

Stratemeyer Edward

The Last Cruise of the Spitfire: or, Luke Foster's Strange Voyage



Edward Stratemeyer

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or, Luke Foster's Strange Voyage**

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Содержание

| | |
|-----------------------------------|----|
| CHAPTER I | 6 |
| CHAPTER II | 9 |
| CHAPTER III | 12 |
| CHAPTER IV | 14 |
| CHAPTER V | 18 |
| CHAPTER VI | 20 |
| CHAPTER VII | 24 |
| Конец ознакомительного фрагмента. | 26 |

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PREFACE TO THE REVISED EDITION

"The Last Cruise of the Spitfire" is the opening volume of the "Ship and Shore" Series, and tells of the things which happened to a boy who ran away from his guardian's home because he could no longer stand the cruel treatment received.

In this tale, in order to get close to the heart of the boy, the author has allowed Luke Foster to tell his own story in his own way. Luke has never before been to sea, and when he is carried off on the "Spitfire" his real experiences on the briny ocean, set up in juxtaposition to what he had imagined a life on the "rolling deep" to be, make reading which I trust every lad who has a "hankering" after a sailor's life may digest with profit. Luke concludes that a life on land is good enough for him, and I feel certain that a majority of our readers will agree with him.

Of Luke's overbearing cousin and his dishonest uncle much might be said which Luke leaves untold. The boy does this probably out of his natural good-heartedness. Yet the lives of the pair, and especially that of the father, well illustrate the old saying, that, sooner or later, every wrong-doer is bound to overreach himself and fall into the hands of justice.

Upon first appearing in print, "The Last Cruise of the Spitfire" was as well received as the stories in the "Bound to Succeed Series," which had preceded it; and once again the author begs to thank readers and critics for their continued kindness to him.

EDWARD STRATEMEYER.

Newark, N.J.,

May 1, 1899.

CHAPTER I

MYSELF AND MY UNCLE

"Luke!"

"Yes, Mr. Stillwell."

"Why didn't you sweep and dust the office this morning?"

"I did, sir."

"You did!"

"Yes, sir."

"You did!" repeated the gentleman, who, I may as well state, was my esteemed uncle. "I must say, young man, that lately you have falsified to an astonishing degree."

"Excuse me, but I have not falsified – not to my knowledge, sir."

"Stop; don't contradict me – "

"I am telling the truth, sir."

"Stop, I tell you! I will not have it! Look here, and then dare to tell me that this office has seen the touch of a broom or duster this day!"

And my Uncle Felix motioned me majestically into his office with one hand, while with the other he pointed in bitter scorn at the floor.

Mr. Felix Stillwell was in a bad humor. His sarcastic tones told this quite as well as the sour look upon his face. Evidently some business matters had gone wrong, and he intended to vent the spleen raised thereby upon me. He was a high-strung man at the best, and when anything went wrong the first person in his way was sure to catch the full benefit of his ire.

I was an orphan, and had lived with my Uncle Felix three years. Previous to that time I was a scholar at the Hargrove Military and Commercial Academy, a first class training-school for boys, situated upon the Palisades, overlooking the Hudson River.

My father was a retired lawyer, who, being in ill health, went with my mother on a two years' trip to Europe. They journeyed from place to place for sixteen months, and then lost their lives in a terrible railway accident in England. The death of both my parents at once was a fearful blow to me, and for a long while I could not think, and was utterly unable to judge what was taking place around me. At the end of three months I was informed that Mr. Stillwell had been appointed my guardian, and then I was taken from school and placed in his office in New York City.

My duties at the office of Stillwell, Grinder & Co. were varied. In the morning I was expected to clean everything as bright as a pin. Then I went to the post-office, and on a dozen other errands; after which I did such writing as was placed in my hands.

For this work I was allowed my board, clothing and fifty cents a week spending money – not a large sum, but one with which I would have been content had other things been equal.

But they were far from being so. I lived with my uncle, but I was not treated as one of the family. His wife – I do not care to call her my aunt – was a very proud woman who had come from a blue-blooded Boston family, and she hardly deigned to notice me. When she did it was in a patronizing manner, as if I was a menial far beneath her.

My two cousins, Lillian and Augustus, were even less civil. Lillian, who was a fashionable miss of seventeen, never spoke to me excepting when she wanted something done, and Gus, as every one called him, thought it his right to order me around as if I was his valet.

In the matter of food and clothing I was scarcely considered. Any of Gus's cast-off suits were thought good enough for the office, and my Sunday suit was two years old. I had my breakfast with the servants before the others were up, took my noon lunch with me, and dinner when I returned from the office, which was generally two hours after Mr. Stillwell, when everything was cold.

Looking back at those times I often wonder how it was I stood the treatment as long as I did. During my parents' lives I had had nearly everything that my heart wished, and to be thus cut short, not only in my bodily wants, but also in consideration and affection, was hard indeed.

To my mind there was no reason why I should be treated as one so far beneath the family. My mother had been a gentlewoman and my father a gentleman, and I was conceited enough to think that by both breeding and education I was fully the equal of my cousins. Besides, my father had been well-to-do, and had, no doubt, left me a fair inheritance.

Had I had less to do I would have been lonely in a city where I hardly knew a soul. But my work kept me so busy I had no time to think of myself, and perhaps this is one reason why I did not rebel before I did.

In the whole of the metropolis there was but one person whom I considered a friend. That was Mr. Ira Mason, who had his law offices in the same building with Stillwell, Grinder & Co. I had done a number of errands for this gentleman, and in return he had become interested in me.

To Mr. Mason I confided my story in all its details, and when I had finished he told me that if matters did not mend, or got worse, to let him know, and he would see what could be done for me.

My uncle did not like Mr. Mason, who, on several occasions, had had clients who wished to obtain patents, and whom he had taken elsewhere; the reason given being that Stillwell, Grinder & Co.'s rates were too high, though their peculiar methods of getting patents had much to do with it.

It was the morning of my seventeenth birthday. I had requested my uncle, several days previous, to give me a holiday, which I intended to spend with an old school chum of mine, Harry Banker, at his home in Locustville, a pretty village, fifty miles northwest of the city.

The Banker family and mine had been well acquainted, and I had received numerous invitations from them to spend some time at their home, a large farm; but was each time forced to decline.

When I had requested my uncle to let me go for just one day, I had thought it would be impossible for him to refuse, as it was the middle of July, and business was dull. I had saved my money for some time, determined to be prepared to pay my own way if he should not give me the price of a ticket.

My request for a day off was met with a sharp refusal. It wasn't necessary, there was work to do, and, besides, Gus was going to take the day to go to Coney Island, and I must attend to his desk during his absence.

I was taken back by the curt negative that I received, and was inclined to "air my mind." I had had no holiday for two years, and was clearly entitled to one. Gus had had a week at Christmas, and half a dozen days since. It was not treating me fairly to pile up the work upon me, and give me no breathing spells.

What made me feel worse was the fact that I had written to Harry telling him of my expectations, so that I might find him home, and we could have a good time. He would surely expect me, and it was doubtful if I could get him word in time telling him I could not come.

On the evening before I had written him a letter and posted it. Gus had seen me do so, and had made a mean remark concerning the fact that I was to stay at home while he was to have a good time.

The remark was entirely uncalled for, and it made me angry. Hot words passed; and he was on the point of hitting me when my uncle came in and stopped the row. But my cousin was fearfully angry still, and vowed to get even with me; and I knew he would try his best to do so.

On arriving at the offices that morning, I was in no bright humor. But I knew sulking would accomplish nothing, and so set to with a will to clean up as usual. This job took fully half an hour, and when it was done I crossed over to Mr. Mason's office to return a book he had loaned me, and also to obtain another from his large library.

While in the office I heard footsteps in the hall, and looking through the partly closed door had seen Gus enter his father's private office, closing the door after him. I was on the point of following, when I remembered what had passed between us, and so waited until some member of the firm might appear.

Fully five minutes elapsed, and then my cousin came out, closing the door softly behind him. He paused for a moment in the hallway, and, seeing no one, hurried down the stairs, and out of the building.

I thought nothing more of his movements, but continued to look over the books, Mr. Mason meanwhile being busy at his desk in a smaller office beyond. Presently I heard my uncle's well-known step, and hurried out, meeting him just after he had been in his private office, which was behind all the others.

"Don't think that because it is your birthday you can neglect your work," he went on, in a rising voice. "This office is to be cleaned thoroughly every morning."

"I cleaned it thoroughly not half an hour ago," I replied stoutly.

"Do you mean to contradict me?" he cried.

"I'm telling the truth," was all I could say.

"Does that look like it?"

The floor certainly did not look like it. Bits of paper were strewn in all directions, and the bottle of ink on the desk had been upset, creating a small blue-black river, running diagonally over the oil-cloth towards the safe that stood beside the window.

Of course I knew at once who had done all this. Gus had vowed to get square with me, and this was his method of doing so. Yet I could not help but wonder what the outcome would be.

"I say, does that floor look like it?" repeated Mr. Stillwell, in gathering wrath.

"I didn't do this, Uncle Felix."

"You didn't?" he sneered. "Well, who did, then? We haven't any cat to do it."

I was on the point of saying it was a two-legged cat, but thinking he would not relish the joke, replied:

"I don't know. Gus was here."

"My son? Impossible! I left him at home half an hour ago."

"He was here not ten minutes since," I said.

"I don't believe it! Besides, why should he make a pig-pen of the office, answer me that?" stormed Uncle Felix.

"Because he knew I had just cleaned it up, and he wanted to get even with me for that row we had yesterday."

"A likely story, I must say! As if Augustus wasn't beyond such childishness! You did this yourself. I want you to clean it up at once."

"I didn't do – " I began.

"Not another word! Clean it up, I say."

My uncle was in such a savage humor I knew it would be useless for me to attempt to reason with him. So getting a sponge and some water, I began to clean up the muss on the desk. I had hardly cleaned the writing-pad when my uncle stopped me.

"If you are going to take all day, do the job when you come back from the post-office. I want some letters to go in the nine o'clock mail. Here they are."

He shoved the letters into my hand.

"Now don't get them all dirty!" he cried, "or I'll crack you over the head. Be off with you."

In a moment I was on my way to the post-office, three blocks distant.

CHAPTER II

AN UNEXPECTED LETTER

As I walked along the street I could not help but ponder over the way I had been treated. My uncle's manner towards me was getting harsher every day. If it kept up in this fashion soon the time would come when human nature could stand it no longer.

And what was I to do then? Several times I had asked myself that question without being able to come to a satisfactory answer. It was easy enough to think of running away and so forth, but this was just the thing I did not wish to do. My uncle was my guardian, and he was bound to support me. To be sure, the support he gave me was merely a nominal one; but I was not versed in law, and was afraid if I went off he might keep my inheritance from me. I did not know how much money my father had left, but what there was I wanted to come to me.

Gus's actions puzzled me. If he was bound for a day to Coney Island what had brought him to the office at such an early hour of the morning? I knew that he disliked early rising, and was pretty well satisfied that even the delight of paying me off would not have induced him to leave his soft bed.

Arriving at the post-office, I posted Mr. Stillwell's letters, and then opened the box containing the letters for the firm. There were quite a handful, and I looked at the addresses to see that no mistakes had been made.

In an instant one of them attracted my attention.

It was directed as follows:

Mr. Luke Foster,
Care of Stillwell, Grinder & Co.,
PATENT AGENTS,
New York City.

The letter was addressed to me, and as it was the first foreign epistle I had received since my parents' death, I looked at it with considerable curiosity. It was postmarked London, and the handwriting was cramped and heavy.

Tearing the letter open, I was still more astonished to read the following lines:

"Mr. Luke Foster,

"Dear Sir:

"Of course you will be astonished to receive this, I being a stranger to you. But just before his death I became well acquainted with your father, he spending with your mother six weeks at my country residence in Northampton. We met six years ago in New York, and traveled from that city to Chicago, and from there to St. Louis; so you will see that we became quite intimate.

"While stopping at my house your father expressed the fear that should he die suddenly while on his travels, and his wife also (odd, indeed, when such proved to be the case), your future might be an uncertain one. He said he had made a will, appointing his friend, John W. Banker of Locustville, New York State, to be your guardian, but was afraid you might not like the choice, or that this man might not treat you well.

"Never expecting that your father's end was near, I laughingly replied that I was sure he had done for the best. But he shook his head in doubt, and said men were strange, and often acted in a way least expected, which is certainly true. So

I agreed, should anything happen to him, to keep an eye on you. I have not done so for the following reason:

"Following close upon your parents' death came the demise of my mother in Paris, and a week later, the failure of a banking house in South America, with which I was closely connected. After the funeral of my mother I took passage for Rio de Janeiro, and it was about two weeks ago that I set foot in England. Since then I have been exceedingly busy straightening out my affairs, and this is the first chance I have had of addressing you.

"I trust your father's choice of a guardian has been a happy one, and that you are doing well. If not, write me immediately, and I will see what can be done. I send this letter in care of your uncle because I have not had your address. I know that he and your father were not on good terms, but I trust you no longer carry on that quarrel.

"Very truly,

"Your friend,

"Harvey Nottingham.

"43 Old Fellows Road."

Standing by one of the deep windows of the post-office, I read the letter through twice. It will be needless for me to state that it impressed me strangely.

The most important statement made by the writer was that my father had never intended my uncle to be my guardian. I knew of the family quarrel, but Mr. Stillwell, when he had taken me from the academy, had assured me that that was all past and gone, and I had been delighted to have it so, for it had always pained me to see my mother not on speaking terms with my aunt. But apparently my uncle had not told the truth, and for reasons of his own.

How was it that Mr. Stillwell had been appointed my guardian when my father wished Mr. Banker to act in that capacity? This was a question that worried me not a little. I liked Harry's father very much, and was sure he would have treated me with far more consideration than I was now receiving.

The perusal of the letter drove all thoughts of the unpleasant scene I had left behind from my mind, and I was on the point of going directly to my uncle for an explanation of the case. But then came the recollection of Mr. Stillwell's manner towards me, and I shoved the letter into my pocket, resolved to say nothing until I had thought the matter over.

I walked back to the office slowly, for I was in deep thought. For two years my uncle had been my guardian, and during that time my life had been little better than a continual hardship. The letter brought up the memory of the past, and I realized now more than ever how happy the days gone by had been. What had brought about the change?

Clearly, the way I was being treated. Mr. Stillwell cared nothing for me, body or soul. Indeed, at that moment I was inclined to think that he would be as well satisfied to see me dead as alive. Perhaps if I were dead he would inherit the money left me by my father.

This thought had never occurred to me before, and I gave it considerable attention. When I came to review the whole matter I discovered that in reality I knew very little of my own affairs. I had taken many things for granted, and my uncle's word on all occasions. Whether this was for the best was still to be seen.

I was glad I had not gone on a visit that day. Had I done so Mr. Stillwell would have received my letter, and I do not doubt but that he would have opened it. As it was, he knew nothing of the communication, and I did not intend that he should until I was ready to disclose it to him.

By the stamp upon the letter sheet, I saw that Mr. Nottingham was a solicitor, and this made my mind revert to Mr. Ira Mason. As I have said, the lawyer had taken an interest in me, and I was sure he would now give me the best advice in his power.

I was sorry I could not go to the gentleman at once. The letter had fired my curiosity, and I wanted to get at the bottom of the affair.

But I had already lost time: to lose more would raise a storm of anger against me. I determined to wait until the noon hour, or after my uncle had gone home.

The firm of patent lawyers of which my uncle was senior partner was composed of himself, Mr. Grinder, a short, stumpy busybody, now away to Washington on business, and Mr. Canning, a young man who had been but recently taken in, not so much because he was needed, I fancied, as because he brought with him plenty of money and a good business connection.

Mr. Canning did not come to business until very late, as he lived twenty-five miles out of the city, in New Jersey. There were no clerks but Gus and myself; so when I arrived at the office I found Mr. Stillwell still alone.

My uncle's face was as dark as a thunder-cloud when I handed him the letters. I made up my mind he was about to lecture me for having taken my time, and I braced up to withstand the shower of strong language he would be sure to heap upon me.

"So, young man, you've got back at last!" he exclaimed.

"Yes, sir."

"Been rather a long while."

To this I made no reply. What was there to say?

"It's a wonder you came back at all," he went on. "To be honest, I never expected to see you again."

"I'm sorry I can't please you, Uncle Felix."

"Don't Uncle Felix me!" he cried savagely. "After your dirty work to-day I don't want to be any relation to you."

This was certainly putting it rather strongly.

"Whether you believe it or not, I didn't muss up the office," I said firmly. "Gus did that."

"I left Gus at home," he cried, even more emphatically than before, and I could see that he was really angry because of my having dragged his son's name into the dispute.

"Gus was here, and left just before you came."

"I don't believe it."

"All the same, it is true."

"It's only a story to pass your crimes off on my son. But it won't wash, Luke, it won't wash."

I made no further reply, seeing it was useless to try to reason with him, but hung up my hat and turned my attention to cleaning up the floor.

CHAPTER III

SOMEBODY'S CRIME

While engaged in tidying up the office I noticed for the first time that the door of the safe stood open. This was a most unusual thing, and I wondered if my uncle had taken something out and forgotten to close it. He was a very careful man, and if he had it was the first time I had known him to do such a thing.

"The safe door is open," I said mildly, as he moved as if to leave the office.

"Have you just found that out?" he sneered; and then I saw that he had gone over to the door of the office only to close it.

"Was it open before?" I asked in some alarm.

He looked at me for a moment in silence, the cloud upon his brow deepening.

"Luke, you are a mighty cool one for a boy, but I've got you fast, so you might as well give in," he said finally. "Come, now, I want no nonsense."

This unexpected speech only bewildered me.

"I don't understand you, Uncle Felix."

"How many times must I tell you that I am no longer your uncle?" he stormed. "From this time I am done with you."

"What have I done?"

"What have you done? What haven't you done? Ruined your good name forever!"

"I didn't muss up –"

"Oh, pshaw, give the floor and the office a rest! I want you to own up without further words."

By this time I was more bewildered than ever. What in the world was my uncle driving at?

"What do you want me to own up to?" I asked.

"You know well enough."

"No, I don't."

"Yes, you do."

"I don't."

"I'll give you five minutes to make a full confession," he cried, in a perfect rage. "At the end of that time if you are still obdurate I will hand you over to the police."

This was certainly alarming news. Surely something serious had happened.

"If you will tell me what the trouble is, I'll try to answer your question," was all I could find to say.

Again he looked at me in that hard, cold manner.

"I want you to tell me," he said, with great deliberation, "I want you to tell me instantly what you have done with the six thousand dollars and the papers that were in the safe."

I stood amazed. For a moment I hardly realized the meaning of the words that had been spoken.

"The six thousand dollars that were in the safe!" I gasped.

"Exactly."

"I don't know anything about the money. I didn't know you had six thousand in the place."

"Yes, you did. You saw me place it in the safe yesterday afternoon."

"No, sir, I did not."

"You did: and you took it out either last night or this morning. Come, tell me what you have done with it, or, as sure my name is Felix Stillwell, you shall pass the remainder of this day in prison. Luke, I am not to be trifled with!"

My uncle was fearfully in earnest, and his thin hands trembled with excitement when he spoke. In spite of the fact that I was a pretty stout young fellow, I was glad that though he had closed the door leading to the outer office, he had been unable to lock it. It might come so far that I would be glad enough to escape from his presence.

"Did you hear me?" he demanded, seeing that I made no immediate reply.

I was busy thinking over the strange news he had announced. Six thousand dollars and some papers missing from the safe! Whoever had taken them had made a big haul.

I could not help but think of Gus. He was the only one who had been in the office besides myself. Was it possible the young man had robbed his own father?

I was loath to believe that such was the case. My cousin a thief! It could not be possible; and yet if he had not taken the money, who had?

"Do you hear me?" demanded Mr. Stillwell again.

"I hear you," I replied, as calmly as I could, though I was nearly as excited as he was.

"What did you do with the money?"

"I don't know anything about the money."

My uncle made a threatening gesture.

"It's the truth, whether you believe it or not," I went on. "I did not know you had the money, and I haven't been near the safe."

"Luke Foster, do you realize that you are staring the State prison in the face?"

"I can't help that. I know nothing of your money, and that's all there is to it."

"When did you open the office this morning?"

"Quarter to seven."

"Did you clean up at once?"

"Yes, sir."

"When you cleaned up was the safe door open?"

"No, sir. It might have been unlocked, but it wasn't open."

"How long did it take you to clean up?"

"About half an hour."

"What did you do then?"

"I went to Mr. Mason's office to return a book he had loaned me."

"And then?"

"When I came back I met you," I replied promptly.

"And you mean to say the safe was robbed in the meantime. Luke, you cannot make me believe that."

"I don't know when the safe was robbed. I told you what I did, that was all."

"I don't believe a word of your story! You have robbed the safe, and you have the money."

"If you think so you can search me," I replied promptly.

But even as I spoke I thought of the strange letter I had received. What would my uncle say if he saw it? It seemed to me I was getting into hot water in more ways than one.

"I shall search you, never fear," said Mr. Stillwell. "But you had better confess. It may go easier with you if you do."

"I can't confess to something I'm not guilty of," I returned. And then, as I thought of how I had been treated, I cried out:

"You had better look nearer home for the guilty party, Uncle Felix."

My reply seemed to anger him beyond all endurance.

"Don't you dare to insinuate my son is a thief!" he cried. "You low-bred upstart! I have half a mind to hand you over to the police at once!"

And with his face full of passion Uncle Felix bore down upon me, as if ready to crush me beneath the iron heel of his wrath once and forever.

CHAPTER IV

AN UNEXPECTED ARRIVAL

Mr. Stillwell's anger had reached a white heat, and as he strode towards me, I was half inclined to think he intended to take my very life. He was naturally a passionate man, and the insinuation I had made concerning his son maddened him beyond all endurance.

I could readily understand why this was so. My Uncle Felix almost worshiped his son, and to have any one insinuate that that son was a thief cut him to the heart. I believe he would rather have lost the six thousand dollars, greatly as he might have felt the loss, than to have imagined that Gus was the guilty party.

"My son a thief!" he repeated hotly. "How dare you?"

"Gus was the only one in the office besides myself," I replied.

"And that is the reason you lay the crime at his door? I don't believe a word you say."

I did not expect that he would. Gus was a favored son, while I was but an orphan with no one to stand up for me.

"Are you going to tell me what you have done with the money and the papers?" he demanded.

"How can I when I don't know anything of them?"

"You do know."

"I don't."

I hardly had the words out when my uncle grasped me roughly by the coat collar.

"I'll teach you a lesson, you young rascal!"

"Let go of me, Uncle Felix!" I cried. "Let go, or I'll – I'll –"

"What will you do?" he sneered.

"Never mind; only you may be sorry if you don't."

His only reply was to tighten his hand upon my collar in such a way that I was in immediate danger of being strangled.

"I'll choke you to death, if you don't tell!" he cried. "Speak up instantly."

"I don't know."

His hand tightened.

"Will you tell?"

I did not reply. I saw that he meant what he said, and I was busy trying to think how to defend myself.

When Mr. Stillwell had caught me I had backed up against the desk. Near me lay a heavy ruler, used by Mr. Grinder in preparing designs for patents. I picked up the ruler, and before my assailant was aware struck him a violent blow upon the wrist.

The brass edge of the weapon I had used made a slight cut upon my uncle's arm, and with a cry more of alarm than pain he dropped his hold of me and turned his attention to the injury.

Seeing this I quickly placed a large office chair near the door, and got behind it, in such a manner that I could escape at an instant's warning.

"You young villain! Do you mean to add murder to your other crimes?" he howled, as he proceeded to bind his handkerchief around his wrist.

"I mean to fight my own battles," I replied. "I won't let you or any other man choke me to death."

"You shall suffer for all you have done!"

"I'm willing to take the consequences," I replied, as coolly as I could.

He continued to glare at me, but for a moment made no movement, probably because he knew not what to do next. I watched him very much as a mouse may watch a cat.

"Come, Luke, you can't keep this up any longer. Hand over that money and the papers."

"Let me tell you for the last time, Mr. Stillwell, that I know nothing of either," said I. "If any one has them that person is your son."

"Don't tell me such a yarn!"

"I believe it's the truth. If not, why did Gus steal into the office and out again in such a hurry this morning?"

"I don't believe he was here. I left him in his room at home."

"Are you sure he was in his room?"

"Yes, for I called him, and he answered back."

"Nevertheless he was here, and maybe I can prove it."

My uncle bit his lip. He did not relish my last remark.

"And even if he was here he did not know the combination of the safe."

"Neither did I."

"But you could have found it out. You had plenty of chances."

"No more chances than Gus had."

"Pooh! Don't tell me that!"

"It's the truth."

"My son is not on a level with you."

"I always considered myself as good as he is," I returned warmly.

"My son is not a thief."

"Neither am I, Uncle Felix; and what is more, I won't let you or any other man say so," I declared.

"What are you going to do about it?" he asked curiously.

"I won't stand it, that's all."

"Do you know that I intend to have you arrested if you don't return what you have stolen?"

"If you have me arrested I will do all I can to defend myself," was my answer. "If I am brought before the judge perhaps I will have one or two things to say that you will not relish."

"What do you mean?"

"There will be time enough to speak when I am brought into court."

"You think you are smart, Luke, but you are nothing but a fool. What can you say against me?"

"A good many things that you don't dream of. You are not treating me rightly, and you know it. You don't give me decent clothing to wear, and I have to work harder than any one in the office. I am sure my father never intended such a future for his son."

"I don't care what you father intended!" he snarled.

"But I do, and what is more, I intend, sooner or later, to try to have matters mended. My father always told me he wished me to keep on going to school and then to enter Princeton."

"Never mind, I am your guardian now, and I know what is best for you."

"How much money did my father leave me?" I asked, with considerable curiosity.

"None of your business."

"Oh, but it *is* my business."

"It is not your business, and I want you to shut up!" he cried, in a rage. "He left little enough."

"Little enough," I cried. "My father was rich."

"He was at one time; but he lost the most of his fortune in stocks just before he died. You have hardly enough to keep you until you are twenty-one."

I must confess that my uncle's remarks were quite a shock to me. I had always supposed that I would some day be wealthy. I gave the matter a moment's thought, and then came to the conclusion that Mr. Stillwell was not telling the truth.

"How much money did my father leave?" I repeated. "I am entitled to know."

"You will know when I get ready to tell you, not before."

"Perhaps you are mistaken," said I. "And another thing, Uncle Felix, how is it that you were appointed my guardian?"

At these words I fancied my uncle turned pale. He sprang towards me, then stopped short.

"What do you mean by that question?" he demanded.

"I mean why were you made my guardian when my father and you were not on good terms?"

"Pooh, that quarrel was of no consequence," was the lofty reply. "Your father could not find a better person in which to trust his son's care."

I had my own opinion on that point, but did not find it fit to say so. Then I put in what I thought was a master stroke.

"I thought Mr. Banker was to be my guardian."

At these words Mr. Stillwell turned even paler than before, and his hand trembled as he pointed his long finger at me in a threatening manner.

"You think too much!" he growled.

"Are you going to answer that question?"

"What put it into your head?"

"Never mind."

"Has John Banker been writing to you about it?"

In spite of his effort to ask the question unconcernedly I could see that my uncle was tremendously interested. Like a flash it came over me that perhaps this was one of the reasons he did not wish me to spend any time at Harry Banker's home. Mr. Banker might take it into his head to ask me how I was being treated, and that might lead to trouble.

"Never mind; but I'm going to find out before long."

"And you are going to prison before long, unless you hand over what you took from the safe."

"I am not afraid of you, Mr. Stillwell. I have always done right. But I'm going to know something about myself, and soon. I have a letter in my pocket that tells me that Mr. Banker was to be my guardian, and I'm going to know why he is not."

Mr. Stillwell glared at me. If he could have eaten me up I believe he would have done so.

"You have a letter?" he cried hoarsely. "Who from?"

"That is my business."

"And I'll make it mine. Hand it over this instant!"

"Not much."

"I say you will."

"And I say no."

I was sorry I had spoken of the letter. I could readily see that it had worked Mr. Stillwell up to a fever heat.

"Give me that letter, Luke. I'll stand no more fooling."

Once more my uncle bore down upon me. But I saw him coming, and shoved the chair in his way.

I still held the ruler in my hand, and now brandished it over my head.

"Don't come any closer!" I cried. "If you do I'll crack you on the head!"

My uncle was too enraged to pay attention to my words. He hurled the chair aside and sprang upon me as a wild beast springs upon its prey.

"We'll see who is master!" he panted.

In another instant he had me by the throat. His grasp was that of a band of steel, and I thought for a surety my last hour had come.

"Let – let go!" I gasped.

"Will you give me the letter?"

My only reply was to struggle with all my strength. In a moment we were both on the floor.

"Help! Help!" I cried.

"Shut up!" he exclaimed, and tried to close my mouth with his hand.

"I won't shut up! Let me up! Help!"

But now my voice was fainter. It was all I could do to get my breath. The room swam round and round before my eyes.

"Give up that letter and the money and papers you took!"

"Help! Help! – "

I could cry no longer. My senses were fast leaving me. Would no one come to my assistance?

"We'll see who is master! If you don't give – "

My uncle did not finish his speech, for at that instant the door was flung open, and a tall, powerful man stood in the doorway.

"Here! let up there!" he commanded. "What are you doing, Stillwell? Who's that on the floor? Great buckwheat, if it ain't Luke Foster!"

I listened in amazement as well as delight. The newcomer was Mr. John Banker!

CHAPTER V

AN APPALLING PROSPECT

Never was an arrival more opportune than when Mr. John Banker stepped into the private office. I fully believe had he come a moment later he would have found me insensible. As it was it took me several seconds to recover my breath.

"John Banker!" ejaculated my uncle, and every line of his features told of his discomfiture.

"What are you doing with Luke?" went on Harry's father. "Let him up."

"None of your business!" growled my uncle.

"I think it is. Luke, get up."

By this time I had somewhat recovered, and I was not slow to obey the command. I arose to my feet, and took my place beside my newly-arrived friend.

"What's it all about?" went on Mr. Banker, turning to me.

"He says I robbed the safe of six thousand dollars," I replied.

"And so he did," put in my uncle, glad to be able to speak a word for himself.

"Six thousand dollars!" ejaculated Mr. Banker. "Phew! but that's a large sum!"

"I know nothing of the money," I went on. "But I think his son took it, and I just told him so, and that made him mad."

"My son is no thief," stormed Mr. Stillwell.

"And neither is Robert Foster's son, I reckon," returned my friend. "I've knowed Luke all my life, and he's as straightforward a lad as one wants to meet. There's some mistake, Mr. Stillwell."

"No mistake at all; and unless the boy gives up what he took he shall go to prison."

"No, no; don't be too harsh!" cried Mr. Banker. "Remember he is your nephew."

"He is no longer any relation of mine! I've cast him off."

"You have, have you?" asked my friend, curiously.

"Yes, I have."

"Maybe you haven't any right to do it," went on Mr. Banker. "You've got his money in trust."

"Precious little of it."

"Yes? I reckon Robert Foster left quite a pile."

"No such thing."

"He was worth fifty or sixty thousand dollars."

"Fifty or sixty thousand dollars!" howled Mr. Stillwell. "It isn't quarter of that sum. He left five thousand dollars, and that's all."

"Nonsense, Stillwell, he left more."

"Who knows best, you or I?"

"Never mind; you can't make me believe Luke's father wasn't better off than that."

My uncle pursed up his lips.

"But that isn't here nor there," he said. "Luke has taken the money, and he's got to go to prison."

A look of pain crossed Mr. Banker's face. He and my father had been warm friends, and I well knew that he would do all in his power for me.

"He won't go to prison if I can help it," he said. "Luke, tell me the whole story."

Despite the numerous interruptions from my uncle, I related the particulars of the case. Mr. Banker listened with close attention.

"That sounds like a straight story," he said, when I had concluded. "I can't see but what your son is just as much under suspicion as Luke, Stillwell."

"You don't know anything about it, Banker, and the less you have to do with the matter the better off you will be."

"I'm going to see Luke through."

"What brought you here?"

"I came to take him along with me, if he hadn't gone yet. Harry said he expected him up to spend the day or maybe a week, and I happened to be in the city since yesterday."

"He wouldn't leave me off," I put in. "He hasn't let me have a holiday since I've been here."

"Humph! seems to me you're rather hard on the lad, Stillwell, in more ways than one."

"It's none of your business. You had better leave us alone."

"As I've said before, I intend to see Luke through. Don't be alarmed, my lad. If you've done right all will go well with you."

"Thank you, Mr. Banker. I need a friend. Mr. Stillwell doesn't give me half a show."

"You shall have all the show you need after this, Luke."

My uncle was in a rage, but he did not know what to do. Now that I had some one to stand by me, I no longer felt the alarm I had when alone.

"For the last time, are you going to give up the money?" asked Mr. Stillwell.

"I've already answered that question," was my reply.

"Then you shall go to prison. Come along with me."

He made a movement as if to take me by the arm, but Mr. Banker stopped him.

"Not so fast, Stillwell. Where do you intend to take him?"

"To the station house, where he belongs."

This alarmed me.

"Can he do it?" I asked. "I didn't take the money."

Mr. Banker's face clouded.

"I am afraid he can. But don't be alarmed. I will stand by you."

But the prospect before me of spending even a short while in one of the city station houses, previous to an examination, was not a pleasant one. I had known one young clerk who had done so, and was ever afterwards spoken of as having been to prison under suspicion.

"I won't go to prison," I cried. "He has no right to send me. Why doesn't he send Gus, too?"

"You come along," said my uncle sternly. "Didn't I tell you we would find out who was master?"

He took hold of my arm. As he did so Mr. Canning came bustling in.

"Hello, what's up?" he exclaimed.

My uncle told his story. The new partner listened incredulously.

"I can hardly believe it possible!" he exclaimed. "Yet many things are queer here, he added," with a peculiar look that made my uncle wince.

"And I'm going to make an example of him," went on my uncle. "Take charge of the office while I take the young rascal down to the police station."

"I will take charge of the office, but don't act hastily," replied Mr. Canning.

"Now come along," went on Mr. Stillwell to me. "And beware how you conduct yourself."

"I shall go along," said Mr. Banker.

Taking me by the arm, my uncle led the way down the stairs. Mr. Banker was close at my side.

CHAPTER VI

A TURN OF FORTUNE

It was now almost nine o'clock, and Nassau Street, where the patent offices of Stillwell, Grinder & Co. were situated, was crowded with people. My uncle made such a show of what he was doing that it was not long before quite a crowd was following us, all anxious to know what had happened.

"There is no use of your making such a show of the poor boy," said Mr. Banker. "You act as if he had murdered some one."

"Mind your own business," snarled Mr. Stillwell.

Mr. Banker was an upright farmer, and there was little of natural meekness in his nature. He resented my uncle's speech, and quite an altercation took place.

While the two were talking I was doing some hard thinking. The idea of going to prison became every moment more odious to me. I could fancy myself in a dark, damp cell, surrounded by criminals of every degree, awaiting a hearing. What would my friends think? And if the affair once got into the newspapers my good name would be gone forever.

The more I thought of the matter the more determined I became that I would not go to prison. Suppose I ran away?

No sooner had this foolish thought entered my mind than I prepared to act upon it. We were now on the corner of Fulton Street, and to cross here was all but impossible. My uncle and Mr. Banker were still in hot dispute, and for an instant neither of them noticed me.

"Good-bye, Mr. Banker, I'm off!" I cried out suddenly.

And the next moment I had torn myself loose from my uncle's grasp, and was dashing down Fulton Street at the top of my speed.

"Hi! come back!" called out Mr. Banker after me; but I paid no heed.

"Stop him! Stop him!" yelled my uncle. "Stop the thief!"

His last words set the street in commotion. The cry of "Stop the thief!" resounded on all sides, and soon it seemed to me that I was being followed by at least half a hundred men and boys, all eager to stop me in hopes of a possible reward.

But now that I had once started, I made up my mind not to be captured. I was a good block ahead, and by skillful turning I gradually managed to increase the distance.

I was headed for the East River, and it was not long before I came in sight of the docks and the ferry slips. At one of the slips stood a ferry-boat just preparing to leave for Brooklyn.

The sight of the boat gave me a sudden thought. I dashed into the ferry-house, paid the ferry fare, and in a moment was on board, just as the boat left the slip.

It had been a long and hard run, but at last I was safe from being followed. Once in Brooklyn there would be a hundred places for me to go in case of necessity.

Wiping the perspiration from my face, I made my way to the forward deck. But few people were on board, and quite undisturbed, I leaned against the railing to review the situation.

What should I do next, was the question that arose to my mind, and I found no little difficulty in answering it. I was half inclined to think that I had acted very foolishly in running away. Now every one would surely believe me guilty, and if I was caught it would go hard indeed with me.

Had I better go back? For one brief instant I thought such a course would be best; then came the vision of the cell, and I shuddered, and resolved, now I had undertaken to escape, to continue as I had begun. Whether I was wise or not I will leave my readers to determine after my story is concluded.

It was not long before the boat bumped into the slip on the opposite shore. The shock brought me to a recollection of the present, and in company with the other passengers I went ashore. I had something of a notion that a policeman would be in waiting for me, but none appeared, and I passed out to the street unaccosted.

I had been to Brooklyn several times on errands for the firm, so I knew the streets quite well. But fearful of being seen, I passed close to the wharves, and finally came to a lumber yard, and here I sat down.

It was a hot day, and it was not long before I was forced to seek the shade. Close at hand was a shed, and this I took the liberty of entering.

It was a rough place, used for the seasoning of the better class of wood. I found a seat on some ends of planking in a cool corner, quite out of the line of observation of those who were passing.

Here I sat for full an hour. Nothing seemed to be going on in the lumber yard, and no one came to disturb me.

But at last came voices, and then two rough looking men approached. I was about to make my presence known, but their appearance was such that I remained silent; and they took seats close to the spot where I was.

"And the captain is sure that she is fully insured?" asked the taller of the two.

"Trust Captain Hannock to cover himself well!" laughed the other. "You can bet he has her screwed up to the top notch."

"And what is this cargo insured for?"

"McNeil didn't say. Not much less than a hundred thousand, I guess. Of course you'll go, Crocker?"

"Ya-as," replied the man addressed as Crocker, somewhat slowly. "I can't pick up a thousand dollars any easier than that."

"I thought I had struck you right. Are you ready to sail?"

"Anytime you say, Lowell. I owe two weeks' board now, and Mammy Brown hinted last night I'd better pay up or seek other quarters."

And Crocker gave a short, hard laugh.

"Then meet me at the Grapevine in an hour," said the man called Lowell. "I've got to make a few other arrangements before we start."

"Right you are."

"And remember, not a word –"

"Luff there! As if I didn't understand the soundings."

"All right. Come and have one."

The two men arose at once and headed for a saloon that stood upon the near corner.

I arose also and watched them out of sight. The conversation that they had held had not been a very lucid one, yet I was certain they were up to no good. One of them had spoken of making a thousand dollars in an easy manner, and I was positive that meant the money was to be gained dishonestly.

What was I to do? I was no detective, to follow the men, and I was just at present on far from good terms with the police. It seemed a pity to let the matter rest where it stood, but for the present I did not feel inclined to investigate it. I would keep my eyes open, and if anything more turned up, or was noted in the papers, I would tell all I had heard.

I wandered along the docks, piled high with merchandise of all descriptions. Beyond, a number of stately vessels rested at anchor, large and small, among which the steam tugs were industriously puffing and blowing, on the lookout for a job.

The sight was a novel one to me, and soon I walked out upon the end of a dock to get a better view.

"Hi, there! No loafing on this pier!" called a burly watchman; and I lost no time in moving on.

Presently I came to a wharf that seemed to be more public, and walked out to one side of it. Here it was shady, and close at hand floated a large row-boat.

The craft was deserted. Wishing to observe the scene without being noticed, I leaped into her. There was a cushion on the stern seat, and on this I sat down.

The breeze and the gentle motion of the boat were delightful, and for a moment I thought how pleasant a life on the ocean must be. Alas! little did I realize what was in store for me on the boundless deep.

As I sat on the soft cushion I could not help but speculate on all that had transpired within the last few hours. Early in the morning my mind had been free from care that was anyway deep; now I was a fugitive, not knowing which way to turn or what to do.

But I was not disheartened. I was healthy and strong and I felt confident that I could work my way in the world. But I was worried about clearing my fair name of the suspicion Uncle Felix had cast upon it. I must do that at any and all costs.

Presently a footstep sounded above me on the dock, and a well-dressed young man appeared.

"Hullo, there!" he cried, on catching sight of me.

"Hullo!" I replied, shortly. I was not in a talkative humor, and wished him to know it.

"What are you doing down there?" he went on, rather sharply.

"Nothing much."

"Do you know that that is my boat?"

"No, I didn't know it," I returned, and then jumped to my feet. "Excuse me, but I haven't hurt anything."

"But what are you doing there?"

"Only resting. I've walked a good bit to-day and I am tired. I'll go if you want to use the boat."

"Oh, no, that's all right. I don't want the boat for a couple of hours yet. You may stay where you are."

"Thank you."

He was about to turn away, but a sudden thought seemed to come into his mind.

"You say you have walked a good bit to-day?" he asked curiously.

"That's it."

"You are not out of work and on the tramp, are you?"

"Something like that," I replied. "I'm out of work and as I can't pay to journey around, I'll have to walk."

"I see. Well, I hope you strike something before long. It's not pleasant to be out of work and money."

The young man nodded pleasantly and walked away. I must confess I gazed after him longingly. I warmly appreciated the few kind words he had given me.

As I turned back to sit down once more I heard two men get up from behind a number of packing-cases on the pier, and walk away. I had not noticed them before, and I wondered if they had overheard the conversation which had taken place.

It was rather warm in the boat, and the rocking motion caused by the waves soon put me in a drowsy mood. My time was my own, and I felt in no humor to move away. I allowed my head to fall back, and almost before I knew it I had dropped into a light doze.

My wakening was a rude one. The row-boat gave a violent lurch, nearly precipitating me into the water. I tried to scramble to my feet, but some one with a big bag pushed me back.

"Here, what does this mean – " I began, indignantly.

"Shut up!" come back in hurried tones.

Then the bag was pulled over my head and arms, and in five seconds I found myself a prisoner and hardly able to move hands or feet.

I tried to cry out and to ask questions, but could not. The bag was thick, and, being tied around my neck, almost took away my breath.

For the first instant I was afraid that the police from New York had found me, but I as quickly gave up this idea. They would never treat me in this strange fashion, I felt certain. But who were my strange assailants, and what did they intend to do with me?

I felt myself lifted out of the boat and into another craft. Then I was thrown on my back and something that felt like a piece of canvas was spread over me.

The boat, with me and my captors moved off and kept moving for perhaps ten minutes or quarter of an hour. I tried to struggle to my feet, but strung hands held me down.

"Better keep still!" I heard a voice cry. "You can't escape, no matter how hard you try."

When the boat finally came to a standstill I was nearly suffocated for the want of fresh air, and I wondered if I had not been chloroformed when first assaulted. I was hoisted up by several men and placed upon my feet, and then the cords which bound me were cut and the bag was removed.

I looked around with a start. I was on shipboard, with the great ocean all around me.

"Down with him!" shouted a voice behind me.

Before I could turn to face the speaker a big black hole loomed up in front of me, and I was tumbled down into utter darkness. The hatch above was closed, and I was left a prisoner!

CHAPTER VII

ON BOARD THE SPITFIRE

As I have said, I was tumbled into the black hole, and the hatch was closed over me. Luckily I fell upon a pile of loose sailing, so my fall was broken and did me no harm.

But I was so completely bewildered by what had taken place that for a moment I did not know what had happened. Then I gradually became wide awake, and realized that I had been entrapped on board the vessel, which was probably short of sailors.

I had read of men who were thus pressed into the service, but never dreamed that such a thing could occur so close to the great metropolis, and in broad daylight.

Who my captors were or where they were taking me was a mystery. For an instant I thought the affair might be my uncle's work, but soon dismissed that idea as being too dime-novelish altogether.

With some difficulty I rose to my feet, but the motion of the vessel, as the sailors got her under way, was too strong for me, and I was forced to lie down.

The place was intensely dark, and even after my eyes became accustomed to the blackness, I could see little or nothing. On all sides not a light was to be seen, and overhead only a single streak of brightness around the hatch was visible. I was indeed a prisoner, and must make the best of it.

I crawled about the hold for quite a while, feeling everywhere for a place to escape, but none came to hand. Meanwhile I heard the creaking of the blocks as the sails were being hoisted, and the tramp of the sailors as they hurried around obeying orders. I could hear the murmur of voices, but try my best, could not make out a word of what was being said.

Presently, by the motion beneath me, I knew we were fully under way. The cargo below me groaned as it shifted an inch or two this way and that, and for an instant I was alarmed lest a case of goods should by some chance break loose and crush me. But nothing of the kind happened, and after a while all became comparatively quiet.

I knew not what time of the day it was, but judged it must be about the middle of the afternoon. How much longer would my captivity last?

If I could have found something with which to do so, I would have climbed up to the hatch, or shoved it open. But nothing was at hand, and the opening was fully five feet above my head.

The air in the hold was stifling and soon I breathed with difficulty. I longed for a drink of water, and wondered how long I could stand being in the place should those on deck forget I was there.

But those on deck had not forgotten me, as I soon saw. Presently the hatch was raised, letting in a flood of sunshine, and then a man's head was bent low.

"Below there!" he called out.

"Let me out," I replied.

"Will you be easy if we do?" he went on.

"That all depends. Why was I brought on board?"

"Because you belong here."

"Belong here!" I ejaculated. "I don't belong to this vessel."

"Well, that's what I was told; I don't know anything about it myself. Here, catch the rope and I'll haul you up."

As the sailor spoke he lowered a piece of heavy rope. Thinking anything would be better than remaining in the hold, I complied with his request, and a moment later stood upon the deck of the vessel.

As I came up, a man, whom I took to be the captain, came towards me. He was a tall, lank individual, with a red beard and hair. The look on his face was a sour one, and it was easy to see that he was not of a kindly nature.

"Hello, my hearty!" he exclaimed. "So you're up at last. Had quite a nap, didn't you?"

"Why was I brought on this ship?" I demanded.

"Why was you brought on board? Well, now, that's a mighty good one, smash the tophat if it isn't."

"You have no right to bring me on board," I went on, "and I want you to put me ashore at once."

The captain gave a scowl.

"See here, youngster, I don't allow any one on board to speak to me in that fashion. You've got to keep a civil tongue in your head."

"Why was I brought on board?"

Конец ознакомительного фрагмента.

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