himself out and closed the door behind him. The boys waited until he got to the street, and then Julian took possession of the chair he had just vacated.

"Well, sir, what do you think of that?" asked Jack, using companion's expression.

"I think our fortune is gone up," answered Julian; and then he leaned his elbows on his knees and looked down at the floor.

Jack laughed as loudly as the German did a few moments before. Julian straightened up and looked at him in surprise.

"What do you mean by that?" he exclaimed. "Is a hundred thousand dollars such a sum in your eyes that you can afford to be merry over it?"

"No; but you will never lose it through that man. His name is not Haberstro any more than mine is."

"Jack, what do you mean?"

"You were so busy with your own thoughts that you didn't see how I was pumping him, did you? In the first place he told us that Winkleman was sick in St. Louis; and yet Winkleman says in his letter that they were so poor that they could not raise enough to buy a halter for a mule. Now, he would not have used such an expression as that if he had been here in the city, would he?"

"No, I don't think he would," said Julian, reflectively. "He used the words of the country in which he lived."

"That is what I think. In the next place, he said that he was engaged in a paying business here, and consequently did not go with Winkleman to the mines; and then, almost in the same breath, he said he could not refer me to anybody here because his home was in Chicago. You didn't see those little errors, did you?"

Julian began to brighten up. He remembered all the German had said to Jack, but somehow he did not think of it. The box was not lost, after all.

"Now, he must have had somebody to post him in regard to these matters," said Jack. "Who do you think it was?"

"Casper Nevins!" said Julian, who just then happened to think of the boy's name.

"That is what I think. He is bound to have that box, is he not? Don't you give that box up; do you hear me?"

"I am mighty sure I won't give it up," said Julian, emphatically. "I shan't give it up until you are on hand. I had better take Mr. Wiggins into my confidence to-morrow."

"Of course. Tell him the whole thing. Tell him about the mistakes this man made in his conversation with me, and let him draw his own conclusions. I never saw such a desperate fellow as that Casper Nevins is. Now let us go on and get supper."

"I feel a good deal better than I did a few minutes ago," said Julian, with something like a long-drawn sigh of relief. "I thought the box was lost to us, sure."

The boys were impatient to have to-morrow come because they wanted to see what the German – they did not know what his true name was – was going to do about it.

"I will tell you one thing, Jack," said Julian. "If that Dutchman goes to-morrow and sees Mr. Wiggins about it, he will get a look that will last him as long as he lives. I ought to know, for I

have had those eyes turned on me two or three times. If that man stands against them I shall think he is a nervy fellow."

The night wore away at last, and at the usual hour the boys were at their posts. Casper was in the office, and he seemed to be uneasy about something. He could not sit still. He was continually getting up and going to the door, and then he would come back and walk around the room. When Mr. Wiggins came in and wished them all a good-morning, Julian followed him into the back room.

"Julian, have you some news about that box?" said he.

"Yes, sir; there was a man up to our room and handed us this card, and I thought – "

"Halloo," said Mr. Wiggins. "The box does not belong to you, after all."

"Hold on until I get through explaining things," said Julian.

With this Julian began, and told him of the conversation that had taken place between Jack and the German, not omitting the smallest thing. Mr. Wiggins listened intently, and when the story was done he said.

"Somebody has been posting that man in regard to that box. Now, who have you told about it except Jack Sheldon?"

"I don't know as that has anything to do with it," said Julian, who resolved that he would stand by Casper as long as he could.

"Yes, it has; it has a good deal to do with it. Does Casper Nevins know all about it?"

"What do you know about Casper?" said Julian in surprise. He wondered if there was any boy in the office who could do anything wrong without Mr. Wiggins finding it out.

"Because he has been uneasy for the past week. Does Casper know all about it?"

"Yes, sir, he does. He was there when we read the letter."

"That is all. I will see you again after a while."

Julian went out and sat down, and in a few minutes Mr. Wiggins came from the back room and spoke to the operator, who immediately sent off a dispatch. Nobody was called to carry this, for the message went straight to the office for which it was intended. Five minutes passed, and then a stout man, who was a stranger to all of them, strolled into the office. One of the boys got up to wait upon him, pushing some blanks toward him, but the stout man did not want to send any telegraphic dispatches.

"I just want to look around and see how you do things here," said he.

"Then take this chair, sir," said Mr. Wiggins. "I guess you will find that we do things about right."

The minutes passed, and all the boys who had congregated in the office had been sent off with messages – all except Casper. There did not seem to be any dispatches for him. The chief operator was busy at his desk, when suddenly the door opened, and the same German who had called at Julian's room the night before, came in. Mr. Wiggins glanced toward him and then he looked toward Casper. The latter never could control himself when he was in difficulty, and his face grew white.

"Is this the Western Union Telegraph office?" said the German, wiping his forehead with his handkerchief. "Do I speak to Mr. Wiggins? Well, sir, I would like to see you about a box that one of your boys bought at a sale of 'old horse' in the express office. That box contains something that is off immense value to me – S. W. Haberstro." And he handed out his card with his name engraved on it.

"There is a box here addressed to a man of that name," said Mr. Wiggins, "but it is in the bank now. I suppose you have plenty of friends here to whom you can refer?"

"I am sorry to say that I have not," replied the German. "My home is in Chicago. I can refer you to all the Germans there."

"Then, would it not be worth while for you to write to some of your friends there and get some letters of recommendation? You see, we don't want to give the box to anybody unless we know who it is."

"That is all right, sir. I have some business on hand in Chicago, and I will go up there and get them."

"That will be sufficient. Good-day, sir."

The German, who appeared to be in a great hurry, closed the door and hastened up the street. As soon as he was gone, Mr. Wiggins beckoned to Casper and went into the back room.

"Who was that man who just went out?" said he, in a tone of voice which did not admit of argument. "Tell me the truth."

"His name is Claus, sir," said Casper.

"Where does he stay, principally?"

"He stays first in one pool-room, and then in another. Where he lives I don't know."

"That will do," said Mr. Wiggins.

"I never have been guilty of such a thing before," began Casper.

"I said that would do," interrupted Mr. Wiggins. "I may see you again after a while."

When Mr. Wiggins and Casper got out into the other room they found that the stout man had disappeared. He had gone out about the time that the German disappeared. In half an hour he came back, leaned over the desk, and spoke to the chief operator.

"That fellow is no more Haberstro than I am," he whispered. "His name is Solomon Claus. We have had him up a time or two for vagrancy, and I'll take him up for the same cause, if you say so."

"No; let him go, but keep your eyes on him. He has not done us any harm yet. If he comes here again I will send for you."

CHAPTER VIII

CLAUS CALLS AGAIN

When the stout man reached the sidewalk he saw the German a short distance in advance of him, still hurrying along as though he had no time to waste. He turned several corners, and at last disappeared up the stairs that led to the pool-room. The detective, for that was what he was, did not seem to notice what had become of the German, but he marked the place where he had gone up and kept on to the station-house. There he changed his coat and hat, and picked up a huge walking-stick which stood in one corner. When he came out on the streets again, everybody noticed that he walked with difficulty, and there was an expression on his face which only those who were intimate with the detective would have thought belonged to him. It was very different from his ordinary appearance. Instead of the frank, open look with which he regarded everybody, it was drawn up as though he was suffering intense pain, from which he could not get a moment's relief.

The detective speedily found the place where the German had disappeared, walked wearily up the stairs, opened the door, and sank into the nearest chair. Then he pulled a pair of eye-glasses from his pocket and became interested in a paper. But he used his eyes to some advantage, and quickly discovered the man he wanted seated off by himself, with his legs outstretched before him and his chin resting on his breast.

"I guess he found some difficulty in getting that box," said the detective, who knew what Mr. Wiggins wanted of him before he came to the office. "You want to go easy, my friend, or I'll have you up for vagrancy again."

There were not so many in the pool-room as there were the night before, and nobody seemed to bother the German; but presently, while he was thinking about it, another party came in. He took off his coat, seized a cue, and looked all around the room for an antagonist, until he discovered the German sitting there doing nothing.

"Halloo, Claus!" he shouted, "come on, and let us have a game of billiards."

"No, you must excuse me," was the reply; "I don't feel in the humor for billiards or anything else."

"Have you anybody on a string that you are trying to make some money out of?" asked his friend. "Come on, and perhaps a game will brighten you up."

"Claus," muttered the detective. "I know you now. I was told to find out what his name was, so I will go back. So this is where you hang out. I will remember you."

The detective hobbled out the door and down the stairs; but by the time he got down to the street his lameness had all disappeared, and he walked as briskly as anybody. He went to the Western Union Telegraph office, told Mr. Wiggins he had discovered that the man's name was Claus, and not Haberstro, and then went back to the station. Casper Nevins was called into the back room a moment afterward, but he was not there more than long enough to receive his discharge.

"I have never done anything like this before," said Casper, trying to beg off. "If you will overlook this –"

"I can't do it," said Mr. Wiggins. "You are a boy that I can't trust. Why, Casper, do you know what will become of you if you do not mend your ways? You will get into the State's prison before you are five years older. I paid you up yesterday, and you have not done anything to-day, and so you can go."

"It would not be of any use for me to ask for a letter of recommendation, would it?" asked Casper. He always had a good deal of audacity about him, but this made Mr. Wiggins open his eyes in surprise.

"Not from me, you can't," he answered. "You will have to go somewhere else to get it."

Casper put on his cap and left the office, and on the way to the pool-room, where he expected to find Claus, he blamed everybody but himself for the disgrace he had got into. He blamed Claus, although it is hard to see what that man had done, for he worked as hard as anybody could to get that box; but he reproached Julian Gray more than all for his interference in the matter.

"Come to think of it, I don't know but I am to blame a little myself," said he, after he had thought the affair all over. "Why did I not dig out the moment I got that box? I would have been in Denver by this time, and enjoying my wealth. It beats the world what luck some people do have."

But Claus was not in the pool-room. He wanted to be alone, so that he could think over the matter, and he had gone out where he would be by himself. The barkeeper did not know where he had gone, and Casper went home to change his clothes. As he pulled his uniform off he told himself that it would be a long time before he ever wore it again. Then he threw himself into a chair and tried to determine what he should do next.

"I have just ten dollars," he mused, taking the bill from his pocket, "and what I shall do when that is gone is another and a deeper question. I'll bet that Claus don't get any cigars out of me to-night."

Meanwhile Julian Gray came in from delivering his message. His face was flushed, and he acted as though he had been running. He made his report, and then went into the back room in obedience to a sign from Mr. Wiggins.

"Well, Julian, your box is still safe," said the latter.

"Has that Dutchman been around here?" asked Julian.

Mr. Wiggins said he had, and then went on to give the boy a complete history of what Claus had done to secure the box.

"I got rid of him very easily," said Mr. Wiggins. "I told him that it would be well for him to write to some German friends in Chicago, where he said he lived, and he said he was going up there on business and would bring the letters back with him. I found out that his name is Claus, and that he hangs out in a pool-room. You don't know him, do you?"

No, Julian could not say that he had ever heard of him before.

"Well, don't you let the box go without seeing me about it."

"Nobody shall have it. Mr. Wiggins, I don't know how to thank you for what you have done."

"You are a good boy, Julian, and the only thing I have against you is that you will hang around that express office so much. Some day I am going to give you a good scolding for that."

"You will never hear of my being there again. I am done going there forever."

"I don't think you will have to do it any more. You have your fortune, easy enough."

"Oh, Mr. Wiggins! Do you think it is ours sure enough?"

"Well, perhaps I ought not to speak so positively; it is hard to tell at this stage of the game. I *hope* you have."

Julian was delighted to hear Mr. Wiggins talk in this way, but before he could ask him any more questions that gentleman had gone back into the office. He then went out and looked around for Casper. One of the boys told him he believed Casper had got the "sack," for he put on his cap and left the office.

"I don't know what he has been doing," said the boy; "do you?"

"Mr. Wiggins knows, and he will not tell," replied Julian. "I wonder what the poor fellow will do now?"

Julian was impatient for night to come, so that he could go home and see Jack about it. It came at last, and Julian never broke a trot until he ran up the stairs and burst into his room.

"Well?" said Jack. "You look happy. Tell us all about that Dutchman."

"There is not much to tell. His name is Claus, and he lives in a pool-room."

"I knew I was not mistaken in him," said Jack, taking his usual seat by throwing his leg over the table. "That man had better go somewhere else."

But that he did not feel inclined to go somewhere else just then was evident, for just as Jack pronounced his name the boys heard his step coming up the stairs. He had a peculiar step, which, once heard, could not be forgotten.

"Well, he is coming again," said Julian. "Now, what are you going to say to him?"

"That depends upon what he has to say to me," said Jack. "Go to the door, let him in, and put out a chair for him."

He rapped on the door the minute he got there, and Julian opened it for him. He looked closely from one to the other of the boys, but did not see anything in their faces to make him hide what he had on his mind. He had a new plan, but it did not promise as well as the one which had been defeated by Mr. Wiggins. He wanted to induce one of them to get the box for him and let him read the papers that were in it. If he could prevail upon them to bring the box out of the bank, he was certain that in some way he could get an opportunity to steal it. He did not intend to go about it slyly; he intended to take it, open and above-board, and let Jack and Julian help themselves if they could. He was certain that a revolver, presented at their heads and cocked, would surely keep them quiet until he had locked the door and got into the street. Where he would go after that he neither knew nor cared. What he wanted was to get possession of the box.

"Ah! Good-evening," said Claus, bowing very politely. "I came back to see you about that box."

"Take a chair," said Jack. "What about the box?"

"Mr. Wiggins said it was in the bank," said Claus, "and I want to know if you could get it out of there and let me read the letter and the papers. You see, the thing may not be for me, and I don't want to go home and bother my friends about it until I know what the box contains."

"Oh! your friends won't care anything about that," said Jack. "You tell them that the box is for you, and they will give you all the letters you want. Besides, I don't think Mr. Wiggins would agree to what you ask."

The German did not like the way Julian was acting. He had kept his eyes roaming from one to the other; but, although the boy occupied his favorite position, with his hands buried in his pockets and his feet spread out, his expression was different from what it had been the night before. There was a smile on his face, and it would not have taken very much to set him to laughing outright. Claus began to think there was something up.

"Why, the box is your own, ain't it?" asked Claus. "You can do what you please with it."

"Not now, we can't. We have told Mr. Wiggins that we wanted him to watch over it for us, and he will have to be present when you read the papers."

"Then you can't get it for me?"

"No, I don't believe I could, Mr. Claus. You don't need anybody to give you a recommend. Go to some of your friends here – "

"Claus! Claus! That is not my name. My name is Haberstro."

Julian grinned broadly, and even Jack did not appear to be above merriment.

"What do you mean by applying that name to me?" exclaimed Claus. "There is my card."

"I don't want to see it. I have one already. Your name is Claus, you live in a billiard saloon, and you got a full history of this box from Casper Nevins."

"Young man, I will have you arrested before you are an hour older!" said Claus, getting upon his feet. "I come here and ask a civil question of you, and you insult me!"

"Do so, and we will have Casper arrested for burglary and you for trying to obtain money under false pretenses. The sooner you get about it the better it will suit us."

"Very well – I will have a policeman here in less than ten minutes!"

Mr. Claus went out, and this time he did not bow himself through the door as he had done the night before. The boys heard him going downstairs, and then turned and looked at each other.

"Somebody has been posting those fellows," said Claus, as he hurried away toward Casper's room. "I wonder if there was a detective in there while I was at the office? Two attempts have failed, but the third is always successful."

Claus was almost beside himself with fury, but he retained his wits sufficiently to guide him on the road to Casper's room. He found the boy in, seated in a chair, with his elbows on his knees, trying his best to make up his mind what he was going to do, now that he had been discharged from the telegraph office. He had sat that way ever since eleven o'clock in the forenoon, and had not been able to determine upon anything. The first intimation he had that anybody was coming was when the door was thrown open and Claus came in, muttering something under his breath that sounded a good deal like oaths.

"There is no need that you should say anything," said Casper. "You have failed."

"Yes, sir, I have; failed utterly and plump," said Claus.

"And I have been discharged."

"Whew!" whistled Claus. "You are in a fix, aren't you?"

"Yes, and I don't know what I shall do now. Tell me your story, and I will tell you mine."

"Have you a cigar handy?"

"No; and I have no money."

"How long before you will be paid?"

"Oh, it will be two weeks yet."

"Then I will have to go down and get some cigars myself. I can think more clearly while my jaws are puffing than I can without."

"You got your last cigar out of me, old fellow," said Casper to himself, when Claus had left the room. "I have but little money, and I am going to keep it."

CHAPTER IX

THE MASTER MECHANIC

"Well, sir, what do you think of that?" said Julian, when he was certain that Claus had gone down the stairs and out on the street. "He had better try some other way of getting that box."

"He has failed," said Jack, putting a frying-pan filled with bacon on the stove. "Casper Nevins is at the bottom of that. I tell you, that money is safe yet."

"Do you know that I looked upon it as gone when he first came here and handed out his card?" said Julian. "I thought he was Haberstro, sure enough."

"I confess that I thought so, too. Now let us go on and get supper. The next time we save that money, somebody else will have a hand in it."

Конец ознакомительного фрагмента.

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