TOM AND THE SQUATTER'S SON

BY OPIE READ

A STIRRING TALE FOR BOYS FROM 7 TO 60 AND ALL LOVERS OF THE EXCITING SCENES OF PIONEER LIFE

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THE HANDSOME YOUNG WIDOW.

TOM AND THE SQUATTER'S SON

A Stirring Tale of Adventures
in the Pioneer Days for
Boys from 7 to 60

BY
OPIE READ

Author of "The Son of the Swordmaker," "A Kentucky Colonel," "The Carpetbagger," "A Tennessee Judge," The Jucklins," Etc.

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TOM AND THE SQUATTER'S SON

CHAPTER I

Along a new-cut road in the forest of Oklahoma a young fellow briskly walked. The sun was low, its beams streaming through the underbrush, and from time to time he quickened his pace as if anxious to reach some sort of habitation before the fall of night. The country was wild, recently opened up to the settlement of the white man. In the heavy woods skirting the strips of prairie land the black bear still roamed about, keeping time to the tune of his own humorous mood, and among the pine covered hills the newcomer in his log house with dirt floor, was still startled out of his midnight slumber by the scream of the panther. There were but few Indians remaining in the territory. When Congress after many years of delay gave over Okla-

homa to the different races of the earth, the red man, dark and glum with the traditions of his race, grunted contemptuously, rolled up his blanket and turned away, to find a home where strange waters flowed.

The sun was almost down when the youth came upon the cabin of that species of citizen known as a squatter, a man almost as roving as the Indian, a quaint character who never stopped to investigate the ownership of land, but who built his log hut and remained there until told to move on, or until neighbors began to appear, and then, complaining of being crowded, he would pick up his traps and move of his own accord. This habitation did not look older than a few days. New chips were scattered about it and the roof was not quite completed. Beside a stump lay a yellow dog, stretched out to catch the last rays of the sun. In front of the door stood a mule colt, nearly as woolly as a sheep. The youth "halloed" and instantly the tow head of a boy was thrust over the comb of the roof. From his post of observation he had been evidently watching the approach of the stranger.

"Whut do you want?" the tow head in-

quired, showing an eye above the ridge of boards.

"I want to see your father."

"How do you know I've got one?"

"I don't know that you have."

"Then how do you know you want to see him?"

"It isn't likely that you are living here alone."

"No. Thar's the dog down thar and thar's the colt."

"And I guess I can get as much information out of either one of them as I can draw out of you."

Hereupon the mule colt kicked up his heels and scampered off into the woods and the dog looked up with one eye and, again yielding to the soothing rays of the sun, dropped off to sleep.

"Come down," said the traveler, "I want to talk to you."

"Can't you talk to me whar I am?"

"Yes, but I can't get anything out of you."

"Wall, I don't reckon you could get anything out of me down thar."

"Come down and I'll try."

"Can you rassle?" the tow head inquired,

showing his shoulders above the roof. "If you can and think you can fling me down, all right."

"If you want to wrestle I'll try to accommodate you," the youth replied.

"All right," rejoined tow head, scrambling along the roof. "I ain't had no fun since I come here." He dropped to the ground and the youth saw that he was tall and with evidences of wire strength and agility. He appeared to be constructed entirely of bone. His yellowish hair looked like swamp grass scorched by the sun. He wore what is known as a hickory shirt and soiled flax trousers, held up by one "bed-tick" suspender.

"So you want to wrestle with me?"

"Yes, specially as I ain't had no fun since pap come here."

"All right, come on."

The youth threw him, and the dog jumped up, with both eyes wide open.

"I don't believe it," remarked tow head. "Nobody can throw me that easy. Give me another proof."

Again he was tumbled upon the ground. "That looks easy," remarked tow head,

"but some how I don't believe it. Why, I have flung down all the young fellers in north Arkansas, and come mighty nigh breakin' the neck of a feller that worked on a flat boat. You ain't flung me yet. I have jest been a dreamin'. Come at me."

This time he arose with his mouth full of dirt. "Are you convinced now?" the youth inquired.

"Dinged if I don't believe I am. Whar are you from?"

"From away off yonder," answered the youth, waving his hand.

"How did you learn all this?"

"In a gymnasium."

"In a what? But don't say it again. It sorter skeers a feller. But you are strong. And you are about the finest lookin' chap I ever seed. But you are so good lookin' I didn't think you could rassle. What is it you want with pap?"

"I wanted to know if he would let me stay all night."

"Why, you can stay till he comes and then if you can fling him down I reckon he'll let you stay as long as you want to. Here he is now."

A tall raw-boned man, not as old as he looked, came around the corner of the house. The dog ran to him with a caper of welcome, and the mule colt, standing off in the woods, gave him a bray of recognition.

"What's yo' name, young feller?" the squatter inquired.

"Just plain Tom Smith."

"Plain enough. Whar you from?"

"Indiana."

"Still plain enough. But they tell me they send out some right good men from thar. In fact I know they do. I met one not long ago that was powerful entertainin'. Fixed up a fight with him, and he knocked out this tooth right here, flattened my nose and took away my appetite for corn bread. Most amusin' cuss I ever met. But what are you doin' down here—lookin' for a fight?"

"No, I want to stay all night, and—"

"Come all the way down here jest to stay all night? Ain't thar no places to stay whar you come from?"

"Plenty of them. No. I didn't come to fight, unless I have to. I am looking around

and may settle somewhere in this part of the country."

"Want to stay all night. Have you attended to him, Fletch?" the squatter asked, speaking to his son.

"Yep. Had a few falls."

"What did he do?"

"Proved that he had a right to wait for you."

"That so? All right. Young feller, you may not understand our customs right well. We hold that a family's got the right to make its own laws, so we have made ourn. It might seem funny to some folks, but natural enough to us. You see we love fun better than anything in the world, but we don't get none except when a stranger comes along. I've jest moved in here. Which way do you want to rassle?"

"Makes no difference to me."

"Wall, you are an accommodatin' chap. Jest come on an' grab as grab can and I won't hurt you any mo' than I can naturally help."

There was a rush, a swirl of yellow in the air, and the squatter lay stretched out on the ground. He got up, dusted himself and

looked about surprised. "It seems that somethin' has happened," he said, "but it ain't reasonable that a man should believe everythin'. Tell me that happenin' once agi'n."

Again he was thrown upon the ground harder than before, and this time when he got up he turned to his son and said: "Fletch, go kill a couple of them young chickens and fry 'em for the stranger. Fetch out them biscuit and warm 'em up. Young feller, you can stay with me jest as long as you want to."

CHAPTER II

In the night there came a heavy dash of rain, and half asleep, Tom lay upon his pallet listening, dreamily, to the galloping of swift cavalry through the air and upon the roof; and when the forces of the night had all passed, with the occasional patter of a belated troop, he lay there musing upon his hosts, the squatter and his none less peculiar son. Of such people he had read, in books and sketches which seemed to be careless of the truth, but in their real existence he had never believed. To him they had been but the humorous fairies of a frolicsome mind. But now they lay, almost within arm's reach of him, full of strange whims, hardly knowing the value of money, ignorant of the world's commerce and the ambitions for which men risk their lives.

Among the meagre furnishings of this habitation there was not a scrap of printed paper. Always living beyond the refining touch of education, but learned in woodcraft and apt in the unconscious figures of

speech which seem to come up naturally out of the soil, they spent their lives, quaintly joking. But behind them there lives a vivid history; Watt Tylers who with sledge hammers resented the insults of heartless nobles; Cromwells who cut off the heads of imperious oppression and held high a hand that was red but free. And the youth thought of this as he lay there musing. He thought of the slave market that followed the western rebellion in England, when to follow Monmouth the people arrayed themselves against James, who were crushed, hanged, sold into slavery—who, some of them, bought by the ladies of the court, were sent to the Southern colonies in America. Some of the ancestors of this squatter doubtless stood looking into the merciless eye of Jeffreys, the most heartless of all judges; some of them died in the hull of a disease-stricken ship. Thus he was musing when the squatter arose and stretched himself:

"Wall, reckon we better git up and eat a bite."

"It isn't daylight yet," replied Tom.

"That may be, but it's time to git up. A

feller that lays in bed till the sun rises never will amount to nuthin'."

"Have you got anything very important to do to-day?"

"Yes, got to get up and see the sun rise. Don't want the sun to ketch you in bed, do you? It never would forgive you. One time thar come along a feller that was runnin' for governor of the state, and the sun riz one mornin' and cotch him in bed, told the moon and stars on him and beat him five to one. Git up, Fletch, and go out and look at the mule colt."

Fletch was drowsy. He was a squatter, with all the traditions of his class, but more than all he was a boy. "What's the use in lookin' at him, pap? He's thar all right."

"Wall, go out and let him know you know he's thar. What, want to go to sleep ag'in? You'll never be governor of no state."

The boy yawned. "Wall, you've been a gittin' up this early all yo' life an' I ain't seed you governor of no state."

"Hussle out, we ain't got no time to talk politics. We'll git a bite to eat, an' then if you want to you may go to bed ag'in."

The clouds were gone and the sun was

ablaze when Tom told his friends good bye. They shook his hand affectionately, and when the boy had gone with him to the rise of the hill, he halted and said:

"Wall, reckon I'll go back here. Got to count the mule ag'in, you know. Pap has him counted about eight times a day. That's about all I've got to do—git a bite to eat now and then and count the mule. Wish you'd steal him, so I wouldn't be kept so busy. Wait a minit. Whar are you goin'?"

"You have heard of the little town known as Blue Jay, haven't you?"

"Yes, feller come along yistidy an' said he was from thar. He said thar was more than six stores in the place, but I didn't believe him. I wonder if it's true. One of these days I 'low to go over thar and see. Do you reckon you'll be thar long?"

"I don't know."

"Reckon a feller would git lost among all them stores? Wall, good bye, you may see me ag'in some time."

Along in the afternoon, when he had trudged many a tiresome mile, Tom came to a house which bore some of the features of modern civilization. Out in front a man

was harnessing a horse to a buggy, and in the hope of being set forward on his journey by a more speedy way than walking, he halted and addressed the man, inquired as to the direction he intended to drive.

"To Blue Jay," he answered.

"How far is it from here?"

"About ten miles."

"Is any one going with you?"

"Why all these questions? If you want to ride why don't you say so? I am a doctor and a man of few words. I have come out from Blue Jay to see a man that was pretty badly crushed by a bear, and if I hadn't got here in time he would have died. Whoa, here, come under while I buckle this strap. Don't believe you ever belonged to a doctor before. I haven't owned him very long. In fact I haven't been here but a short time—came from Kansas where there are doctors a plenty, I tell you. Are you going to Blue Jay. If you are, why don't you say so? My name is Dr. Plum. You haven't told me your name."

"You haven't given me a chance."

"Haven't? I've given you all the chance there is. I am a man of few words—man of

action, I might say. Come, climb in if you are going with me."

They started off at a dash, and Dr. Plum took off his hat to catch upon his prematurely bald head the rush of cool air. He wore a short-cropped reddish beard, with upper lip shaved, and the links to which his watch was attached were large enough for a dog chain; the checks on his clothes almost reminded one of the mosaics in the floor of an art institute; he wore boots made of alligator hide.

"Come, sir, your name?"

Tom told him.

"But your business, sir. You've said nothing about that. Out in this country we want to know a man's business. You ain't a man yet, but the way boys shoot up these days you may be at any minute. I guess you've had your collar bone broken playing foot ball. Come, own up—don't try to get out of it."

"I've had two of my ribs broken."

"So? Ah, hah. Where, let me see." He began to grabble under Tom's coat, and found the location of the ribs that once were broken. "So? They knit with first inten-

tion—a fair physician attended you. If it had been some exterior hurt I might tell from the scar as to the school of the doctor that did the work. But no matter. Why have you come out here? Don't you know that when a young fellow comes out here alone we naturally suspect that he has done some devilry and has had to run away from home? You didn't know that? Well, you will learn a good lot about real life if you stay out here long. But you didn't come riding a horse—that's one evidence that you may be all right—evidence, you see, that you didn't steal the horse. Laughing at me, eh? Well, I've known fellows to come here laughing and after a short time set up a laugh on the other side of the mouth. What can you do? Know anything about any sort of trade?"

"I have never learned a trade. What's the use of learning one when they are having so many strikes all over the country?"

"Pretty good sense in that. Ever take a prize in your class at Sunday School?"

"If you question me very closely you'll find that there are a great many things I have neglected. I don't lay claims to being good. All things considered I guess I'm

about as natural a boy as you've struck for some time. I never robbed birds' nests while other boys were studying; I never saw a boy drown because he went out in a boat on Sunday, but if you pin me down I'm afraid that once upon a time I tied a tin can to a dog's tail."

"Well, well, you are a singular chap. Just an all round American boy, eh? And you are a fine looking duck, I can tell you that; and a man that has looked very close into that dark eye of yours wouldn't care to tackle you. I've got a friend in Blue Jay that will take to you—Major Barton, fine fellow, smart as they make 'em; Yale man, I believe. Brought money out here and invested it in land around about the town and has done more for our place than all other agencies combined. Unfortunately he hasn't needed my medical services yet, but I may get at him after a while. What sort of business do you expect to engage in?"

"I haven't any idea; anything that comes up."

"Got any money?"

"If I had I wouldn't have walked."

"Logic, sir; logic. Old Whateley himself might sometimes learn from a young-

ster. But in coming out here you must have had some idea. Not looking for a lost father, I hope."

"No, my parents are not living."

"Good. I mean it's good that you don't have to look for them. Not on track of a stolen will, I suppose."

"There's no will that has any bearing on me."

"Well, sir, I guess you are a natural boy, and I wish I had some sort of work to give you. But you ain't likely to starve. Out in a new country they don't let folks starve. To go home and sit down by a comfortable fire knowing that not far away are little children cold and hungry belongs to the civilization of old places. Out here we help one another and forgive short-comings—nearly everything but horse stealing, and my advice to you is—my only advice in fact, is that you'd better walk until you can buy a horse. Going to a stable at night and taking one out may be easier, and a good deal quicker, but it is better to work for him. Of course if you can cheat a man out of one in a trade that's all right; society is a good bit of a cheat itself, you know. Well, from the top of that hill over yonder we can see our town."

CHAPTER III

The Doctor continued to talk, asking questions or firing off his opinions of the world, and Tom was not slow to express himself, but as they neared the hill-top which was to give him the first view of the town, he fell into silence. And when they had reached the summit of the hill, when the tin-covered dome of the sourt house flashed its light into his eyes, the young fellow stood up and exclaimed: "So, that at last is the place."

"Sit down. There's no mistake as to the name of the town—can't say that I would have selected it, but it was named by a gang of adventurous fellows that had no ear for music. What do you mean by saying at last it is the place? Do you expect to meet any friends there?"

"No, sir; I'm not acquainted with any one in the town."

"But your words carry a note of mystery. Being a short-spoken man I don't like mystery. Tell me out and out why you are coming here?"

"I have heard that it is the place for me—that I may do well there."

"All right, no mystery in that. I'll help you all I can—will introduce you to Barton, but you musn't beat about the bush. Speak out."

"I don't think you'll have any cause to complain, sir."

"That's the way to talk. And, by the way, you might go into my office and study medicine."

"Don't think I should like that very well. Is there a newspaper in the town?"

"Yes, sir, one of the very worst you ever saw, the Blue Jay Gazette."

"I used to send dispatches to the Chicago papers and I think I might do something in a printing office."

"You could write up my cases, that's a fact. The fellow that's running the Gazette now doesn't care anything at all about news—made only five inches of the fact that I was attending the bear-crushed patient and gave a foot and a half to a dog fight in a livery stable. He prints only once a week, but he doesn't give enough news to last five minutes. I have sometimes wished he would steal a horse."

"Why?"

"I want to get rid of him. I don't think it would take much to buy him out. If we could scare him he might run away. I have heard that he committed forgery back where he came from, but out here they don't understand forgery and it ain't much of a crime—some of them look on it as a sort of accomplishment, like piano tuning or something of that sort. I'll take you around and introduce you to him. You'll like it out here. I reckon we've got the liveliest set of boys you ever saw. Up to all sorts of pranks—took a fellow out one night and hung him over on that knob, right yonder. He didn't want to be hung—said he was busy—but the boys told him they would look after his affairs. He was a playful sort of a fellow—played with fire and tried to walk off with some goods while a store was burning. I'll introduce you to them. From this hill we can see the town again."

"The place at last," the young man mused.

Blue Jay was a small town, ragged in appearance, with loose boards flapping when the wind was strong. It was constructed almost wholly of wood, with here and there a

"commercial" palace of merchants more adventurous than their neighbors. There was no railway in the town, which was two miles from the river, a necessity brought about by the existence of low lands that were subject to overflow. Like all such towns faith in the future was the source of all its energy. Within a few moments any real estate dealer could explain why Blue Jay was to be one of the centers of commerce and manufacture.

The doctor drove to a drug store, and pointing to a window in the second story remarked that it looked out of his place of business. He shouted to a negro boy who came forward to take care of the horse, and telling Tom to follow him, he entered the drug store. Behind the counter stood a young fellow who addressed the physician as "Doc."

"Anything going on, Charley?"

"Nothing, Doc."

"Nobody needs me, I guess."

"Not that I have heard."

"How do these people expect me to live if they don't send for me? Mr. Brown, this is young Smith; I found him out here al-

most dead of swamp fever—had been given up by three doctors—but I attended him and you see what he now is."

The druggist reached forth his hand and Tom shook him, blushing to think that he was a testimonial, but as he was grateful for the "lift" which the doctor had given him over the dreary road he said nothing.

"Of course you have come to live among us," the druggist remarked, and Tom replied: "Yes, for a while at least."

"Oh, if you stay here a while you are bound to become a fixture. Look at me. I expected simply to pass through here, but I've been here a year and am one of the oldest inhabitants."

"He'll be one of us all right," said the doctor, and then speaking to Tom he continued: "I guess you'd better go over to the hotel and get your supper and in the morning if I'm not called away I'll take you over and introduce you to the newspaper. Tell the hotel man that you are my friend and he won't ask you to pay in advance. Haven't got much baggage, have you? That bundle contain your all? Well, you ain't a very promising guest, that's a fact. But tell him

you know me and he won't charge you more than two prices."

The hotel was a small affair, built of unplaned pine boards, consisting of two rooms down stairs and a number of stalls above. In the office were several boys of about Tom's age, ranging from seventeen to twenty, and when he entered they eyed him suspiciously. When he asked of the proprietor, a dried-up old fellow, if he could be accommodated with supper and a bed, a red-headed boy turned to his companions and remarked: "Bill, I don't reckon he wants to buy any of your dad's land."

"If I wanted to buy manners I wouldn't stop to examine your stock," Tom replied, and the boys laughed. "He got you that time, Abe," one of them said, and Abe replied: "Yes, and I'll get him the first thing he knows."

Arrangements were completed with the landlord and Tom was about to go into the dining room when Abe stepped up and said:

"I want to see you a minute."

"All right, two minutes if you think it will take that long."

"If what will take that long?"

"The business you want to transact with me."

"Yes, you bet your life I'll transact business with you. What did you mean by saying that I hadn't any manners? Don't try to wriggle out of it. What did you mean?"

Tom began to laugh. "I meant exactly what I said—that if I wanted manners I wouldn't examine your stock. And I wouldn't. You are at home; I am a stranger. I came in here modestly and you began to make sport of me, and if you don't like what I said you may help yourself to something that you may like better."

"Come, no rowin' here," said the landlord. "Abe, that chap could lick you in a minute."

"Who, me?" Abe shouted, but there was a squeak in his voice. "Don't you bet your money on it for you'd lose. If he wants anything out of me he can get it, I tell you that. I'm not goin' to be run over by every feller that comes along."

"Fight fair," cried one of the boys, evidently a leader. "Here, stand back, fellers and let them go at it right."

"Wait a minute," said Tom. "I was the

best boxer in my school and this chap's no match for me. If there's got to be a fight let it be somewhat equal. Select your best man and let him take this fellow's place."

"You talk pretty big," replied the leader. "And mebby you don't know me. My name is Jim Turner."

"Well, what of that?"

The boys looked at one another. Some of them shook their heads. Was it possible that there was to be a revolution in the affairs of boydom?

"Don't fight in here," said the landlord, showing by his manner that he was keen for the combat.

"I'll fight this chap anywhere," Jim Turner declared, pulling off his coat. Tom's coat came off and the two lusty fellows stood facing each other. It was said afterward that Tom knocked him down with the first blow. Of course those among the boys who still had faith in their hero denied this, but not one among them went so far as not to acknowledge that the second blow brought him. When they had washed his face and given him his hat—when he had muttered about seeing him some other time, he passed

through the crowd that had gathered about the door and went away, with one or two boys following him, but they soon came back to peep in at Tom as he sat eating his supper. Abe came into the room and approaching the table took off his slouch hat and said:

"It was all my fault. I ain't no coward, you understand, and I would have fought you and been knocked silly, but I want to say I'm sorry for what I said. A feller don't always know how soon he's goin' to be a fool. We ain't a bad lot here, Jim and the rest of us, and we'll do the right thing by you if you stay here, and I don't think you can find a better place. Hope you won't hold anything up against me."

"Not at all," Tom replied. "You boys have just reminded me of home, that's all."

"Where is he?" a voice called, and looking up Tom saw Dr. Plum coming toward him. "Ah, here you are." He shook hands as if years had passed, inquired as to how Tom was getting along, presented the good wishes of Charley, the druggist, and then said: "Lively town here, my son. Glad they so soon extended to you the politeness of the season. Sometimes they are a little

slow, being busy at something else, and I am pleased to know that you have made such an impression. By the way, shake hands with my Friend Wilson."

A tall, gaunt looking man came up and Tom shook hands with him. "Wilson," said the Doctor, "is the editor of the Gazette and I reckon he wants to get at the facts of the row. Give them to him just as they took place for we'll all enjoy reading about them. Be printed under the head of society items, you know."

"The affair is not worth writing," Tom replied, closely searching the editor's countenance, striving to determine, no doubt, whether or not he would be a hard man to deal with. "It was all a prank."

"Pranks make a paper mighty interesting," replied Wilson, taking out his pencil and note-book. "The folks here have to read so much about the booming of our town and the high-shouldered prospects of the community that when a prank comes along they gobble it up and smack their mouths. Whipped Jim, I hear."

"Well, you might call it a draw."

"A draw! Well, for the honor of our

town I'll do that. You see we are a proud set of people. What do you expect to engage in out here?"

"I don't know—most anything."

"Well, a feller that's willing to do most anything oughtn't to be out of work. I guess you heard so much about our place that you couldn't hardly keep away. Come around to the Gazette office to-morrow and I'll see what I can do for you."

"Thank you. I'll do so."

The editor scribbled in his note book, shut it up with a vigoorus slap, to show the quick intensity of his publication, and hastily walked out. The doctor again shook hands with Tom and withdrew, but Abe continued to linger. "What are you going to do after you eat?" he inquired.

"Go to bed. I'm tired."

"You don't look like you could get tired."

"But I am. I have walked a long distance within the past few days."

"I wanted to talk to you about a minute but I reckon in the mornin' will do. I was goin' to tell you somethin' that may help you. The fellers here put up all sorts of jokes on a stranger. They call it the initiation, and

some of the jokes ain't right smooth. I'm a member of the tribe and ain't allowed to tell what the jokes are—oughtn't to have told this much. But I sorter felt that I was under some sort of obligation to you. Look out for 'em, Good night."

Tom lay up close to the roof, and in the night there came a rain, music to his dreaming senses. He was young in years but the past seemed long to him, as his mind floated back, and he was impressed with the thought that ages ago he had listened to the patter of the rain, in some country far away, almost at the dawn of time, when great animals roamed the earth and when no stone recorded the history of man. He aroused himself to shake off this impression, and now wide awake, heard something sharper than the rain, a noise at the window, as if some one were trying to raise the sash. It was so dark that he could not see. But he could act, and gliding out of bed he felt his way to a corner of the room, nearest the window, and waited. He heard the sash go up—heard some one step into the room. Then there came a flash like lightning—a dark lantern—and he saw a man moving slowly

toward the bed. Surely this could not be a joke of the boys. About the room the light was poured, like water from a sluice gate, and at one moment the bed looked like a patch of flame and then a tomb of darkness. Within Tom's reach there was nothing to be employed as a weapon, except a frail barrel which he found with feeling about. It was empty, with but one head. He grasped it, and held it in front of him, knowing that the light in its constant shifting would soon fall upon him. And it came full in his face, when he had lowered the barrel to look, and then there was complete darkness—the light was shut off.

"What do you want?" the young man asked.

The floor creaked and there was no other sound.

"What do you want here?"

"If you move you are dead," replied a deep voice.

"As long as I can move I'm not dead, that's sure."

"You have brought your jokes with you. But that's not what I came after. I want your money."

"Is that all? Do I owe you anything?"

"You owe me all you've got. You go around buying land and I don't own enough to bury me in."

"Buying land! I think you've got into the wrong room. But you needn't worry about enough land to be buried in. The county will donate six feet for that purpose. Now if this is a joke it has gone far enough, and if it isn't—"

"Do you reckon I'd risk my life to joke? Come, when I throw the light on you if your hands ain't up, it will be all off with you."

Tom leaped to one side and the light shot past him, and he saw a gleam harder than light, of steel. He leaped forward, with his barrel held out in front of him, and he heard sounds and felt vibrations which convinced him that the robber was lashing the frail protection with a knife. The young man knew that the robber would not shoot except as a final resort, and he pressed forward, striving in the total darkness to find some sort of advantage. He thought of shouting an alarm, but the faces of the boys, grinning, guying, came up before him, and he waived that idea, striving to strike the

robber with the barrel, to push him against the wall. Suddenly the barrel was struck by something heavy, and almost crumbled in his hands. The hoops fell to the floor, but seizing a stave he passed forward to the attack. There came a flash and a crash, the shot of a pistol, and the next moment he felt the splintering of the stave. With a desperate blow he had shattered it over the robber's head, and then there came a jar and all was silent. Tom grabbed about, found the lantern, drew the slide and poured the light downward, and there upon the floor, bleeding and apparently dead, lay the body of a man. At this moment there came a tramping on the stairs and the landlord with a light burst into the room.

"Why, what—"

"I guess he's done for," said Tom.

"I hope so," said the landlord, looking down at the man. "Why, it's Lem Craig."

"A joker?" Tom inquired.

"Joker? He's just got back here from prison. He's a bad citizen. Wait a minute, he's comin' too all right. Why, when I went to bed he was drinkin' in the bar room, and if he had been strictly sober he'd got you

shure. Come, get up here, now. Looks like you used a hand saw instead of a barrel stave. Here's his pistol—see stuck on a half cock and wouldn't shoot again. That was lucky for you. See if you can get up, brother Craig. It's made your legs sorter limber. I'll take his knife. Let's see if we can ease him down stairs. Come on, brother."

Craig, still dazed and bleeding, was taken below, and the town marshal was summoned. "Good," he said, as he came into the office. "He never ought to have been turned out of the pen. Don't believe he can walk to the jail. Here, Bill," he called to some one, "have a wagon brought here. Young feller," he added, addressing Tom, "you're all right."

"You bet he is," exclaimed the editor, bustling into the room. "He's furnished more news than all of you put together. Now tell me how it took place."

Tom told him and then remarked: "I shall not forget my engagement with you to-morrow, and now hoping that no more jokes are to be played on me, I'll go up and try it again."

CHAPTER IV

The town of Blue Jay was thrilled with Tom's adventure, and the next morning he found himself a hero. The Doctor came early to the hotel and introduced Tom to a number of leading citizens, never failing to add, "an old friend of mine, you know." Shortly after breakfast, and while the town was still busy with talking of the adventure, Tom called at the office of the Gazette. This great mouthpiece of a throbbing civilization was published once a week, except when the rise in the water courses prevented the arrival of the blank paper and then it came out as soon as possible, always with an editorial giving the cause of the delay and congratulating the people that such a calamity was not likely to occur again. The office was of one story constructed of plain boards, and the press was worked by hand. At the rear end of the long room sat Wilson, the editor, busily writing, particularly when he saw Tom enter. "Here's copy!" he shouted to a boy ripping off a sheet of paper and clap-

ping it down upon the table. "Ah, it is the hero. Well sir, I'm pleased to see you, but you'll have to pardon me for a time. The life of a journalist is all rush, you know. Where's that cob pipe. Ah, here it is." He filled the pipe and striking a match on the sole of his boot, applied it and began to smoke. "I have looked forward to the time when I might retire from this ceaseless strife," said he, sharpening his pencil, "but there is after all a fascination about it. A maker of history, however humble that history may be, has a place in society. Now let me see. I must write an article on the necessity of good roads. Good roads," he repeated, musing as if constructing the warp of his literary effort. "Good roads are the marks of advancing civilization. The roads of Rome were the best in the ancient day, and Rome ruled the world. Without roads Rome could have done nothing. And Blue Jay, as the prospective conqueror of all the trade of the adjacent territory, must have good roads." His pipe went out. He relighted it and again bent himself to his work, muttering and scribbling. Some one came in and the editor cried out: "Ah, Major

Barton, delighted to meet you. Major, this is the young man who nailed Craig."

Tom arose and shook hands with the Major, a thick-set man with a business air. His bluish eyes were almost colorless; his face was large, but his nose was thin and sharp pointed. Upon the whole he was rather repellant and it was not until he spoke that Tom felt inclined toward him.

His voice was soft and musical, and his words well chosen.

"You have done our town some service," said the Major. "You come among us as a fearless youth, and that is the hope of our community. I have lived in many parts of the country, but nowhere do I find such attachments as here. Not physical influences, perhaps," he added waving his hand. The editor winced and nodded. "Not physical, but spiritual influences. Of course society has not yet burst into full bloom, and perhaps that is one of the attractions, for when society has bloomed, it begins at once to decay."

"That is a fact," spoke up the editor. "I will write an editorial on that subject."

"Here man is natural," continued the Major, letting his hand drop upon Tom's

knee. "We do not deal in diplomacies but in square dealing. Of course the Craig affair is but an incident."

"Purely," spoke up the editor, "purely. And I will write an editorial on that subject, too. You might say it is rather an unfrequent incident. I have lived here a long time—five months at the inside, and my house hasn't been robbed but once and then it was an accident."

"An accident?" Tom inquired.

"Purely, sir. If the robber had known who lived there he wouldn't have put himself to the trouble."

"He was taking desperate and altogether useless chances in my case," Tom replied. "I felt rather sorry for him."

"Good, good, sir," exclaimed the editor, "worthy of a place in print, not as an editorial," he added, glancing at the Major, "but as—well, as an ordinary, but example-teaching incident. Copy!" he shouted, and then leaning back, continued: "Now gentlemen, there having come a lull in my labors, I am at leisure for polite conversation."

"Wilson," said the Major, "I am negotia-

ting for a tract of land in the Long Bow neighborhood, about fifty miles from here, and would like you to go over and look at it for me. And, by the way, I shall have a good deal of that sort of work from now on. Don't you want to change your employment?"

"What! Do I wish permanently to surrender the pen which is mightier than the sword? Major, your proposition is rather startling."

"I didn't think it would startle you—especially after I had talked to Dr. Plum this morning. He said he thought you needed out-door exercise, such as riding horse-back. I believe he really owns this paper."

"Ah," cried the editor. "So the secret has seeped out. Yes, sir, he practically owns the Gazette, and if he thinks I need outside employment, his words must be considered. What else did he say?"

"Well, he remarked that this young man, having had much experience, could run the paper."

"All right," said Wilson, getting up and bowing. "After all, land is the basis of wealth and all independence. I hope I do

not detract from labor when I make this statement. Labor is noble and to it we owe agriculture, commerce and all the arts, but if it hadn't been for the land, people could not have remained here to achieve all this development. Am I logical?"

"Wholly," replied the Major.

"I thank you. And now, recognizing that land is the basis of all things, and feeling somewhat tired of my editorial duties, I am willing to engage in land speculations. When do you wish me to set forth?"

"At once. Plum will be over pretty soon to make arrangements with the young man."

"I am then at your immediate service."

The Major and Wilson withdrew, and Tom was sitting there looking over a newspaper when Dr. Plum came in. "Ah, my old friend, it was somewhat of a surprise for you, wasn't it? Well, this life is full of surprises, most interesting when she springs her surprise at the right time and in the right way. Now, of course this paper is not making any money. It may be built up, however, and it is not a good idea to throw away so bright a prospect. Will you take charge of the Gazette and run it for fifty dollars a month?"

"I shall be delighted if you think you can afford to pay that much."

"Oh, it's little enough when it comes to that. Go ahead and do the best you can. I've got to call on my bear patient and will see you again soon." And at the door he halted and said: "Don't forget that I am your old time friend."

"No, sir, I won't. And I am trying now to express my thanks to you. I know how to recognize an injury, an insult, but when one has been so kind as you have, I am somewhat taken off my feet."

"Nonsense. Good day."

And so Tom sat down, the editor of the paper. He was world-wise enough to know that the responsibilities of this little office were not great, but his sense of obligation came down hard upon him and he mused over his coming duties, striving to form a policy that might make the paper popular. The first thing he did, after acquainting the one printer and the boy with the fact that he was now the conductor of the Blue Jay mouthpiece, was to kill the editorial matter recently written by Wilson and to substitute something simple and in good taste. He

knew, however, that it would not do to wipe out all the extravagant colors, so he wrote a humorous sketch, a short character study and an extravagant puff of the town. He was almost in ignorance as to the details of getting out the paper, but shrewdly he kept the printer in the dark, telling him to go ahead, thereby scoring a point with harmless though necessary flattery. When he went to dinner the landlord, known throughout the neighborhood as old Giff, met him with as much graciousness as he could stew out of his rough character. The news of Tom's accession to the tripod was in wide circulation, and old Giff found new cause for admiration, not because he had any particular respect for printer's ink, but because in it there was a mystery.

"I want you to understand," he said to Tom, "that you own this house."

"I hope you don't want me to be that poor," Tom replied, and the old man's sharp eyes twinkled. He possessed the backwoodsman's first essential, the comprehension of anything meant for a joke.

"I mean no harm," he said, chuckling. "I simply want you to feel at home and when

you can't stand it any longer in the hotel why, I'll let you sleep in the barn. The doctor will be here to eat dinner with you."

"I thought he went away out into the country to see the man that met the bear."

"Yes, he started out there, but decided to come back. He met a feller that told him he wasn't needed particularly."

"Is the man getting better?"

"Well, some folks might think so. He's dead. Here comes Doc now."

The doctor came up, took off his buckskin gloves, which he persisted in wearing even during the hottest of weather, and shook hands with Tom.

"Our old friend who had the argument with the bear is gone," said he, "and it is a pity, too, for three or four men around about the community wanted their wells cleaned out and he was good at that sort of work. But it couldn't be helped. Science can't always defy death, you know. Come in, Tom, and we'll eat."

And when they had sat down to the table, he continued: "I met the printer out yonder and he told me that you understood your business. I replied that all my old friends

did that, and they do. Whenever a man becomes my friend, he at once arises into some sort of proficiency. But my enemies!" He made a gesture of contempt. "Bob," he added, turning to the negro waiter, "what have you for dinner?"

"De same dat we had yistidy, sah."

"Well, what was that?"

"Bout de same dat we has all de time—haug an' hominy. Look yere, doctor, how dat bear man er gittin' er laung."

"He's dead."

"Look yere, you don't tell me! Now dat's bad. He owed me fifty cents fur heppin' him clean out er well. Who gwine pay me dat money?"

"I don't know."

"Wall, I doan wanter lose it. Look yere, you's de doctor an' he died on yo' hands so you ought ter pay it."

"Bring me some hog and hominy," said the doctor.

When the darkey had turned away and was slowly shuffling toward the shed which they called the kitchen, the doctor remarked:

"If you were to take sick and I should attend you and you should die, that negro

would say that you owed him. I have paid him about three dollars along those lines. How do you like Barton?"

"I don't know."

"Don't know? Haven't you met him?"

"Of course, but I haven't made up my mind."

"Why, he owns more land than any man in the neighborhood."

"That may be, but I am not acquainted with him yet. His voice is musical."

"As a flute," said the doctor. "But just between you and me there is something peculiar about him, some mystery that I don't understand. But don't say a word about it."

"No," replied Tom, with an eagerness in his eye which the doctor did not observe. For a few moments neither spoke a word, and then the doctor remarked: "But you understand that there's no harm in him. He is good hearted and generous. Not another word. Here comes the coon."

"Hate to lose dat money," said the darkey, placing the dishes upon the table. "I'd like to go ober and work de press fur dis young man, but I'se er feerd he mout die an' neber pay me fur it. Is yo' health right good, sah?"

" Ithink you may put faith in me," Tom answered.

"Ain't gwine out ter look fur no b'ar, is you?"

"No, robbers are more to my taste."

"I blebe dat's er fack. An' the way you used dat white man up is scanlus. I went ober ter de jail dis mawnin' an' he didn't hab no taste fur vidults."

The paper was to go to press that evening, to be ready for the day following, and the office of pressman was filled by the hotel negro. He talked constantly of the money owing to him, and when, along after midnight, Tom paid him he said, "I wonder how yo' ricollection is."

"Why so? You've got your money."

"Yas, sah, but ef yo' recollection ain't good you mout furgit de fack an' I could git in agin."

"Don't you worry about that. I never pay but once."

"Wall, some folks doan eben do dat. Wall, I must be gwine. An' I hope no robber won't stop me 'tween yere an' de hotel an' hol' me up an' take dis money 'way frum

me. I doan like ter be robbed. It gits mighty tiresome. Good night."

When he was gone Tom took up his paper and for a time sat reading it, with a just feeling of pride that he was a factor in the progress of the town. For a time he was to sleep in a little cubby hole at the rear of the office. When he went in with his spluttering oil lamp and looked at the bed, it appeared as if occupied by some one. He pulled at the covers and—there between the sheets lay a skeleton. "Rather a lean bed fellow," he remarked, setting his lamp upon the table. "Old fellow I don't know your name, and I guess you'll have to come out."

He took up the skeleton and stood it in a corner, and then smiled as an idea struck him. Then, getting some printer's ink and a stick he marked some letters upon the forehead of the "former one," took him out and with a string hung him in front of the ffice; and the next morning passers by read the words, written on the skull: "The only man in town who does not read the Gazette."

CHAPTER V

As Tom was on his way to breakfast at the hotel, he met Abe, the boy who had warned him against the jokes of his companions. He humorously drew down one corner of his mouth, looked about to determine whether or not he was observed and finding that he was not, remarked: "It's funny they put that thing in your bed when they know'd you wa'n't afraid of a live man, but they did and I don't want you to let on that I said anything to you about it. They haven't got to the end of their rope yet, and if you don't mind they'll slip up on you."

"And suppose they don't?" said Tom.

"Wall," replied Abe, lifting one foot slowly and rubbing his ankle, "they will put you down as about the sharpest feller that ever struck this part of the country. It's all in fun, you know, and you musn't get mad."

"Of course not. But can you give me an idea of the next prank they are likely to play?"

"No, for you see I belong to the tribe and

they would turn me out if they reckoned I'd told as much as I have."

At the breakfast table the doctor was waiting, and when Tom entered he bounced up and shook hands with him, "Good," he exclaimed. "Oh, you have shamed them all into reading the Gazette. I don't see how they can possibly get away from it. The rascals stole that skeleton out of my office, but just let him hang there as a sign. You couldn't get a better one. 'Only man in town who doesn't read the —,' " he threw himself back with a laugh.

"Haven't you got any use for the skeleton over at your office?" Tom inquired.

"None whatever. You see he was rather a reproach to me, having been a patient of mine and of course in debt to this nigger waiter."

"A patient of yours?"

"Yes. In the flesh he was an Indian and was a patient of mine after he had been given up—by the law, you understand. He was hanged. Just let him stand there."

But when Tom returned to the office the skeleton was gone, having been doubtless carried away and hidden for the purpose of

future jokes, and the editor did not investigate the theft, being rather glad that the grewsome thing was no longer a part of his establishment. During the day a number of men called to compliment the paper on its appearance and tone, and before night several subscriptions had been taken, a growth flattering to Tom and encouraging to the doctor. As the days passed the newcomer waited for the outcropping of another joke. He met the boys frequently, sat about with them at night telling stories and listening to their droll yarns, but received no inkling of what was to come. One night the party was assembled in the drug store, when Charley the druggist spoke up as if a sudden thought had occurred to him: "Say, fellows, it's snipe time. An old man was in here to-day and he says that they are plentiful out on the island."

"I'm glad to hear that," replied Jim Turner, "for there ain't anything I like better than snipe. And I should think you'd like to have some instead of that hog and hominy over at the hotel," he added, speaking to Tom.

"I wouldn't mind it. I used to go snipe

hunting along the Wabash, and I generally brought in a good bag. I must get a gun and go after them."

"Gun," Jim repeated. "Why, you don't need a gun."

"How do you get them?"

"Why you are green. We go after 'em at night. Just take a candle and a sack, and put the candle down on the ground and hold the sack and drive 'em in. You can get a sack full in a few minutes."

"You don't say so!" cried out a boy named George Frazier. "I'd like to see that thing done."

"We do it every season," replied Charley the druggist, roaching back his reddish hair.

"Suppose we go to-night," said Jim Turner. "Don't you want to go Tom?"

"Yes; how far is the island?"

"Well, the river is about a mile and a half from here and the island is about three hundred yards out in the river. Come on fellers and lets go."

A party of five set forth, talking with enthusiasm and provided with a gunny sack and a candle. "Nothing could be jollier than this," said George Frazier as he walked

along beside Tom. "Say, fellows, oughtn't we to have full moon?"

"No, the darker the better," Jim Turner replied.

"I'll bet we get a bag full in fifteen minutes," spoke up a lumbering chap named Buck Atcherson. "Say, Jim, recollect when we went over there on the island about this time last year?"

"I guess I do," Jim answered. "I sold my share of snipe to a dandy at the hotel for three dollars."

"That was a pretty fair profit," said Tom.

"Bet your life," replied Jim. "Let's turn down this way."

They turned upon a sandy road, new and not wholly cleared of stumps, and hastened onward, their enthusiasm heightening as they progressed. Clouds were gathering and it was with difficulty that they could keep in the pathway, but obstacles were met with merriment and passed with laughter.

"If we cut across here I think we'll find a boat," said Jim. "Here, boys, this way."

They came to a river and there tied to a willow was the boat. It was just large enough to carry them comfortably. But the

water was so swift that they were some time in reaching the island, a low, and sandy tract covered with a thick growth of cottonwood. Landing, they scrambled out, enjoined by Jim to make no noise, and whispering they crept toward the center of the island. Jim struck a match and lighted the candle. "Now, let me see," he said, looking from one to another, "I'll hold the sack and you fellows drive the birds."

"You held it the last time, let me have it," Buck spoke up.

"Wait a moment," said someone else. "Tom is a stranger among us. We got this thing up for his benefit and why not let him hold the sack."

"I'm much obliged to you," replied Tom. "I would like to hold it. I think it would be a capital experience."

Jim was inclined to be accommodating and consented. He stuck the candle in the sand and showed Tom the proper position, and when he had posed for the snipe, the other boys glided off into the darkness, one of them calling back, "Whistle ever now and then and they'll come faster." Tom whistled and the boys lay down and rolled with

laughter. After a time they sneaked back to the river.

"Why, where's the boat?" said Jim. "I'm sure we tied it here."

"Must be a little further down," suggested George Frazier. "Won't that chap have a lonely night of it, whistling for snipe?"

"Boys," said Jim, as they came to another clump of bushes hanging over the water, "there's no use talking, that boat's gone."

"Are you sure you tied it fast?" Buck inquired uneasily.

"Of course I am. I wouldn't take the chances of staying out here all night and maybe all day to-morrow. Lets walk further down," and when they had nearly reached the end of the island he added: "Gone, as sure as you live. Well, let's go back and keep the sucker company."

They saw the candle light gleaming and now, the spirit of fun having departed, went straightway to the snipe stand to explain the joke and to tell of the balk in the proceedings. But when they arrived at the place they looked at one another in amazement. The candle and the sack were there but Tom was gone.

Charley was sitting in the drug store as Tom entered. The druggist began to roar. "What are you laughing about?" Tom innocently inquired.

"Snipe hunter. Oh, they got you at last."

"Got me? I don't quite understand. We had a first rate time."

"I guess so. They let you hold the bag."

"Yes, they were kind enough to do that."

"But why haven't they come round here? Where are they?"

"Oh, they are picking the snipe for the market. We have decided to ship them to Kansas City. They bring a good price there, I understand. Wish I had a few of them broiled right now. I tell you there's nothing better than a broiled snipe—not those that have been shot, but caught in a gunny sack. There is something about a gunny sack that adds to the flavor of a snipe."

With his mouth half open Charley stood looking at him. "Say, tell me what's up?" he said.

"Why, what did you expect to be up? Didn't you think we'd get snipe? Didn't take more than ten minutes to fill the bag, but they were a little skittish at first, but when I

whistled softly they came running like chickens. Plump! Why, you ought to see them. But I haven't time to tell you about them now. It's past my bed time and I must get to work early in the morning."

"Wait a minute. It's all right to guy a feller, but what have you done with the boys? Where did you leave them?"

"They left me. Good night."

As Tom drew near the office he heard some one walking up and down on the board sidewalk, and as he was unlocking the door, a voice called out: "Never did think you was comin' back no mo'. Been a santerin' here hour after hour. Told you I might drap in on you sometime. Don't you ricollect me?" and the voice came closer.

"Why of course," cried Tom, holding out his hand and feeling for his friend, Fletch, the son of the squatter.

CHAPTER VI

When in the little back room the lamp had been lighted, Tom looked at the squatter's son, soiled with the stain of a trudge over a weary road, and said: "How did you happen to come over here, Fletch?"

"Wall, a feller came along with some papers and show'd dad that he didn't have no right to live no whar, and dad lowed, 'wal, then, I'll move on to no place,' and he struck out. I went with him about ten miles to keep him comp'ny and then I says, 'dad, I don't reckon you kin keep up with what they calls the change in the times,' and he lows, he does, mebby not.' Then we walked on a mile or two and I says, 'dad, I like you fust rate and all that, but this here thing of bein' jolted out of one place as soon as you git thar don't suit me.' We went on about a mile furder and dad says: 'I reckon you better go whar folks is and look fur suthin' to do. I'm a wild steer and you ain't nuthin' but a calf.' About a half mile from thar I says, I does, 'I reckon that's a fact. If you

"An' dad says: 'I reckon you better go whar folks is and look fur suthin' to do.' "

ever think you need me, holler and I'll come. Good by.' And when we got to the rise of the next hill, about three quarters away, dad he says, 'Good by.' And then I turned round and walked putty peart. Up to this time I didn't know whar I'd go, but I happened to think of you, an' I come on over here and the man what keeps the place over thar whar folks eat told me you was here a doin' of business, and I come and waited and here I am, ef you kin see me by that light, and—"

"What do you expect to do?" Tom broke in, striving in his mind to picture some post of duty suitable to the temperament and within the range of this peculiar character's abilities.

"Oh, anything. I kin throw a cow down and milk her while she's kickin', and I kin break a hoss till he looks foolish."

"But I have no work of that sort. This is a printing office—we publish a paper."

"You don't tell me. Well, reckon we kin print up enough to last about six months and go off fishin' some whar. I never printed none, you understand, but I kin l'arn. I l'arned to dance a jig that I'd never seen done but once."

"But you can't read."

"Do I have to know how to read? Well, I'll git at it early in the mornin'. Look here, you ain't goin' to turn me out?"

Tom took him by the hand. "No, old fellow, as long as this shelter is mine it shall be yours. There is something in you and I am going to bring it out. You can soon learn to work the press, and at the printer's case it won't take you long to learn to read and to set type. But let's go to bed. You sleep here and I'll lie over there in the corner."

"Not much. I'll lay in the corner—I wouldn't know how to sleep no whar else, and to-morrow I kin rig up some sort of a bed. Say, it was sorter hinted around that you was gone snipe huntin' and them fellers was a gigglin' a right sharp. You didn't let 'em put that old joke on you I hope."

Tom told him what had happened and he rolled in his corner and laughed, and long after the hour of midnight had passed, when the lonesome dog was howling away off, he broke out with a giggle.

Early in the morning there came a violent knocking at the door, and when Fletch, who was first to get up, opened it a voice out in

the darksome dawn demanded in the harsh notes of anger: "I want to know where my son is. Tell me this instant."

Fletch stepped back and Tom went to the door. "Who are you?" he inquired.

"I'll make you understand who I am. Where is my son?"

"Well, until I know who you are I can't tell who is your son or where he is."

"My name is Turner and my son is named James."

"Oh, won't you come in, Mr. Turner."

"That is not answering my question. My son and several other boys went with you last night, and I understand that you are the only one who has returned."

"That may be true."

"May be true! It is true. What did you do with my son?"

"Ask your son what he tried to do with me! He and the others took me out on a snipe hunt and he hasn't come home yet—that is, from what you say I infer that he hasn't. The fact is, they wanted to leave me on the island all night and I left them."

"You don't mean to tell me that my boy has been all night out there in that miserable place."

"Yes, in that miserable place where he tried to leave me."

"But they were only joking with you."

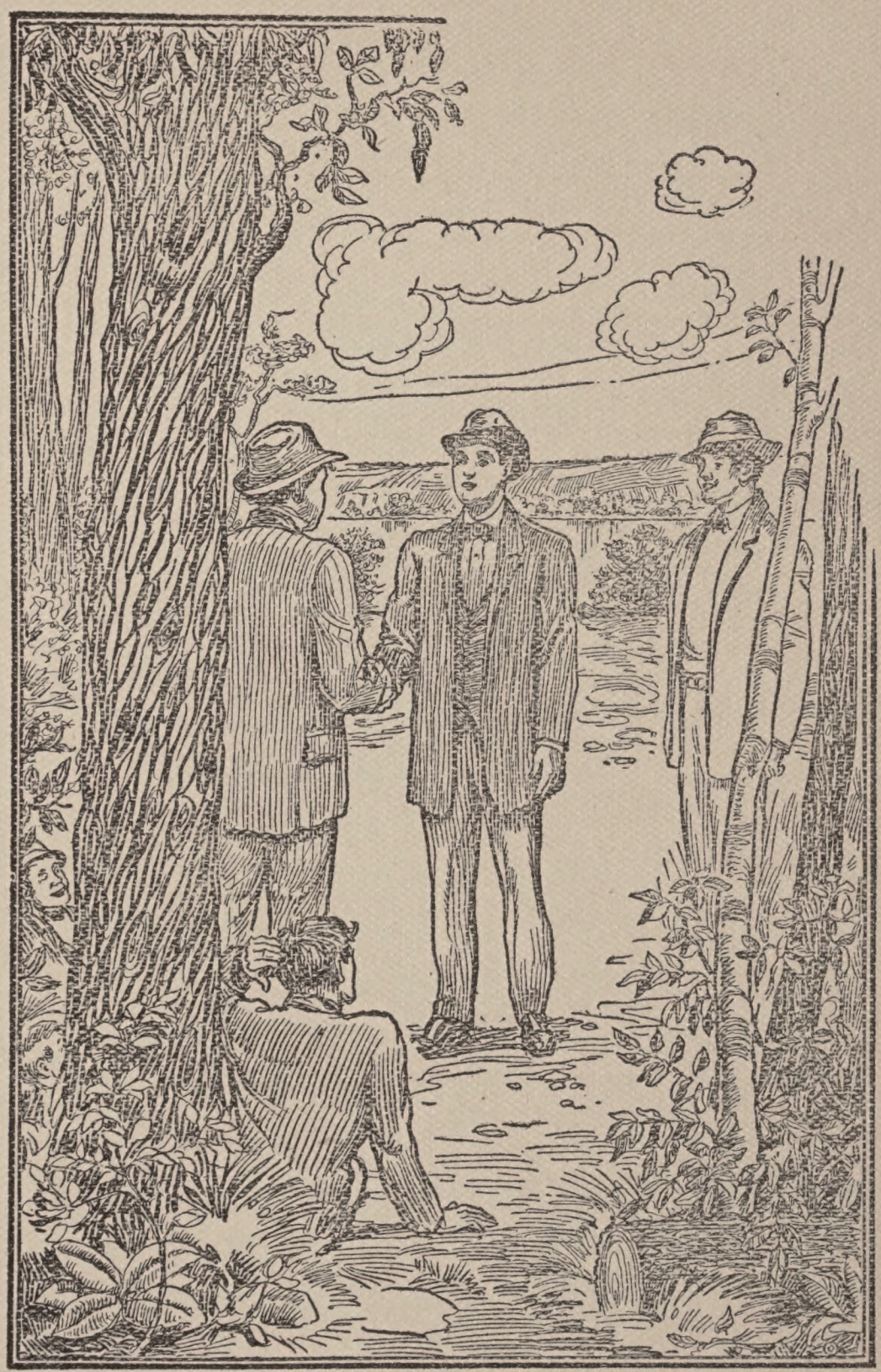
"And I was only joking with them."

"Oh," said Fletch, standing in the background, "the shoe sorter makes a feller limp when you put it on tuther foot. It's better for a lot of fellers to be thar together than one feller to be thar by hisse'f."

"I am not talking to you," replied Mr. Turner, and then speaking to Tom he added: "You have taken a nice course to make friends in this town, and I am going to speak to Mr. Barton. I think your career here will be short."

"That may be, Mr. Turner, but as long as I stay here I'll take care of myself the best I can. I don't wish to be impertinent, but don't you think you could look at this affair in a more liberal light? I simply caught those boys at their own game and I don't see why there should be any hard feelings. There wouldn't have been if it had turned out the other way. Practical joking at best is bad, and I think that a lesson against it is always valuable."

"Young man, I must admit that you have



He sprang up, dusted himself, and shook hands with Tom.

struck a note of common sense. How old are you and where are you from?"

"You may put me down for eighteen and from Indiana."

"You seem to have had good training. I was angry at first, but I trust you will forgive me."

"When you put it that way, Mr. Turner, I must ask you to pardon me, and to show my sincerity, my friend here and I will go at once and bring them off the island."

"Young man, you are a gentleman, and I will say as much to Mr. Barton."

"Thank you, sir. Come on, Fletch."

They shook hands with Mr. Turner and at a brisk walk set out for the river, reaching it just as the sun was coming up. The boat was found where Tom had tied it, and they rowed against the swift current out to the island. At the place where the candle had burned down into the sand the boys were huddled asleep, with the snipe sack used as scant covering. Tom leaned over and touched Jim. He looked up, first with a sleepy frown and then with a smile. He sprang up, dusted himself and shook hands with Tom; and then his loud laughter awoke

the other boys. Fletch was introduced as a wild man, captured on the island, and he gave them a war dance and a whoop that echoed up and down the river. In merry mood they went to the boat, and then arose the question as to whether or not it were dangerous for all to attempt to go ashore at once. Tom offered to wait for the second trip and then arose an argument, each boy declaring his right to the sacrifice. But Fletch settled the matter by doffing his clothes, throwing them into the boat and plunging out into the stream. As they were hastening to town Jim said to Tom: "You put it on us in fine shape, but we'll get you yet."

"That may be, but what's the object? What good will it do?"

"It will let you know we are here," spoke up George Frazier.

"I know that already."

"Yes, but we want you to know it stronger. You may have heard of the other jokes but we've got one that will fetch you."

"I wish you would give me some sort of idea of it."

"Never you mind, you'll get the idea soon enough and then it will be too late."

"A thing that's soon enough and yet too late is rather out of proportion," said Tom. "To tell you the truth I don't like practical joking. I don't see any fun in it, I'd much rather go hunting or swimming—not snipe hunting, you understand."

"We won't say anything about that," remarked Jim. "Guess I've got enough snipe to last me the rest of my life. I'm afraid the folks at home worried about me a good deal."

"Yes, and worry afterward is generally a consequence of the practical joke. But they aren't worrying now. I saw your father this morning and everything is all right."

When Tom and Fletch were at the breakfast table old Giff, the landlord came along, with his mouth humorously drawn. "I have ordered you some eggs," he said, "and that is about the most I could do for the governor of the state."

CHAPTER VII

Fletch took an awkward position at the printer's case, and with fumbling fingers felt about for the type. Once in a while an expression of astonishment would escape him, finding some letter which he declared he had never heard of, but he looked up with victory in his eyes and spoke with confidence in his voice when he announced that he had finally located the letter "a" and that it could not possibly get away from him. Tom complimented his perseverance, musing upon the wasted opportunities of the average boy. With what indifference the most of us have looked upon the golden privileges of learning! But this poor fellow, struggling in the bonds of ignorance, stood doggedly at his humiliating task, as if by sheer force he would conquer the past and seize the rewards of the present. Once Tom saw him snatch a type and break it with his teeth.

"What did you do then, Fletch?"

"I bit this blamed slab-sided "l" in two. It keeps a dodgin' me and I have fixed it.

Now whar is that "b"? It was right here a minit ago. A feller wouldn't think a piece of lead could hop around that-ter way."

"Keep at it, my boy, and everything will come all right."

"Oh, I'll keep at it. I don't know anything else but to keep at a thing. I was out in the woods one time and treed a 'coon. I didn't have no axe an' no gun, so I sets down under the tree and says to the 'coon: 'Well, if I go 'way, you'll come down and cl'ar you'se'f; so I reckon I'll stay.' Wall, I sot thar all day and all night and along toward evenin' of the next day the 'coon tried to make a sneak on me an' I let him come, an' jest sot thar a pretendin' to be asleep. An' about the time he was a makin' off, I jumped up and killed him with a stick an' I sold his skin fur a quarter, an' bought me a straw hat an' put off to church dressed up fitten to kill, I 'lowed; and about the time I got to meetin' my hat blow'd off an' a blamed calf over in a lot grabbed it up an' had it about half et up befo' I could choke it outen his mouth."

"You didn't make much by getting the 'coon," said Tom, "but it taught you a lesson—that after you have worked so hard for a thing, you ought to take good care of it."

"Bet yo' life. Look here, I've got a whole row of these things up on end all right. Oh, I'm a gittin' thar; an' the fust thing you know I'll be able to spell, and then when Circuit Cou't meets I'll go right over an' shake hands with the jedge an' ax him about the weather out his way. Hold on, it's all crumbled to pieces. How these things kin twist about so is a curis thing. Now I've got to fix 'em all over ag'in. But I kin stay here mighty nigh as long as they kin. Here's one that don't fit."

"It's what they call a 'wrong font,' " Tom replied, looking at his friend and smiling at the printer, an old-timer, who stood near. "That is the reason the line fell to pieces," the editor added.

"Sorter like a drunk feller at a dance," remarked Fletch. "It sorter proves that in this here life we must all line up right or we don't fit."

"You have found a good moral. Remember it."

"Oh, I don't furgit. Sometimes I have been afeered that putty nigh about all I could do was to ricolleck. But if thar's l'arnin' in these here boxes I'm goin' to pick it out."

And thus it was day after day. Sometimes the determined fellow would get up in the night, and by the light of candles resume his work at the case. His was more than a double fight, battling against ignorance and clumsiness, but after a while he began to learn easier, and once when a column of matter he had set was put into the Gazette, he walked out alone to muse, as Dickens did on the dark night when he dropped his first piece of writing into the mail box.

Within four weeks from the time when Tom took charge of the paper the circulation had more than doubled, and this gave him such encouragement that he readily consented to the treat of a bear hunt. The day was set, the company gathered, the dogs "blown together" with the horn. In the party were Jim, Frasier and Ike, and with Fletch, of course, for from the moment the expedition was organized his intelligence began to emphasize itself. No longer was he the awkward wooer of knowledge; he pushed to the front, as bold as a Frank.

Down they went into the river bottoms where the trees were heavy and the cane almost as rank as a Brazilian jungle. The

weather was fine and spirits were high. The dogs frisked about, and one old-timer looking with contempt upon the younger breed, threw up his head and let forth a long and swelling howl that put them all to shame. How delightful it was the first night, sitting about the camp fire, surrounded by glistening cane. With boyish pretense they invited little excitements, the cracking of a stick, the hoarse waving of the cane, the flutter of some night bird; and after an hour of dozing made sweet with half consciousness, they sprang up at daylight to cook breakfast and to be off after the big game. Hour after hour they fought their way through the tangle, sometimes halting in the few open places to rest and to wait for the dogs, and along toward noon the old veteran hound known as Long Head sounded the first notes of a trail. Then all was excitement. With a Winchester in his hand Tom battled with the cane, frequently hearing the shout of Fletch, far in advance of him. And now the whole pack of hounds broke forth in barbaric chant.

"This way—a path," shouted Fletch to Tom. "Git down and run like a shote."

The battle was a whirl of black and tan, gray and white.

"I wonder how far we are from the bear?" Tom remarked, breaking loose from the stubborn spikes of a saw boar.

"His tracks air hot enough to smoke," Fletch replied.

"I'd like to get a shot at him."

"All right, but you'll have to be keerful—mout hit one of the dogs."

They came into an open space, and as the dogs were quieting down, having in the tangle evidently lost the hot stimulus of the trail, halted to breathe. Just then there came a frightening outcry, and hell-bent through the cane came Ike, yelling that the bear was after him. And something was after him, not a bear, but a ferocious wild hog. Ike bounded into the open space. The hog came on with bristles up and fierce tusks gleaming.

"Give it to him," Fletch accommodatingly and quietly remarked, and Tom fired. The hog leaped stiffly into the air, but came down running not toward Ike but directly at Tom. But another shot, almost fairly between the eyes, ended the assault.

"Worse than a bear," said Fletch, walking up and touching the hog's snout with his foot. "These here tushes cut like a knife."

"Why didn't you turn round and shoot?" Tom inquired of Ike. "You've still got your gun—wearing it under your arm."

Ike looked at his gun and seemed surprised. "Blamed if I didn't think I'd lost it," said he. "Why didn't I shoot? I didn't have time. He jumped out at me and I didn't think there ever was a gun in the world."

"There's the dogs ag'in," said Fletch. "Come on."

They had lost sight and hearing of Jim and the others, but soon they were found up a tree. By this time the dogs were growling and snarling in a small open space.

"What are you doing up there?" Tom asked, and Jim, as he began to swing himself down, made answer: "Had business up here, didn't we fellers? That bear's out there. The dogs are all around him."

And about this time the fight began, howling, snarling; and occasionally there came a sharp yep telling that a dog had made his last outcry.

"Don't shoot," said Fletch, as they cautiously drew near. "We want to see the fun."

"No fun for these poor fellows," Tom replied as a lacerated dog ran past him.

The battle was a whirl of black and tan, of gray and white. It was an entanglement of bear and dog, and the thicket rang with loud grunts and startling cries. The wise old hound was cautions, leaping about to nip the bear's legs, but the younger ones, fuller of spirit and keen in the thrill of a first adventure, frequently exposed themselves and paid the penalty.

"This has gone far enough," Tom declared, cocking his gun.

"Wait a moment," said Fletch. "Let's count three and mind the dogs."

The guns barked, the bear fell, and upon him rushed the revengeful dogs. A fire was kindled, and that night the bear and the boys camped together.

CHAPTER VIII

Two days later Barton came into the office where the boys were at work. "You have not only proved yourself an editor but a bear hunter as well," he remarked to Tom. "They say you boys killed half a dozen."

"We killed two," Tom answered.

"Well, even two make the biggest killing we've had in some time. Say," he added, taking a chair and moving it close to the table where the editor was writing, "I want to know more of you."

"There isn't anything in my life that would interest you," Tom replied. "Tell me something about yourself."

"Oh, everything concerning me is an open book. I am simply a business man."

"You are surely a developer of new places."

"Thank you, young man. What part of Indiana are you from?"

"I suppose you have heard of Brown county."

"So you are from old Brown, eh?" Major

Barton leaned back and meditated for a long time. "Were you ever in Kentucky?" he inquired.

"Oh, yes, I have passed through that state a number of times."

The major arose and meditatively walked up and down the room, and Tom fell into musing, looking at him sometimes, as if striving to settle a question in his mind. Suddenly there came an enthusiastic "How are you?" and in walked Wilson, the former editor. He seized Tom by the hand and vigorously wrung it, but with great dignity, almost mocking in its solemnity, he bowed to Major Barton. The major walked over and stood looking out the window at an ox team stalled in the street. And turning about, with his arm resting on the case, Fletch gazed at him. The ex-editor sat down in the chair vacated by the major, and with a smile said to Tom: "You are making this paper jump like a frog." The major turned and glanced at him. Fletch resumed his work.

"We are doing the best we can under the circumstances."

"Ah, and the best you can under the circumstances is always a topnotcher," said

Wilson. "I was fond of the pen, sir, but I find that I am more adapted to real estate."

"Yes," the major broke in, "and to-day I want you to go over to Slim Prairie and look at a piece of land."

"Yes, sir, I shall be pleased to examine it and give you my judgment, but as I have just come in from a long and tiresome ride, I should like to repose for a short, and I hope a refreshing season."

"I want you to go to-day."

Fletch turned again and looked at the major. "Land down thar ain't in the habit of runnin' off, is it?"

"Come to think about it," replied the major, "I don't believe I am talkin' to you."

"But I'm talkin' to you. My daddy took up a piece of land way out yander, and some feller about yo' size come along with a piece of paper that they had writ on in the cou't house an' made him move on off. Don't ricollect me, do you?"

"Oh, you are that squatter's son. That's all right, and still I don't know that I had addressed any remark to you."

"No, but the time must come when you wish you had."

"Look here, I don't want any insolence from you."

Tom made a sign and Flech obediently resumed his work.

"Going out to Slim Prairie to-day, Wilson?" the major asked, and Wilson answered:

"Well, I reckon I'll have to, Major, beings that you request it. I am a most accommodating man, you know."

"All right, get off as soon after dinner as you can."

The major walked out, glancing back at Fletch as he neared the door, and Wilson sat there thinking. And when satisfied that his employer was no longer within hearing, he remarked: "Good deal of music in that man's voice."

"What sort of a holt has he got on you?" Fletch inquired and Wilson started.

"Hold on me? None at all, sir. But I am accommodating."

"So was my daddy when he moved off that place out yander. One of these days I mout git even with that feller."

"Revenge," said Tom musingly, "is a hard tenant to put out when once it has occupied a

room in your mind. Don't let it take possession of the entire house."

"My young friend," remarked Wilson, arising and bowing to Tom, "there is nothing more beautiful than to see youth and wisdom walking hand in hand."

"Thank you."

"Oh, not at all, I thank you. As man advances in years he is too much inclined to think that wisdom belongs alone to the aged. But we more often find a foolish old man than a wise one."

"Yes," said Fletch, "and if my daddy hadn't been sorter foolish, he wouldn'ter let that feller drive him off. He wouldn'ter done it a few years ago. Well, thar's a time a comin'."

"For us all, let us hope," replied Tom. "And I may say to you now, not to be repeated, that everything with me at present is simply an incident, leading up to a time which I hope is not far off."

"Ah," spoke up Wilson, "when you may go to congress, I suppose."

"No, not that. But I have dedicated my life to a certain purpose, and I believe that I am getting closer, but we won't talk about it."

"Hello, here," cried Jim Turner, bounding into the room. "Say, Tom, a party of us fellers got together this mornin' and decided that we wouldn't try any more jokes on you. We have elected you our captain."

"All right, but you must do away with that sort of joking altogether."

"We knew you'd say that and we agreed to it. But we've got to do something."

"Yes, and I'll tell you what that something is. I have authority to organize lodges of Coming Men of America. Every American boy ought to belong to it; and I am going to call a meeting to be held at the school house next Saturday night."

Jim studied for a moment and then said: "Sort of a secret thing, I reckon."

"Yes, it is an order not thrown open to the curiosity of the idle. Its teachings are ennobling; it prepares a boy for the real battle of life, and stimulates him with courage and self reliance. It is spreading over all the country, and it will not be long before there are lodges in every community; and not only the present but the generations to come will feel the benefit of it."

Jim pondered for a time, walking up and

down the room, and then remarked: "I'm with you, but we may have trouble in gettin' it started."

"Trouble? I don't understand."

"Why, you know there's a lot of fellers that live out here over the creek and they object to everything. A man came along here and started a night school for writin', and these fellers made a raid on it one night and larruped the scholars and ducked the teacher where the water was over his head and he come mighty nigh drownin'."

"Wall," drawled Fletch, "if thar's goin' to be trouble you may count me in from the fust. I ain't had no trouble now for a good while, and I'm gittin' sorter lonesome."

"Well, I am going to establish that lodge, trouble or no trouble." Tom replied. "And as I don't want to hurt anyone, I'd advise these fellows to keep away. I need you, Fletch."

"Got me, hain't you?"

"Got me too," said Jim.

Wilson had been sitting twirling his thumbs. "I may not gather the import of your enterprise," said he, speaking to Tom and winking at Jim, "but it's also natural for

me to have trouble. I ain't a boy, but somehow I believe that I am one of the Coming Men of America. Will you take me in?"

"You shall be one of us," Tom answered. "We need your wisdom."

"Young fellow," said Wilson, shaking hands with Tom, "if nothing else did, that would prove to me that you are to be a great man. You have perception, sir, and that is what most men lack to a sad degree."

The tavern bell rang for dinner, and as the boys were going out, Wilson touched Tom on the arm and said: "I'd like to see you here a minute. Boys, Tom will be along after a while," and then Fletch and Jim went out. Wilson walked up and down the room for a few moments and then said: "I don't want you to say a word about it, and I can't explain now—but don't take Major Barton into your society."

Tom looked at him and for a time said nothing. He went to the window and looked out. "Hope I haven't hurt your feelings," said Wilson.

"Oh, not at all. The fact is I had decided upon that myself. There's something about him—"

"Hush, not a word," Wilson broke in, "He's got ears like a gray hound. He hears things floating in the air that no one else can. But I won't say anything more now and you mustn't ask me for an explanation. There is a time coming, I hope."

"There is," said Tom, "if he turns out to be—but I won't say anything else, either. But Dr. Plum and the major seem to be good friends and the doctor is all right, I think."

"As good as they make them, my boy; but like a great many good men he can be taken in. But don't say a word. In some things Plum is as shrewd as a fox, and then he falls down. It seems to me that he shuts his eyes at the wrong time.

"But not a word. However, what was it you was going to say about Barton? Do you know anything about him?"

"I ought not to have said what I did. Won't you come to dinner with me?"

"No, don't believe I'm hungry enough to eat dinner at that hotel."

"It does require appetite, that's a fact."

"Not a word," Wilson again cautioned Tom as they went out; and when on the sidewalk he spoke up rather loudly: "Yes, I

reckon Barton is about the best man we have in this community. And sense? Why, he can give pointers to them all. Well, I'm going out into the country for a little pleasure trip and will see you when I come back."

During all that afternoon Tom mused as if trying to solve some problem; and at night when he went to bed, the pillow was hard.

CHAPTER IX

On the day following Major Barton was sitting in his real estate office when Tom entered. The great man frowned at first, but smoothing his countenance said in a soft voice: "Why, come right in. I was just thinking about you. Take that chair. Yes, I was thinking of the success you are making of the Gazette; but my young friend, there is one thing I must say to you. It is well enough to be pleasant and genial with every one, but we should choose our associates and especially should we wisely select our business co-workers."

"Well," said Tom, sitting down and waiting for the major to proceed.

"I have reference to that impudent fellow who works in the office—that old squatter's son."

"He is a friend of mine," Tom replied.

"A friend of yours!" Upon the visitor the major turned a searching eye. In it there were no soft lights; it was like high polish on granite. "A friend of yours. Don't you

think you could have made a better selection?"

"The best friends in this world are not selected, Major. They come by chance. Perhaps chance may not be the right word. But they come sometimes when we least expect them. I didn't take to that boy because I needed a friend."

"Well, why then?"

"Because he needed one."

"You'll get out of that way of thinking before you are as old as I am."

"But maybe not until I *am* as old as you are."

"Well, I want him discharged."

"*You* want him discharged! Have you a right to make such a demand?"

"Young man, the respect in which I am held, and the impudence with which he has treated me, entitle me to make the demand."

"Then you acknowledge that it is a demand."

"You have said so, sir."

"But I haven't said that I'll discharge him."

"Oh, you haven't? Then perhaps the paper may have a new editor."

"The plant, I understand, belongs to Dr. Plum."

"Ah, ha. And I have a mortgage on Plum. I could sell him out tomorrow. Along with your romantic attachments you might as well have some little judgment, you know."

For a time they sat in silence, and then the major searching Tom from head to foot inquired: "May I ask the object of this early call?"

"Oh, I just thought I'd drop in to see you. Inasmuch as the paper is gradually making land more valuable in this community I didn't know but I might be welcome."

"Ah, pretty well up for a fellow of your age."

"Men develop earlier now, you know, than they did when you came on."

"In want of respect for elders—yes."

"In many instances that is true, Major. But I hope that I am not wanting in respect when respect is due."

"Not due then, in this instance, I suppose."

"I didn't say that."

"I am glad then, that you have second thoughts; and now let me inquire if you are going to discharge that lout?"

"You mean Fletch? No, I'm not going to discharge him."

"Then Plum will tell you to get out of the office."

"He can't very well. We have gone into this thing by law; papers have been signed giving me absolute control for one year."

"But I tell you that I own Plum."

"You weren't there to assert your ownership of him when the papers were signed."

"Ah, you have some idea of affairs. And if properly directed you may become a success."

"If success depends upon turning against my friends, I don't want it."

"Good Sunday school talk, young fellow."

"No, it's the brotherhood of man talk." And after a pause he added: "Well, I'll bid you good morning."

"Wait a moment. Don't say anything to Plum about this conversation. Forget that it took place."

"If you don't mention it, I won't. But I want to tell you that when you attempt to force Fletch out of the office there'll be trouble."

"No threats, sir."

"Not a threat—simply a determination. Good morning."

Tom went out pondering, turning something over and over in his mind. "I don't want to make a mistake," he mused, "I want it to be an absolute cinch, but I believe he is the man."

On his way to the office he met Wilson. "My good young friend, how are you?"

"All right. I have just had a talk with our friend, the Major."

"Have you?" Wilson asked, turning to walk with Tom.

"Yes, quite an interesting talk."

"Did he say anything about me?"

"Not a word. By the way, do you know exactly where he came from?"

Glancing round Tom saw that Wilson was shaking his head. "No, I don't. And not a word of this to any one, but I have caught him in a few discrepancies as to his former places of residence. Do you know what I had to do yesterday? I had to force a man off a place that he had cleared up. The major had found a slight flaw in the title and put the law on him. It hurt me."

"Why did you do it?"

"Family, my boy—bread and butter. But one of these days I'll be—. Not a word. Good morning Mr. Clendenning, beautiful day." They had met a prominent citizen. "Saw you and your family at church the other night—your daughter is the most beautiful girl in town, sir." And passing on, Wilson continued: "The major's silent partner, and you must be careful what you say before him. I tell you, sir, this life is a tangled up affair. So you say the major didn't say anything about me."

"He didn't mention your name."

"He didn't? Then I am not of sufficient importance to be mentioned. All right. But one of these days he will mention my name, and it won't be to tell me to go out into the country to order some poor wretch off the land he has cleared. Say, you were speaking of organizing that lodge of Coming Men of America. Have you thought any more about it?"

"I am going to write something about it today—call a meeting to meet next Saturday night."

"All right; but don't forget the boys from Slim Prairie. They'll be on hand and we'll have trouble with them."

"I hope not."

"Hope's a good thing," said Wilson, "but in this instance I don't believe it will serve." And again he spoke up in a loud voice: "Yes, sir, Major Barton is not only one of the finest business men in this section of the country, but his generosity is like a thaw in the spring. I admit that I am figurative, but it is with the use of figures of speech that we get at the subtle truths of this life. Good morning, Mr. St. Clair. I can see by your countenance that you read the Gazette, especially since our young friend here began to edit it." And passing on, he added: "A wolf if there ever was one, but not a word."

"This town seems to consist largely of secrets," said Tom.

"True, sir; true. Whenever five men come together there are secrets. But don't tell anybody that I said so."

At the office door Wilson shook hands with Tom, wishing him a happy new year though the season was summer; and walked away with his head bowed, whistling his meditation.

Fletch was at his "case," slowly but surely picking up type. "Oh, I'm learnin' their

tricks," he said as Tom came in. "And I'm gettin' so I can read right peart—strike a snag every now and then, you know, but I don't hang up as long as I did. This here place is better than a school, ain't it?"

"In some respects, yes."

"A feller come along jest now," said Fletch, "and said he seed you in Barton's office a talkin' to him right out from the shoulder."

"Yes, we had rather a lively conversation," Tom replied, seating himself at the table to begin work.

"Reckon he said somethin' about me. But you needn't tell me what it was—I don't care. I'm not a feller to give much advice; I most always think he knows what's best for him, but if I was a givin' out that artickle I'd tell that blowhard not to fool with me too much. Say, two or three of the boys come around to tell you they wanted to join the lodge. I told 'em to go out and cut some right good hickory sticks—that we mout need sich things befo' we got through. But don't pay no 'tention to me—you're busy."

CHAPTER X

A call was printed in the Gazette, the night came, a number of persons assembled and Tom arose to address the meeting. Briefly he outlined the policy of the order and was rounding a patriotic period when there came a loud groan from the rear end of the room. He halted for a few moments and then proceeded. There came a cat call and then a howl in imitation of a wolf. "Gentlemen," said the speaker, "we have not come here to organize a menagerie, and as animals have not been invited, I request them to retire." He waited. There was no movement and no sound. In front sat Fletch and a number of the boys, gripping their hickory sticks. In the rear was a tough looking gang. Over by a window stood Wilson.

"Well, animals," said Tom, "if you have decided to remain, you must behave yourselves." He waited, and there came not a sound, but the moment he took up his appeal to patriotism there came from the rear an imitation of a cat fight. The people began

to laugh and Tom good humoredly remarked: "If there's an officer in the house I wish he'd put those cats out. They might scratch some one."

No one arose to assert the authority of the law and Tom waited until the cat fight had subsided. Then he resumed his address, when in the rear end of the house a dog fight began.

"It seems that we have quite an assortment of cats and dogs," said the speaker. "I will wait until the new war is over." The dogs ceased to fight, Tom began again, and then pigs began to squeal. "Let's git at 'em," said Fletch. We've stood about as much as we ought to."

"Wait," Tom replied.

"And now," the speaker continued, "having given the cats, dogs and hogs a chance, we reserve the right to attend to our own affairs."

Up arose a tall, gaunt fellow and whooped like an Indian.

"Ah," said Tom, "I see that we have savages along with the animals. But our forbearance has reached the limit, and I call

upon that aboriginee to take his cats, dogs and hogs out of here."

"Talkin' to me?" inquired the tall, gaunt fellow.

"Yes, talking to you."

"Wall, talk ag'in."

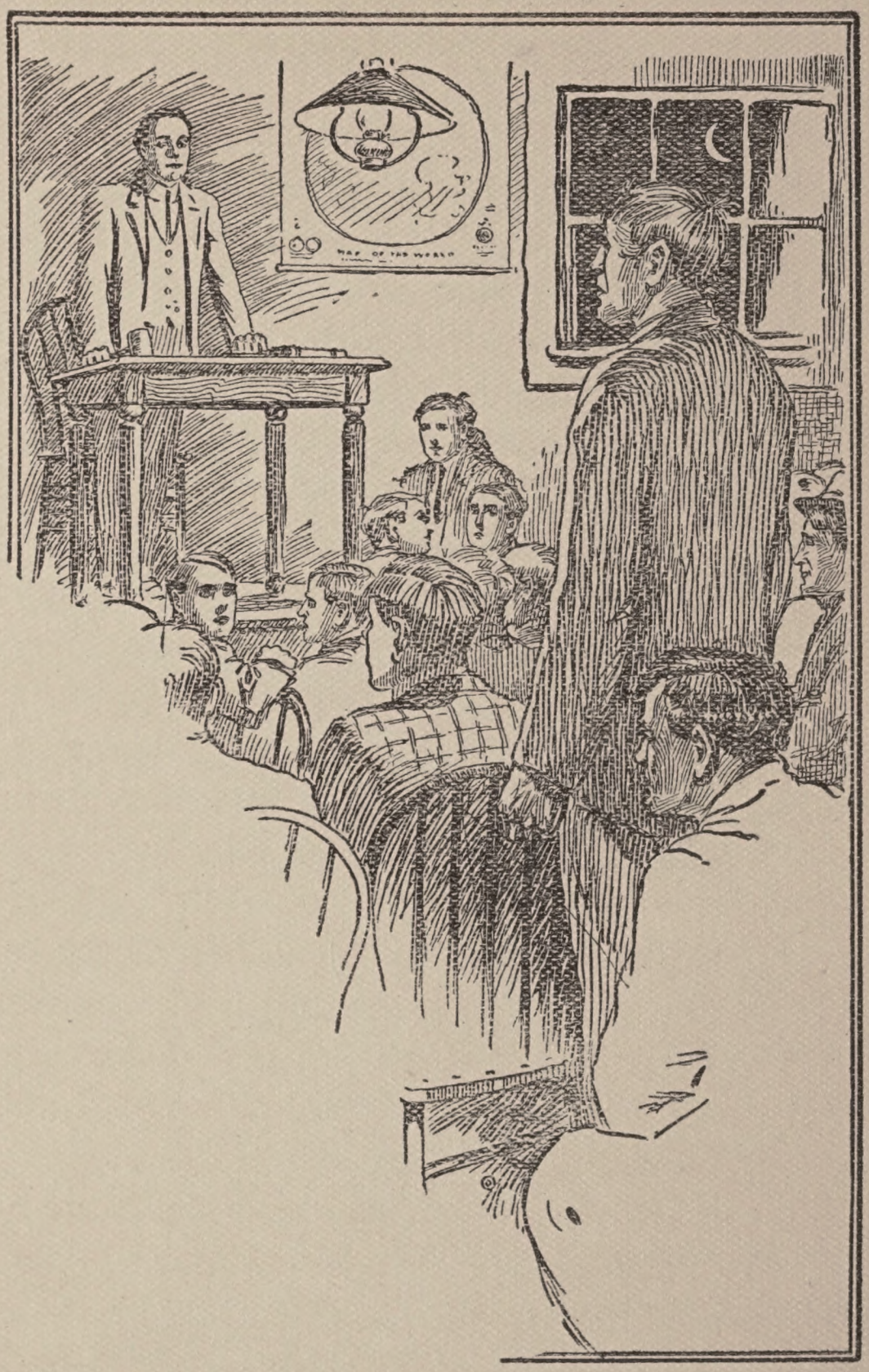
This raised a laugh. Tom waited and then said: "I'll talk again, and I won't stop at that. It's about time now to act. I see that there are about a dozen of you scoundrels—"

"Boys!" shouted the leader, "he calls us scoundrels."

"Yes," said Tom, "for as I haven't been introduced to you I must take up the most natural name."

From the rear of the house there was a rush toward the front, and up arose Fletch and his band. Tom jumped down among his friends. Wilson came forward from the window. The tall fellow did not halt. He was as resolute as if he had been at the head of a better cause. "You call me a dog?" he roared, rushing at Tom.

And then followed an example of modern athletics over brute force. With the ease of a graceful gesture Tom knocked him down.



"Talkin' to me?" inquired the tall, gaunt fellow.

He scrambled to his feet and again was sprawled out upon the floor. By this time Fletch and his men were in among the invaders. Wilson was seen to grab a short chap and throw him through a window. A panic arose. "They are going to shoot!" some one shouted, and a harmless shot was fired and the next instant a pistol was struck from a marauder's hand and an arm hung limp, broken. A lamp was smashed and the house caught fire. Then there was a wild and uproarious rush for the door. But the fighting continued. Five of the Slim Prairie boys were on the floor. "They will burn up!" some one cried. But Tom and Wilson subdued the fire. Then they returned to the fight. One fellow, short, broad, a gorilla in form and expression, whipped out his knife and made a lunge at Tom. Fletch struck him with his stick, but it bounced off his head as if it had come in contact with a stone. But Tom caught him under the chin and laid him out. By this time the house was cleared. The invaders terribly beaten, ran for their horses, those who could run, the others begged for mercy. Finally all was quiet and the lodge was organized.

The next morning Tom met Barton. "I have been thinking about that fellow Fletch," said the major, "and I guess you'd better keep him."

CHAPTER XI

Six months passed, and the lodge, established by determination, flourished from the first. Men, seeing that it was an American order, having for its object the moral and mental development of youth, encouraged their sons to join it.

One day while Tom was busy with going to press with his paper, Major Barton came in. "Don't let me interrupt you," he said in his soft and persuasive voice. He sat down, watched Tom for a time, and as Fletch and the printer were going out to dinner, the major remarked to Tom: "I'd like to see you for a moment, alone." Tom waited, and when alone with the major, said: "Well, they have gone. What can I do for you?"

"I have been thinking that your coming here was rather a good thing for the community. You have taught the Slim Prairie boys a lesson, and not since then have they gone on the war path." Tom stood waiting, knowing that something of more import was to follow.

"I thank you for your good opinion. But isn't there something else you wished to say?"

"Well, yes. It has occurred to me that it would be a good idea to join your institution. It might help me."

"It is not organized to help people that way—in business. We don't turn it to commercial account."

"Oh, not primarily, of course. Still, I believe I'll join."

"Major, I don't want to appear impertinent, but has any one intimated that you would be acceptable?"

"Why, what do you mean? Acceptable! Why, of course I am."

"You have over estimated yourself, Major. We don't want you."

"Young man, don't joke with me."

"It's no joke unless you intend to make it such. I will oppose your joining."

"Why, this is outrageous. And if you are in earnest I'll make you regret it."

"All right; but by this time you ought to know that threats don't go with me. And as you have made a few, I'll make one. If you attempt to join and are rejected, which will

"You have overestimated yourself, Major; we don't want you."

surely follow, I will publish the fact in the Gazette."

"You will, ha? Then open war is between us."

"Just as you please."

"No, let it go—amounts to nothing. I am still your friend."

"Then I beg your pardon for what I've said."

"Not at all, young fellow. We'll bury the hatchet. Be open and above board with me and I'll be the same with you. Good day."

That afternoon Dr. Plum called on Tom, took him into a dark corner of the back room and said: "My son, you know I'll do anything I can for you. Don't you?"

"Yes, Doctor. But what's up?"

"Don't stir up Barton too much. He's a bad enemy."

"Is he an enemy of yours, Doctor?"

"I think not, or at least he has no cause to be. Not long ago—telling you confidentially, you understand—I advanced him a sum of money."

"You did? Why, I thought he had a mortgage on—" and then remembering that he had given his word to Barton to say

nothing of the import of a conversation relative to the Doctor, he added: "Mortgage on nearly everything in town."

"He makes a pretty fair show, but he has no mortgage on me, I'm glad to say. It would be about like him to threaten you with expulsion from this printing office—to carry a point. But if he does, laugh at him. I could come nearer turning him into the street than he could putting you out of here. But everything considered he's not bad. There's a good deal of bluster about him, but I have reason to know that in business he's honest. I haven't told you the main object of my visit. I have been crediting you with everything in excess of interest on the purchase money of this office, and now I wish to say that you own a third interest paid up. Wait a moment. And now, if you want to buy the other two-thirds you may pay me whenever you get ready. Wait a minute. As you know, the sketches in your sheet are attracting attention away from home; the great dailies are reproducing them; notice is thereby directed to us; we grow in importance and population, and our road to statehood is made shorter and more certain. I

don't want you to thank me. This is business. Wait a minute. We are organizing the First National Bank of Blue Jay, with Major Barton as president. The article which you wrote on the necessity of railway communication is resulting in good—a company is being organized. Within a few years we may take off the buckskins of territory and put on the robes of state. Hope I am not too figurative for you."

"No; go ahead."

"Robes of state; and then, my young friend, you may see your way cleared for Congress. But don't antagonize Barton. It's true he is crotchety at times, but in business his head is as level as a floor. And if he wants to join your society let him in."

"Doctor, he may be all you paint him; he may be one of the best business men in the country, but he can't open our door."

"Very well; let it drop. You are now the owner of this paper—one of us, with your interests interwoven with ours. And your friend Fletch is getting to be a great news gatherer. Well, I'm off. Good day."

Fletch had learned so rapidly; with so firm and determined a grasp had he seized

the duties of his new life that he had been promoted to the position of reporter. His grammar was not strictly in line and his writing was pot-hooky and enormous, but he had what is termed a nose for news and could track a matter of interest as a hound follows the trail of a fox. He always stood near as Tom corrected his matter, and never forgot an important point. His spare time was devoted largely to reading—not the frivolous stuff that spurts from the press, but editorials written by thinkers, and stories with meat in them. He soon came to pick out graces of expression, and a well turned sentence or a bit of philosophy was a delight to him. For days he went about laughing over Falstaff. One would have thought that the greatest of all humorous creations had just been discovered.

"Don't let your reading kill your individuality," Tom one night remarked to him. "Don't permit yourself to be led away from naturalness."

"Well," said Fletch, "you are hittin' at me, but I don't know where you want to hit me. But I reckon I know what you mean. I am goin' to be the master of such things," he added, putting his hand on a book.

"You are all right, Fletch. And in your studies you have one great advantage—you take that which you believe will be the most useful to you. In after years you'll have nothing to unlearn. The self educated man, while about him there may always remain something unfinished, is strong because he has had to fight; he depends upon himself. Self reliance is the most powerful weapon ever given to man. And without it, a boy may have the highest education and yet stand helpless in the fight or be run over by the strong. Take Lincoln for your model. Your opportunities have been poor, but now they are rich compared with his."

"He had to split rails, didn't he?"

"Yes; and at night he studied by a brush-wood fire."

"Well, I can beat that. I've got a coal oil lamp. Did I tell you I'd hearn—heard from my dad?"

"No, have you?"

"Yes, he's gone into perlite society."

"You don't tell me?"

"I'm the one that is tellin' you. He went over in the Indian territory and got hold of a ferry boat and is runnin' it—gathers in as much as fifty cents some days."

"But you spoke of his being in society. Is is ferryman a social leader out in that part of the country?"

"Of course; for without him the folks couldn't git across the river. But I reckon when Barton hears that dad's got a boat he'll send over there and try to take it away from him. And he's got it in for you and me and we'll have to watch him. I hear a lot of folks sayin' he's a good man, with his soft talk and all that; but I'll bet you he's a wearin' of a sheep's skin."

Tom walked over to the window and as he came slowly back to his table, he said, as if thinking aloud: "If he should turn out to be the man I want."

"What did you say?"

"Oh, nothing—just musing."

"Well, when a feller's a musin' and ain't musin' about nothin' he's a musin' hard, I tell you. But you don't have to tell me a word more than you think you ought to."

"No, not until I am sure that it is right, Fletch." He walked over and put his hand on Fletch's shoulder. "I had a brother two years older than myself, as fine a fellow as you ever saw. I loved him—he was my de-

light. But not a word of this to any one. I have already said too much."

"All right—you ain't talkin' down a rain barrel for your words to come a rumblin' out again."

"You'll know all about it in time."

"All right, and when you need me, all you've got to do is to wink and I'll be there. What's this?" Tom handed him something. "Five dollars! You've already paid me for this week."

"Yes, but this is a bonus. Buy some books."

"No; reckon I've got more than I can read up for awhile. If it's jest the same to you I'll send it to dad and with it he can step a little higher up in society. He can buy himself a pair of gum boots and that will fix him. You don't care, do you?"

"Of course not. Send it to him."

Fletch stood with the bank note spread out on his case. "Blamed if it ain't almost as big as a hoss blanket," he said.

"It may in its time have served as even a thicker covering—may have kept some one from freezing to death."

"That's so. I reckon money is a pretty

good thing atter all. Befo' I met you I had nibbled at a nickel now and then, but you are the fust feller that ever let me take a big bite." Slowly he began to fold the note. "Ain't nobody that you want whipped, is there?"

"No; if I did I'd do the work."

"Yes, but didn't know but you might feel too busy. Say, this mornin' when I went out, it seemed that the sun was brighter than ever befo'."

"It was knowledge coming up over the hilltop of your mind, my boy."

"You can talk mo' like a preacher than any feller I ever seen. And you've got Jim Turner and Ike and the rest of 'em to thinkin' about somethin' else besides jokin'."

Barton halted in front of the door and looked in. But he did not enter—he passed on, and Tom fell into musing, walking up and down the room. And that night, when a dog on a distant hill was barking in the noon-tide of darkness, Fletch awoke and found his friend sitting at a table, dim in the misty lamp light, deeply musing. He had not even attempted to read, for near him there was no book or paper; he sat staring at

the floor, with his arm over the back of the chair. Long had he sat there. From the board sidewalks all footsteps had died away, and nowhere else was there a light, save in Charley's drugs store, the green eye of night in the lonesome dark.

"What's up?" Fletch asked, and Tom good naturedly answered: "I am."

"Anything wrong?"

"I'm thinking, that's all. Go to sleep."

CHAPTER XII

A brass band played in front of a small brick building. A crowd was gathered about, and in the street were ox teams, their drivers gazing, thrilled with the scream of the high horn and entranced with the grunt of the bass. On the building, white letters on white canvas, set forth this announcement: "These brick are home made and the men who planned and put up this magnificent institution are all of this town." It was the First National Bank of Blue Jay. The crowd called loudly for Major Barton, president. He came out upon the steps and made a speech. He congratulated the people of his town. "The headlight of civilization is now turned upon you, fellow citizens," said he. "This home of capital marks the epoch when you emerge from the back woods into commercial power; and my word for it, within five years we will represent a city of many thousand inhabitants."

At the outer edge of the crowd stood Tom, leaning against a tree.

"You have done your share in bringing this about," a neighbor said to him.

"I don't think so. A fellow that has no money can't do much toward making a nest for capital."

"Well, but your paper has had great influence. Didn't you suggest Barton for president?"

"No." Tom looked at the man and the man looked at him.

"But you don't believe they could have found a better man, do you?"

"I don't believe they could have found a more willing man."

"Well," replied the man with a truth that caused Tom to look into his eyes, "the most willing man is often the best."

"You are right, sir. Ah, I see Wilson up to speak."

Wilson delivered a highly-colored and fulsome address and when he concluded and came strolling slowly over to where Tom stood, he plucked the young editor by the sleeve, drew him off to one side and in a low tone remarked: "I hope that the Lord will forgive me for the lies I have told this day. See the people crowding up to put in their

money. After all, man has a great deal of confidence in man. But don't even hint that I said so."

"Why, is it a crime here to hold an opinion?"

"I'm not saying anything," Wilson answered with a wink. "But one of these days the people of this town will see something that wasn't planted and watered by a fairy queen. Going back to the office?"

"Yes. I must write something about this financial farce."

"Call it that and I'll give you my hat," said Wilson as he walked along with Tom.

Shortly after they reached the office, Barton, covered with the glory of the day, came into the room. "Ah," said he to the editor, "I didn't see you deposit any money with us."

"I reckon he's able to find use for all he's got," Fletch drawled, looking up from his work.

"Young fellow," Wilson spoke up, "that's no way to talk to a banker."

"Well, you see I ain't uster talkin' to 'em and don't know exactly how to go about it.

Bank! Ain't that the place where they lend money?"

"Yes," Tom answered, slily winking at Wilson. "That's what banks are for."

"That so," said Fletch, and then speaking to Barton he added: "When you go back I wish you'd count me out about a hundred."

"I wouldn't count you out a cent," Major Barton replied.

"No? Reckon you'd count me out of all I had."

"Sir," said Barton, turning to Tom, "how much longer are you going to permit that—that thing to insult me?"

"Be more careful, Fletch," Tom cautioned and the squatter's son humorously drew down the corners of his mouth. "All right. Don't know of a feller that is mo' willin' to be careful than I am. But you'll sorter have to bear with me, Mr. Banker. I was raised out where things was sorter loose j'inted."

"I don't care where you were raised," replied the major.

"Reckon not," Fletch grotesquely mouthed. "And you didn't care how short a time I lived there after I was raised."

"I bid you good-day," said the major, speaking to Wilson and Tom.

"Don't be snatched on my account," said Fletch as the major went out.

"You'd better watch your corners or he'll mix with you," remarked Wilson.

Fletch grinned and replied: "Well, when we do I reckon some of the color will be red."

That evening after supper Tom was walking alone out along a path skirting a piece of timber near town when he heard some one walking rapidly behind him. He halted, faced about and in the fading light recognized the man who had spoken to him at the edge of the crowd in front of the bank.

"Hope I don't intrude," remarked the man.

"Not at all."

"Thank you. My name is Collier. I know who you are, so we are acquainted. I'm a stranger here, and I understand that you haven't been here very long, so neither one of us has to enter into explanation. I always like it better when I don't have to explain," he added as they walked along together. "If all the time that has been given

to unnecessary explanation had been properly applied and the proceeds rightly invested, there would not now be a pauper on the face of the earth."

"That's the second emphasized truth you've told me today," said Tom.

"Thank you. And truth is not wasted upon the young. If we must lie let us lie to the aged for the old man is not so much deceived by falsehood."

"But when we feel that it is necessary to lie wouldn't it be better to keep silent?"

"In theory, perhaps; but in its own defense virtue may employ an untruth."

"I'm afraid you are getting a little too deep for me," said Tom, looking round at his companion, now shadowy in the deepening dusk. "May I inquire as to what business you follow?"

"Well, you may term me a reformed rake. With an inherited fortune I blunted my energies, weakened my constitution and have come out here to regret the past."

"Wouldn't it be better to shape the future?"

"Yes, but without cloth we can't fashion a garment. The future is not within my grasp."

"But it is to come and the past is forever gone."

"Young fellow, you are a sort of a prodigy. You make me think. Let us sit down here on this log."

Long they sat there talking. The moon came up, dew sparkled on the stubbed grass, and when they arose to go, their hands were clasped. And for a long time during the walk back to town, they were silent, but just before they parted Collier said: "It is of no use to tell you to be discreet."

"No. I realize that a single word might spoil it all."

"And do as I tell you—cultivate him."

"I will. Everything must be complete before we act."

"Yes, and when it is, we will act swiftly. Tomorrow I will deposit three hundred dollars."

"And we must not appear together very often. Suspicion has a thousand eyes, you know. Good night."

CHAPTER XIII

At midnight, two weeks later, the town was startled by a terrific explosion. Into the streets the people poured. The night was dark and a heavy rain was falling. No one knew which way to turn. Finally arose the cry that the bank had been blown up. Then there was a rush to the scene of disaster. The report was true.

The brick house was demolished. The people stood about as if nervously waiting for another shock. A buggy was furiously driven out to the house of President Barton, but he was not at home. The driver came back with the information that together with Dr. Plum and Mr. Wilson, the major had gone to inspect a proposed investment in a little town about twenty miles away. It was noon of the next day before the party returned.

"Don't take on so," said Plum, putting his hand on Barton's shoulder as together they stood viewing the ruins. At a respectful distance stood a group of men. They entered

deeply into sympathy with the major. A touch of financial bereavement makes the whole community kin. "Don't take on so," the doctor repeated.

"Plum, we are ruined."

"Oh, it's bad but not that bad. We'll build again. How much is the loss, all told?"

"Twenty thousand, at least."

"Well, it's no use to grieve. Now let's see if we can catch the robbers."

The town marshal came forward with a clew. And as if the explosion had taken place at different times, in sections, he declared that he was first to hear it. He was awake at the time, eating a bit of wild turkey that had been sent to him by one of his many admirers. Suddenly a bone which he was about to raise to his mouth fell from his hand, a decided proof that something had happened. The house shook and this confirmed his suspicion. Then came the noise and there could be no further doubt. He ran out into the street and sniffed the smoke of gun powder. His first thought was of the bank. To the average town marshal the bank is the holy of holies, and this marshal reached the spot before the bricks were done falling.

"Don't take on so," said Plum, putting his hand on Barton's shoulder.

"But did you see anyone?" the doctor inquired.

The marshall put his finger to his nose. "I have my suspicions, sir," he said.

"But did you see anyone?"

"I thought I saw three men in the dark."

"Ah, dressed in black I suppose," remarked Wilson.

The marshal, keenly alive to the financial depression of Mr. Wilson, looked at him with contempt. "Of course. Everything was black."

"Did the three men introduce themselves?" asked the doctor.

"Please don't confuse him," Barton sadly spoke up, wiping his red eyes.

"Of course," replied the marshal. "They introduced themselves and asked how the graveyard was getting along since so many doctors had come into the neighborhood."

The doctor raised his cane but Barton caught his arm. "Let us have no trouble, Doctor. If you saw the men, Marshal, why didn't you shoot at them?"

"I didn't have my pistol."

"So much turkey grease on his fingers that the pistol slipped out of his hand, I guess," said the doctor.

"Please, don't confuse him," insisted the major. "Why didn't you follow them when they ran away?"

"They scattered and I didn't know which one to follow and by the time I decided they were all gone. But I'll get 'em yet, see if I don't."

"Yes, we'll see that you don't," said the doctor.

"Well, don't be so sure about that," the marshal replied, slowly shaking his head. "I know my business, I'll inform you. No robber ever got away from me yet."

"Never had one, did you?"

"Doc, now what you want to come talkin' that way for? I never done you no harm."

"Oh, I hope you will catch them."

A posse was organized and the robber hunt was begun. Men on horses galloped over the surrounding hills, and men on foot peeped about in the forest. But the days passed and still no trail was struck.

One night when Fletch was asleep, Collier came into Tom's room. He was met as if by appointment. "What do you think?" Tom inquired as the visitor sat down.

"Somehow I can't think. I guess it was a

genuine robbery. Barton is hard pressed for money—sold a piece of land for little more than half of its real value, and I think he is really grief stricken. What do you think?"

"I'm like you. Some one has suggested that those Slim Prairie boys might have had something to do with it."

"There isn't any proof of it."

Then came a voice from the bed. "Oh, Barton robbed it all right enough."

"Here, Fletch, you mustn't talk that way," said Tom. "If you think so, keep it to yourself."

"You are wild this time," Collier remarked to Fletch. "Even a robber may be robbed, you know."

"Yes," drawled Fletch, "but he ain't as likely to be as the other feller."

"Yes, that's true enough. But don't say a word."

"I ain't talkin'," said Fletch, turning over.

The next day while Barton was sitting in his office, Tom came to the door. The great man arose with a sad air and invited him to enter. Tom went in, sat down, and for a time neither of them spoke a word. Finally the major remarked: "Your affairs are prospering, I am pleased to observe."

"I am doing very well, thank you."

"It is pleasant to know that some one is doing well. I have been set back I can't tell how many years. It is not only the loss of the money but the manner of losing it; it has taken the spirit out of me."

"But I understand that the people have generously come forward and assured the stock holders that they will not be compelled to make good the loss."

"Yes, they have done that, still that does not give me back my spirit."

"But there is one thing that ought to give you nerve—the determination that ultimately you will make good the losses."

"Young man, you are right. And sir, right now you have given me more nerve than everybody combined. By the way, who is that man Collier?"

"A representative of a Michigan lumber company."

"I haven't heard that he has made any investments. Has he?"

"He has been looking at pine boards but I don't think that anything definite has come of it. He appears to be all right."

"Yes," said the major, slowly shaking his

head, "but in this conniving and deceitful old world you can never tell."

"Wasn't he one of your depositors?"

"Deposited a few hundred dollars but checked out a few days afterward. Well, I suppose," he added, "that in a new country we are always inclined to cast a suspicious eye on the newcomer. And although you were received kindly when you came, yet in spite of your youth, there were people who were curious. They wanted to know where you were from and all about your business. I myself have been a little slow to accept you —that is, I didn't show it, perhaps, but, er— well, you understand."

"I hope your mind is now thoroughly at rest concerning me."

"Yes. You have sometimes antagonized me, it is true, but that went to prove that you weren't trying to curry favor with me."

"I was not blind to the fact that you were perhaps the most important man in the community, and it may be that on this account I was rude, a stranger, moneyless and yet proud enough not to be humble."

"Very good, I assure you. And I don't see why we should not become more closely

related in business. I need your intelligence and your quickness."

"We may come to some understanding. But I called this morning with regard to news concerning the rebuilding of the bank. Is the work to begin soon?"

"To-day, and within a short time we will resume business. You know the situation and may print what you please. But I'd like to make one request of you. Don't associate with that fellow Collier. I may be wrong, but I believe he will get you into trouble."

"All right."

When Tom went to the office he sent the following note to Collier: "We must keep apart. Don't come to see me even at night. When we meet, it must be in the woods, at our log where we talked that time—and always of a dark night. I will be there to-night. It might be well to agree upon some signal for an extra session."

The new bank building was soon completed and again the brass band played in the street, but a man and a young fellow who since the first opening had come to know each other well did not meet by accident at the edge of the crowd. Tom there heard the

speech of the president. Again Wilson set off his squibbling fireworks, and again, seeking Tom he whispered: "I hope that the Lord will forgive me for the lies I have told this day."

When Tom returned to the office he found the following note from Collier: "I think the scheme you suggested last night is a good one. Select the most intelligent woman of your acquaintance and pay court to her, but never be entrapped into telling her anything. She will be of use to us."

In the town lived a Mrs. Mayhew, a widow, young and handsome. She kept house for her brother, a sluggish dealer in cattle but hospitable and rather fond of entertaining. In the Gazette appeared a complimentary write-up of his enterprise and his worth to the community, and his house was thrown open to the editor. He cared no more for paper freshly printed than for scraps of paper blown about the street; a book was no more to him than a block, but flattery stirred his vanity.

"We must have that young fellow in the house after this," he said.

"Have him in the house?" his sister queried, "What do you mean?"

"Let him come here."

"Oh, you mean invite him?"

"Yes. I guess he's all right."

"I thought you didn't like him."

"Didn't at first but I understand he's all right." The woman laughed and one evening not long afterward when Tom sat in her parlor, she looked at him and wondered how any one could ever have thought that he was not all right.

"Don't you think Major Barton is a charming man?" she asked archly, giving him a look that she doubtless knew must be fetching.

"Yes, an honor to any society."

"And he is a widower," she laughed.

"Which makes him still more wonderful. How can he resist?"

"Oh, you are trying to tease me."

"We admire roses, madam, but don't try to tease them."

"Very good, but sometimes we pick them to pieces."

"Not often, unless they have begun to wilt and—you haven't."

"Oh, what an engaging boy you are. Why aren't you older?"

In the town lived a Mrs. Mayhew, a widow, young and handsome.

"It might in this instance be a misfortune. You wouldn't be so frank with me."

"I believe you are older."

"Older than what?"

"Than what you look. But tell me something about Major Barton. I am immensely interested in him."

"I can well believe it."

"Oh, not in the way you think. But he is so deep and I am always charmed with wisdom. Does he read much?"

"Reads up the records of men who want to borrow money, I suppose."

"But doesn't he read poetry? Oh, how I dote on poetry. My father was a poet—wrote a whole lot of poetry to my mother."

"The safest poetry a man could write is to his wife, I should think."

"Oh, what a tease you are. But won't you find out all you can about the major and tell me? And you won't find it strange if I ask you to find out something else, will you?"

"Certainly not. Any commission from you will be perfectly natural."

"Well, find out what he—he thinks of me."

"I will."

"What, must you go now?" she asked as he arose. "Well, I am ever so glad that you came and I do hope you will come often. Good-bye."

On a log in the dark sat Collier and Tom. "I spoke of selecting an intelligent woman," said Collier, "but I think this one just foolish enough to serve our purpose. She doesn't care anything for Barton you know; simply wants to shine in this crude little social world. When are you going to call again?"

"Before long. And in the mean time I must find out something to tell her. Won't do, you know, to thrash over the same old straw. We must keep her appetite whetted by slight feeding. And when the time comes, the coup will take place at her house."

"That is, if all our work hasn't been done for nothing—if all our surmises have not been false. Sometimes I doubt and then again I am almost convinced that he is the man. And if along with the other we could only fasten this bank robbery on him it would give this town a delightful shock. I believe I told you that our agency has a young fellow now acting as cashier of the

bank. Well, he is as shrewd as they make 'em, and will keep his eyes open. I know it's hard to give yourself up to the practice of deceit, but if ever a man had cause you have. Get as deep into his friendship as you can. Explain as little as you can to Fletch and let him do some of the cultivating."

"I have taken him into complete fellowship. He knows all about it."

"Well, he's all right. Have him honey around the major. Suppose we go."

CHAPTER XIV

The next morning while Fletch was sauntering along the street he halted at the door of the major's office. "Got a right nice place in here," he said.

The major looked up and grunted something. Fletch continued. "I reckon I've been a little brash with you. Tom told me so and I began to think about it last night and before I drapped off to sleep I was right sorry."

"Well, I am glad to hear that, any how. You haven't done yourself any good in insulting me."

"No, suh, that's a fact. It made me sorry, and a feller ain't done himself good when he's sorry, but when he is sorry it shows that he intends to do better."

"Very true, young man. Won't you come in?"

"Don't mind if I do for a minit or so." He slouched into the room and sat down. "Been a thinkin' a good deal and I don't hold you to blame for dad's movin'. Nothin' could keep him long in the same place."

"And besides, I paid him for his land," said the major.

Fletch knew this to be a lie, but he said: "All it was wuth, too, I reckon. So, we won't say nothin' more about it. By the way, I guess I'm the best jedge of a woman you ever come across."

"Yes?" queried the major, smiling at him. "What put that into your head?"

"I reckon it was because jest now I seed a hummer. I went into a store and there she stood a buyin' of a blue ribbon because she had tuck the premium, I reckon; and I whispered to the clerk that I'd like to have a knockin' down to her, an' he laughed, he did, and introduced me; and when she turned around and smiled I jest said to a feller standing there, I says, 'Jest hold my hat a minit and blamed if I don't dance a jig right here.' The name of this woman is Mrs. Mayhew, and when I drapped into talk with her and happened to mention your name, her eye shined like a star and I 'lows to myself, I does, 'hanged if the major hain't cotch her.' That's what I 'lows."

"Ah, go on, you rascal," said the major laughing. "But how did you happen to speak of me just at that moment?"

Wall, I told her that if she belonged to me I'd take her up and put her in your bank to keep some feller from stealin' her, and she laughed and says, she does, 'wall, I reckon if any body wanted me he could blow up the bank and take me away,' and I says, 'much obleeged for the information and the smile. Good day.' "

"Fletch, you are a genius in your way—there's no getting around that fact."

"Wall, I ain't been right good all my life but I didn't know that I was a genius. But give me a chance and I may git over it. Say, you ain't said what you think of that hummer"

"Oh, Mrs. Mayhew? Present my compliments the next time you see her."

"All right. And I want to present you mine right now for bein' so friendly with me. I may be of some use to you, understand. You never kin tell how fur a frog kin jump by lookin' at him. Well, I must drap round to work."

Fletch came smiling into the printing office. "I reckon I've got him sorter foul," he said to Tom who sat at his desk. I tell

you, pour sorghum molasses on the top of a feller's head and he sticks out his tongue."

"That's right," Tom replied. "A man who's weak enough to be dishonest is usually weak enough to be vain. I have just heard an important piece of news. They say that the Slim Prairie boys have become so much enraged at the report that they must have had something to do with the blowing up of the bank that they have invited several of their relatives from Missouri and are going to make a raid on the town."

"Who was a tellin' you all this?"

"Jim Turner. He usually finds out every thing. He has just come from over there and is now going about, urging the citizens to arm themselves. There are two guns over there in the corner and Wilson has gone out after more"

"Well," said Fletch, "I have seen a few fellers gallop through a place and make it look like an old bed quilt."

Just then Wilson came in with two Winchesters. "Here we are," said he, standing the guns against the wall.

"Do you really believe those fellows have the nerve to do that?" Tom inquired.

"Men who have no sense have nerve enough to do anything," Wilson replied. "They'll take liquor to brace themselves against the possibility of all fear and then—"

At this moment there arose a wild yell and the firing of guns in the street. Men ran in every direction and the door of the bank was slammed and locked. The court house bell was rung furiously.

Tom quietly closed the door of his office and took up a gun. "I don't want to kill any one," he remarked, "but I don't want to be killed. It may be all a bluff."

"Gone too far to be a bluff," said Fletch, peeping through the window. "Listen how they are popin' away. Look, there's a man down in the street. Fellers, we're going to have some fun right here."

And now toward the printing office the marauders dashed, firing as they came. A volley was poured from within and two saddles were emptied and two horses galloped away. This was the first check that the scoundrels had met. Across the street a window was thrown up, a gun that looked like a blunderbuss was thrust through; there came a bellow like a cannon and another

horse galloped away, riderless. Whisky, not apt in calculation, had not counted on such resentment, and now began a general flight. Out of the town the remnant of the gang swept, with guns roaring behind them. And after they were gone, it seemed that every man who had a gun fired it into the street. When at last it was safe to take deliberate action, the citizens issued forth and held an indignation meeting. A number of cattlemen sprang upon their horses and gave pursuit. The dead invaders were given over to the village undertaker. They had been killed outright. The town marshal came up, a candidate for congratulation and praise. He affirmed that the work of extermination had been done by him. In proof of it he exhibited a pistol which he termed a swamp angel. Boys followed him about the town.

Just before nightfall one of the cattlemen returned with information that the outlaws had taken refuge in an old deserted fort about ten miles distant. He said that without cannon it would be impossible to dislodge them. From a boy he had learned the following: The reckless gang had stored the place with provisions, as if they had ex-

pected a seige. The fort was on the hill, with but little timber about it, and to take it by assault would cost many lives. And to starve them out would require many weeks.

The martial spirit was aroused and before morning a company of men had been organized. Tom was elected Captain. He knew something of the military art, having distinguished himself at a competitive drill, given at a state fair. Naturally he was proud of his new distinction. He did not permit his men to go home, but quartered them in the court house. By sunrise the command was ready to march.

CHAPTER XV.

The drums that beat at Louisburg and thundered at Quebec did not inspire the tread of this little army. There was no fife, no music, not even a whistle; but there was determination: for the American though called a lover of peace, is after all the most natural and adaptable soldier in the world. He may not know a word of command, but the moment he takes up a gun he is a warrior.

At a safe distance the cattlemen had the fort surrounded. Two of their number, more adventurous than the rest, had been severely wounded. The leader, a whooping cow-boy, had advocated galloping over the breast works but was ruled down by numbers and discretion. As Tom's army advanced a volley was fired from the fort, but the range was great and no harm was done.

"It is a piece of good advice," said Tom. "They give us to understand that it won't be well to get up much closer. About all we can do is to hold them here until we get a piece of artillery from Fort Smith."

"And even then it will take some time," remarked an old soldier. "Those walls are about eight feet thick, built of stone with earth on the outside. It was constructed in the early days and was put there to stay."

"I never heard of as foolish a thing," Wilson declared. "Do those yaps think they can stay in that fort and whip the entire country?"

"Men that are foolish enough to fight without cause are likely to believe most anything," the old soldier replied.

"Look out, boys," said Tom. "They are using longer range guns. They've got a Mauser, I believe. Fletch, get behind that tree."

"But I want to see what's goin' on, Cap'n."

"But there isn't anything going on. Hear that ping? It's a Mauser sure enough. Wilson, how long will it take to get a cannon from Fort Smith?"

"A week, may be. The roads are not good you know."

"But this won't do."

"You are commander," some one spoke up.

"I know. And now let's see if they'll honor a flag of truce."

Fletch volunteered to carry the flag and in the name of the law to demand the surrender of the fort, but the moment he started toward the enemy, with a white handkerchief on the end of a stick, he was fired upon, and Tom commanded him to return.

"Them fellers aint got as much politeness as a deck hand on a steam boat," said the squatter's son.

"They don't intend to surrender, that's plain enough," said Wilson. And then, looking about he added: "Helloa, here's the town marshal."

The marshal whose name was Swinge, came up, dodging from one tree to another. "Ain't you got 'em yet?" he inquired.

"Got 'em all right but they don't belong to us," Fletch answered. "But maybe you've got a better claim on 'em than we have. If so, help yourself to 'em. We ain't greedy."

"I should think it would be a good idee to charge 'em," said the marshal, speaking to Tom.

"We'll charge 'em for everything they git," Fletch spoke up.

"I ain't a talking' to you," Marshal Swinge retorted.

"But I'm talking to you. And when you feel like chargin' 'em I reckon the Capt'n there will let you. But git out there and show yourself and mebby they'll surrender. Don't see how they kin hold out after they find you are here."

"Captain," said the marshal, "I should think you'd have better control over your men."

"Control! Don't you see how good it is? I'm holding them back all right."

"Well, now here," declared the marshal, "this ain't no jokin matter. I look on it as serious."

"Do you? Glad you are so thoughtful. Say, Web," Tom added, speaking to a red haired fellow, "haven't you been at work over on the new railroad?"

"Yes, worked there till I got all I wanted of it."

"Haven't they got some dynamite cartridges over there—the sort that will explode by concussion?"

"Yes, they've got all sorts."

"Well, strike out over there as fast as you can and bring me three or four."

"But how are you goin' to git 'em into the fort?"

"Never mind, you go and bring them."

We's started off and Tom addressed Jim Turner. "Go back to town and bring me all the toy balloons the fellow has there on the corner."

"Hah," Wilson exclaimed, "I begin to perceive the workings of your military genius."

"And a big ball of twine, Jim," Tom added.

"I think I can see how this campaign is going to end," said Wilson, drawing his head back behind a stump as a Mauser bullet tinged past him. "You are going to fly those balloons like a kite and drop the dynamite over into the fort. But say, why not use a kite?"

"It wouldn't do."

"I don't see why."

"With a kite there would be no way of dropping the dynamite."

"But how are you going to do it with a balloon?"

Why, when the balloons—it will take several of those toy things—are above the fort the Slim Prairie boys will shoot at them for their own amusement, down will come

the cartridge—and an explosion which they have caused to come upon themselves."

"Well, sir," spoke up the town marshal, spread out flat behind a tree, "I thought of that plan myself. I carried it into execution once when I was down on the Mexican border with the rangers."

"I'll bet you did," said Fletch, holding himself to keep from laughing. "And say, wasn't you with Sampson when he tied firebrands to the tails of the foxes and burnt up the wheat?"

"You talking to me?" the marshal inquired with his mouth pressed down close in the short grass, for a bullet had just hummed a tune above him. "Talkin' to me?"

"Yes, come to think about it I believe I am."

"Well, you want to be a leetle more careful. I won't be made fun of by a yahoo like you. Now you fellers may laugh all you want to but I don't see nothin' funny in it. Whenever this scarecrow says anything, particularly when it ain't true, you fellers have to laugh. And I want to tell you I won't have it."

"I reckon you've already got it," said Fletch.

"Yes, and I'll have it out with you when this thing's over."

"You can have it out now if you say the word. Fool with me and I'll grab you and drag you up the hill."

"Look out, don't you put your hands on me."

"Oh, I'll do it in a minit," Fletch declared. "You called me a scare-crow. I guess that's right, and you are the first crow I'm goin' to skeer, and if you don't take back what you said I'll drag you out from behind that tree and give that Mauser man a whack at you. What do I hear? Do you apologize?"

"Well, perhaps I oughtn't to have said it."

"Don't want any perhapses. Take it back."

"All right, rather than have trouble I do take it back. I don't want any trouble with a boy."

"And now I want you to acknowledge that you was lyin' when you said you had sent up dynamite in baloons when you was with the rangers."

The men were laughing. Tom was rolling on the ground. All order was forgotten. "Say, young fellow," the marshal protested, "you are comin' it a little too strong."

"That's all right, acknowledge it or I'll pull your leg round from behind that tree and have it shot off. What do you say?"

"Well,—say did I tell you about my brother Dave? He was a wonder—twin brother of mine, and we looked so much alike that when one of us done a thing sometimes we didn't know which one it was, and come to think of it, I believe it was Dave that scouted with the rangers. Yes, it was Dave; I am sure of it. Now what are you fellers laughin' at? Can't twin brothers look like each other?"

"Boys," said Tom, "don't forget why we are here. Look out! I wonder how much more amunition that Mauser man has about him. I think they've got whiskey as well. If they hadn't they wouldn't be wasting their amunition. Listen, they are singing. We'll put in a bass note after a while."

The day wore away and along toward night the boy came with the balloons. The camp of the railroad builders was further away and it was not expected that Web would get back before sunrise. Fires could not be kindled, for fear of the Mauser. The men lay flat on the ground, with their guns

within reach, ready to repel a rush from the fort. On the other side were the cattle men, with the wings of the two divisions joining. The evening was cloudy but the moon came out at last, a better protection against attack than would have been a hundred more sentinels. The men took turns about sleeping. With humorous arrangement on the part of Tom, Fletch and the marshal were to relieve each other.

"You'll make one of the best watchmen in the camp," said Fletch.

"I'm glad you are at last beginning to appreciate my worth," the marshal replied.

"That's all right. You'll make the best watchman because you're afraid to go to sleep."

"Now, you be blowed, young feller. I'm no more afraid than you are; I'll give you to understand that."

"Oh, I understood it before you give it to me. How did you happen to get this place as marshal?"

"Major Barton recognized my worth and had me appointed."

"I reckon you've knowed him a good while, havn't you?"

"Yes, I used to work for him before he come here."

"Where was it? He lived somewhere in Arkansas didn't he?"

"Yes, came mighty nigh being governor of the state. Could have been if he hadn't been too honest for politics. But you don't like him, do you?"

"Didn't at first, but now I swear by him. Don't swear very often as I've sorter quit cussin', but when I do swear I swear by him. Do you reckon they'll ever ketch the fellers that robbed the bank?"

"I hope so."

"Do you? I mean, so do I. And I reckon them fellers up there in the fort know somethin' about it."

"I'll bet they do, too. That leader is a bad man; uster rob trains in Missouri. His name is Bud Clive. Come mighty near shootin' him once."

"Did you fire back over your shoulder?"

"Look here—"

"So dark it's no use to look."

"That's all right. What I was goin' to say is this: I never can tell whether you are joshin' me or not. What sort of a fellow are

you, any way? Don't you ever get serious? One of these days somebody'll take a fall outen you, I'll tell you that. Everybody ain't as kind hearted as we are and won't stand as much."

"That so? Say, do you ricollect ever meeting me before I come here?"

"No, I met you soon enough when you did come. Glad I didn't meet you before."

"But you did. Don't you ricollect over at a store on the Arkansas river one day a feller come in with a coon skin and a feller and a yaller haired chap got smart and got to pickin' on him? Don't you? And if you'll put your mind down on it you'll ricollect that this feller knocked down the yeller haired chap and stuffed his mouth full of coon skin. Wall, I was the feller and the yaller hair was your brother and he didn't look like you, either. I guess you became twins after that. Well, I'm goin' to sleep now."

Fletch dozed off and was dreaming of the adventurous past, of his cabin in the big timber, of his old coon dog, when the marshal shook him. "Say," said Swinge, "I think I see somebody crawling down the hill. Look yander."

Fletch raised up, rubbing his eyes. "I don't see anything."

"Well, I do, as sure as you live, and I think we better be gittin' away from here."

"Yes, now I see," said Fletch. "It's that fellow with the Mauser. It don't tote a bullet any bigger than a pea, and you are plenty big to stand a little thing like that."

"Don't talk that way, I'm not well. I've had a headache all day. I wonder if the captain would care if I sorter crawled off there."

"We'll ask him after you have done it," said Fletch.

"But," persisted the coward, "I don't belong to the army any way. I hadn't thought of that."

"You may not have belonged to it at first but you do now," said Fletch, "and if you crawl away 't will be my duty to shoot you as a deserter."

"Would you do such a thing?"

"I'd have to. If I didn't they'd have me shot."

"Oh, that thing out there is only a hog. to run away. You bet I'll stand as long as

Hah, I knew it all the time and wasn't goin' the next man."

"Yes, behind a tree," said Fletch.

"Look here, you are tryin' to hatch out trouble. Hush, what was that noise out there in the bushes? Don't you hear it?"

"Yes, I did. I believe its some feller tryin' to slip round here to stab one of us. Thought I saw a knife shine."

The marshal's teeth began to chatter. "If you're cold I'll lend you my coat," said the squatter's son.

"Oh, it's the cap'n," the marshal declared with a sigh of relief. "How is everything, Cap?"

"All right so far as I know. Is that a fire away over yonder or the sun coming up? Yes, the sun, for it's day-light." And shortly afterward, still gazing toward the east, he added: "I believe I see Web coming. And if it is, boys, something is going to happen."

CHAPTER XVI

Web arrived with two dynamite cartridges, carrying one in each hand, walking slowly and with exceeding care along the road. He was greeted with a huzzah, and it was answered by a derisive yell from the fort. A stiff breeze was blowing, and the engineer of the explosive enterprise deemed it as most fortunate as the wind would fly his cluster of balloons directly over the heads of the enemy. It was arranged that in order to draw the outlaws' attention, a detachment of the militia should join the cattlemen and open fire. Otherwise there arose the extreme danger of having the balloons prematurely punctured by bullets from the fort and thus drop the dynamite down among the originators of the plan of attack. Just as the men were moving off a buggy came within sight, but it soon turned aside as the Mauser man brought his long-reaching arm to bear upon it. The vehicle tore off into the woods and shortly afterward Major Barton made his appearance, slowly picking his way from one sheltering tree to another.

"Why," he said to Tom, "I thought you boy's had them all eaten up by this time?"

"Ah," Tom replied, "and if you haven't had breakfast we invite you to help yourself."

"No, thank you, I have eaten. I tell you what, they are well provided. Why, you'll have to pound them out with cannon. Helloa, what have you here?"

Tom explained, as he stood arranging his balloons, and the Major's eyes opened wide. "Well," said he, "when you get through with your military operations you can make fame and fortune as an inventor. I never would have hit upon such a plan."

"Yes," drawled Fletch, "and if we don't watch out them fellers will shoot out the balloons above us and drop the medicine where it ain't wanted."

"That's a fact!" the major exclaimed. "And, gentlemen, I wish you good morning."

He picked his way back to the buggy and drove off to town.

The balloons to which the heavy cartridge was attached mounted slowly, just as a fusilade broke loose on the opposite side of the

fort. The pretense of a determined attack was a complete success. Not a shot was fired at the balloons, and at last they hovered above the fort. Suddenly it was discovered that they were slowly descending. "That won't do," said Tom. "They'll break off our string, rig up a contrivance of their own and send the things back here with a message we may not relish. Here, ten of your best shots. Ready, aim, fire!"

The balloons disappeared in mid air—and then—then came a terrific explosion. With a yell the malitia men rushed up the hill. Dirt was still raining and huge stones were rolling on the ground. The dynamite had struck squarely upon the wall, opposite from the side where the outlaws were gathered, and thus a bloody slaughter was averted. The rascals were now sober, and so frightened that they made no attempt to defend themselves. One of them tore off his shirt and waved it as a sign of unconditional surrender.

"Don't shoot them," Tom commanded.

When the militia entered the breech, it was found that not a hand was raised in opposition. Some of the poor fools were strug-

"The drop's yourn. We give in."

gling to free themselves from the earth that had been heaped upon them. The leader came forward, both hands up, and said:

"The drop's yourn. We give in."

A number of them had been bruised but none killed. Their hands were tied behind them and triumphantly they were marched to town. The brass band met the returning "army," and snorted the break-downs and rag-time tunes of victory. The prisoners, eighteen in number, were lodged in the county jail. The grand jury assembled, indictments were returned, and before the day was done the Slim Prairie boys and their friends from Missouri were on their way to the penitentiary.

That night a man stood on a pile of bricks making a speech, "I am one of the few who have saved this community," he said. The orator was the town marshall. "And what do I ask in return? Nothing except the good will of all. And I hope that you will not believe those who are jealous of me and who may speak evil of my name. And in the meantime, fellow citizens, if you elect me to a higher office, I promise to serve you without fear."

"I'll pull the coward down," said Fletch but Tom took hold of his arm.

"No," he whispered. "Remember that it is our present policy to cultivate the good will of rascals. But our time is coming."

The hour was late and Tom sat alone, on a log in the woods. He held up his watch to catch the light of the moon. "I wonder what is keeping him," he mused. A long time passed and he arose to walk about for exercise. Suddenly he halted and listened. He fancied that he heard a moan. Or was it mere fancy. No, it was not fancy. Distinctly he heard moaning and it seemed to come from the ground, beneath his feet. The woods were dark, in places the ground was rough and he must needs move about cautiously. Listening, standing almost breathless, he heard the moan again, and it seemed to be further off. He cried out, "Who's there!" But there came no answer. Surely it could not be long until day. The dark flush of dawn already lay in the east. Again came the moan, from the left, and in that direction slowly he moved. Again it came, and slightly he changed his course, and now he stood at the brink of a pit, peering down

into its black depths. Then came the moan, stronger. Some one was in the black hole. He took out his handkerchief, set it afire with a match, dropped it over the brink; and by the brief light he saw the body of a man lying upon the stones at the bottom of the pit. "I will be down as soon as I can get there," he cried and no answer came back. The morning was cloudless and from the east the light swept fast. Soon he could see his way clear toward getting down into the place, stepping from rock to rock, and in the bottom of the pit it was still dark when he knelt there over the body of a man. Striking a match he gazed, and dropped the light. It was the body of Collier. Scrambling out he brought water in his hat and bathed the face of his insensible friend. He heard a wagon and hastened to the road.

"Here," he called to the driver, "a friend of mine has fallen into a pit and hurt himself. Come and help me get him out."

Collier was taken from the pit, put into the wagon and conveyed to a cabin some distance away. "What is his name?" the driver asked.

"Jones," Tom answered. "And by the

way, don't say anything about the accident. I don't want his friends to know it."

In the cabin lived an old man, alone, a sort of hermit. "His friends won't know it as long as he's here," said the recluse. "No one stops here. The average man goes hot foot past places that look so poor."

A negro boy was sent after Dr. Plum. And when he came Tom said to him. "I suppose you recollect my friend Collier, but I don't want you to mention the fact that he is hurt. Trust me, in this matter, please, and ask no questions. It will all be made clear to you before long."

"All right, my boy, but it's rather mysterious."

"Let me hold the mystery a while and the light will break."

"All right. Ah, he's coming all right. But he had a pretty bad fall. Say, but he has been struck with something on the head."

"The fall—" Tom began, but a look from the Doctor silenced him.

"It was done with some blunt instrument. But you needn't explain. I'll wait."

The Doctor left to visit another patient and Tom sat by the bedside of his friend.

Along toward noon he revived sufficiently to talk. He said that he had gone to the meeting place and was about to sit down on the log when he was struck with something. But he did not at that time lose consciousness, though he fell to the ground. "I'll stab him," said some one. "No," some one else replied. "Don't do that. We'll throw him over into the hole and they'll think he fell and killed himself."

"Don't talk," said Tom. "You have told me enough. They tried to murder you and we must let them believe that they succeeded. I'll go to town and give it out that you are away on a visit. Every night I'll come to see you. The old man won't say a word. I have paid him in advance for his hospitality and he is grateful."

"I recognized one of the voices," said the wounded man.

"Yes," said Tom. "It was the voice of that coward—the town marshal."

"Yes. He was the one who wanted to stab me."

"And the other—did you recognize—"

"I am almost sure," Collier broke in. "Yes, it was our friend—Barton."

Two days later the Gazette contained the following announcement: "Mr. J. M. Collier we understand, has returned to the east. We had hoped that he might settle in the midst of us, but he ought to know his own business. He had made many friends here but did not even tell them good-by."

CHAPTER XVII

Not long after the paper came out Tom strolled round to Barton's office. "I see," said the major "that your man Collier has gone away."

"Yes, and he left rather suddenly."

"Oh, well, such adventurers come and go and it is impossible to keep track of them."

"I suppose he was an adventurer," Tom replied, looking at the major with an expression as innocent as the query of a child.

"Thoroughly so, my boy. Now, I know the world, and I can tell a bad man the moment I clap my eye on him. And the more you associate with me the more you'll be compelled to respect my—well, I'll call it experience."

"There is no knowledge like experience," said Tom. "Compared with experience, all other information is mere heresay. By the way, I saw Mrs. Mayhew last night and—"

"Ah," the major broke in.

"Yes, and she has commissioned me to invite you to be the guest of honor at an enter-

tainment which she is going to give next Thursday night, just a week from now."

"Why, I shall be delighted," said the major. "She is a very fine lady, I have discovered that."

"And I understand," Tom remarked, closely watching the major, "that she is about to fall heir to quite a large fortune."

"You don't tell me."

"Yes, I do tell you but I don't want you to tell any one. It came to me in a very direct way, but it is still a secret."

"Ah, yes. And have you any idea as to the amount?"

"Fifty thousand dollars, I understand."

"Well, she is to be congratulated."

"Yes, but please don't. She would think that we were paying her attention merely because—"

"Quite right. I understand. Yes you are right."

"But in the mean time, Major, we can humor all her little whims."

"Shrewd young duck—ah, you are shrewd. But I haven't heard that she *has* any whims."

"Neither have I, but the inheritance of a

fortune is likely to develop them, you understand."

"Ah, you are a wise boy," said the banker reaching over and patting Tom on the arm. "And by the way," he added, smiling winsomely, "when you grow tired of the newspaper office you may come over to the bank. The more I study you the more am I convinced that a career is waiting for you. By the way, have you seen Wilson lately."

"Not very lately. Isn't he still working for you?"

"Well, no. The fact is that Wilson is rather shiftless. Won't you sit longer?"

"No, I thank you. And," Tom continued, halting at the door and turning about, "don't forget next Thursday evening."

"I won't."

Wilson was at the office when Tom went in to take up his work for the day. "I had to lie to him," said the editor.

"I don't know that you can call it lying," Wilson replied. "It is necessary business—what statesmen would call diplomacy, and we must engage in it for a time longer."

"Yes, until next Thursday night," said Tom.

"Do you think Collier will be ready by then—well enough?"

"Oh, yes, he's improving very fast. And won't we give the town a sensation."

"Yes, and I was thinking that we might do it all in a quieter way."

"I don't want it done in a quieter way. Out of it we must have our little drama, and the drama is not only interesting but ought to be instructive, you know. Come in, Doctor."

Dr. Plum entered. "Tom," said he, "I'd like to see you a moment—in the other room."

Tom went with him into the back room, and turning to the Doctor, said: "Nothing serious I hope."

"Well, I don't know. What does Barton know of Collier's accident?"

"What does he know? Has he said anything?"

"Well, he hasn't come out and said so, but he seems to be feeling about—asks me all sorts of questions about him, whether he is really gone and if I think it likely that he stole anything before leaving. What does it all mean?"

"It means a good deal, Doctor, and if you

will say nothing and agree to wait until next Thursday night you shall know all about it. But in the mean time you must say nothing."

"Why, that's a week from now. That's a good long while for a doctor to wait."

"I know it is more in order for a patient than for a doctor to wait, but you must do as I request you. I'm the doctor now."

"All right, my son."

"And by the way, I am commissioned to invite you to be present next Thursday night at an entertainment presided over by Mrs. Mayhew—at her house."

"Ah, light begins to break. Sly old rascal is Barton. He's going to marry her then—now; and he wants Collier to be present—is afraid he has gone. Oh, you rascals."

"But don't say a word about it, Doctor."

"No. But I'm a little sharper than you thought. Just give me credit for that as you go along, will you?"

"All right. And don't forget to come, dressed in your best."

"I'll be there, looking like a morning glory vine." When they had returned to the other room the Doctor inquired of Wilson as to what he was doing.

"Nothing at present. But I'm going into business for myself before long. I'm not with the major any more."

"That so? I should have thought that you would have remained with him—first rate man to be with, none better."

"That may be true enough, but by the time a man reaches my age it's almost necessary that he should branch out for himself."

"Wise, sir; wise. And whenever you need my help, call on me."

"Good man and sometimes he's as blind as a bat," said Wilson when the Doctor had gone out. "Barton is cheating him in some manner every day and he can't see it."

"But he will before long."

Fletch came in, nodded to Wilson, sat down, took out his notebook and began to write up the local news of the day. "Any thing important enough for an editorial?" Tom inquired.

"Yes. The town marshal is out as a candidate for sheriff sure enough and the fools around town are goin' to support him."

"They will until the proper time comes," said Tom. "In the mean time say nothing."

"All right. I'm as dumb as a 'possum."

That evening Tom sat in Mrs. Mayhew's parlor. She smiled upon him for he was not only a military hero, enough to win the smile of almost any woman, but was regarded as an important factor in the development of the coming city of Blue Jay. "I am always so glad to see you," she said.

"Ah, a reflection from the pleasure you give me."

"What a flatterer you have become. But you are almost a man now, and all men flatter. Don't they, or do they?"

"Many times they tell truth that sounds like flattery."

"Do they? I am so pleased to hear that."

"I suppose we shall have dancing," said Tom.

"Oh, yes, and for those who don't dance there must be games."

And then he told her of a game that she must enact, and she listened, astonished; but she promised that she would. It could not help but prove a good joke.

And late in the night as Tom sat beside Collier, the injured man, now rapidly recovering, asked if all had been made ready.

"Yes, we are waiting now for you and Thursday night."

"All right, we'll both be there. I think I could walk now."

"But you musn't try. Gather your strength as fast as you can."

"Have you arranged for the carriage?"

"Everything is ready."

"The young woman will never forgive us."

"Yes she will. She will feel a pride in having taken so prominent a part in so interesting a play. He is a fire-works man. We'll give him a few rockets."

CHAPTER XVIII

Mrs. Mayhew smiled upon her guests. It was not only the most fashionable event "of the season," but the most fashionable known to the social history of Blue Jay. Grandmother's silk, long hoarded in the family chest and in wagons hauled out from older civilization, shimmered in the lamplight, and here and there a grandfather's watch, with gold key dangling from black braid, gleamed with the respectability of the slow and stately past. The band, discarding brass and turning to more tuneful strings, played impulse into lightly moving feet, and amid the perfume of roses the dance went on.

Tom had danced with Mrs. Mayhew and now they stood in a corner, looking over the guests, commenting upon the "soft eyes that looked love to those that spake again."

Handing her something done up in a silk handkerchief the young man said: "Before they call the next dance, introduce your new game. It will afford a pleasant change."

Stepping to the middle of the room she

called for attention. The buzzing ceased. "Ladies and gentlemen," she said, "I am about to introduce the game which is now so popular in Eastern society. It is called hand-cuffs. I will show you by example. I am to be blindfolded and then with these hand-cuffs I am to fetter any man whom I can catch, and before I agree to unlock the steel bands he must answer all questions addressed to him. Now you will blindfold me?"

"I will," said Tom, stepping forward. He took the handkerchief from about the hand-cuffs, returned the steel bands to her and proceeded to blindfold her.

"Fix her so she can't see," said Major Barton.

"She will be as blind as justice when I am done with her," Tom replied, and indeed she was as blind as some forms of so called justice, but she could see. And now the game began. Here and there she made skillful pretense of striving to catch some one, but when finally she seized Major Barton she held to him until he stood with hands out ready for the wrist bands. She slipped them on and Tom's eye glinted when he

heard the springs snap. Then Mrs. Mayhew removed the bandage and smiled upon the Major. "Oh," she said, as if she had not known. "I have trapped noble game. And now, sir, before you're restored to liberty, you must answer every question I ask you. How old are you? Honor bright."

"Forty-nine."

"How many times have you been in love?"

The guests laughed and the major pretended to be embarrassed.

"Well, let me see. Twice, any way, once very deeply, the last time."

"Very good. But when was the last time?"

"Well, I know when it began but I cannot see the end of it."

"In love with his jailor," said a wag. It was her time to be embarrassed. Just then there went round the room a titter of merriment. Fletch, wearing trousers at least four inches too short, took his comical place among the guests. And at the door there was seen another face. Collier was standing just outside.

"And now fair one," said the major, "I must beg my release. I should like to see some one else a prisoner."

"But I haven't the key," she replied. "Oh, our editor friend has it."

Tom stepped forward. "Take these things off," said the major.

"When you have answered all the questions that may be asked of you. Major did you ever know a man named William Hackett?"

The major started. "Young man, take these things off, I tell you."

"Yes, I know what you tell me. This William Hackett lived in Kentucky. He was the superintendent of an express company. With him was a young man, named Anderson. A large amount of money was suddenly missing. The young man was arrested and taken to jail, at the bidding of Hackett, and while an investigation was pending, Hackett disappeared. The young man was released, but the disgrace affected his health and he died shortly afterward. He was my brother, Major, you are Hackett."

"It is an infamous lie!" the major thundered, shaking his hand-cuffs. "It is an outrage, and I call upon my friends here to release me from this situation. Mrs. Mayhew—"

"He was my brother, Major,— you are Hackett."

The woman shrieked. Several ladies ran to her. "What does it all mean!" she cried. "Mr. Tom, what does it mean?"

"Let everybody keep quiet," said Tom. "Ladies and gentlemen, it was at a ball in Louisville when this man bade them put hand-cuffs on my brother. There he stood, crushed with shame, but innocent. Here this man stands, brazen and guilty. I made it the object of my life to hunt him down. For more than a year I have pondered over him, wondering if he were the man, not daring to strike lest I might make a mistake. Not long ago a detective whom you know as Collier came out here for the Express Company. We compared notes and at last found that there could be no mistake. About this time something else happened. This Hackett, whom you know as Barton, took all the money out of his bank, set a time fuse and while he was away, the place was blown up."

"It's a lie," shouted Barton. "Here, take these things off or I'll have your life's blood. Ladies and gentlemen, this fellow is a villain and a coward. He wanted to borrow money of me. I wouldn't lend it and he takes this method of showing his resentment. The town marshal—"

"Is now under arrest and the coward confessed," said Tom. "He not only was a tool of robbery but of a darker crime. A few nights ago, in company with Barton, his master, he attempted to murder Collier. They knocked him down and threw him into a pit and believed that he was dead. Oh, this way, Mr. Collier."

Collier stepped into the room. "Ladies and gentlemen," said he, "our young friend Anderson tells the simple truth."

"As far as he knows it," Wilson spoke up. "And now I desire to say a few words. Shut up," he demanded of Barton who was about to speak. "You thought you had me in your perpetual clutches with a piece of paper. Ladies and gentlemen, this man is no better than a cutthroat. And if you knew how mean and cruel he is, you would want to hang him to a tree."

"Why would you want to put such a disgrace on a harmless tree?" Fletch drawled.

"This has gone far enough," said the major, endeavoring to be calm. "Release me or every house in this place will be burned to the ground." Mrs. Mayhew came forward, gazing into the eye of the man

whom innocently she had entrapped. "Madam," he said, "I am in your house."

"Yes," she answered, "and it is the last time you are to enter it. I believe all that they have said. Now that the glitter has fallen from you I can see that you are a scoundrel, and I am glad that I have been instrumental in bringing you to justice. Don't speak to me. You villain."

"Ladies and gentlemen," said Collier, "We have papers that authorize us to take this man back to Kentucky. And when the law there is done with him, then he will be brought back and compelled to answer to you for his other crimes. Come, Major Barton, your carriage is waiting."

"Have I no friends here?" the wretch moaned, looking about. He caught the eye of Dr. Plum who had stood silent. The doctor turned his face away. The entire company turned from the banker, the promoter, the builder of cities—the would-be-murderer.

"You haven't much time to spare," said Tom. "I would accompany you back to your old home, but I don't care to gloat over your downfall. But not in the least am I

sorry for you. My poor brother standing there in the ball room—but I will not reproduce the picture. Mr. Hackett, the man whom you threw into the pit is waiting."

Slowly Hackett walked forth and stepped into the carriage. Dr. Plum came out to take a last look at him. "Fellow," said the doctor, "you ought to be hanged." The carriage rolled away. Fletch put his hand on Tom's arm and said: "I never did ride in one of them things. I reckon they were made mostly for rich folks. Well, this here show is broke up. Suppose we go home."

"All right—to the office. Tomorrow you go in as a partner. No, don't thank me now."

Blue Jay is now a town of nearly ten thousand inhabitants. One of its principle industries is a large steam printing plant, and from it is daily issued the Gazette, a newspaper sparkling with life. One morning it contained a piece of news interesting to every one of its older readers. "William Hackett, alias Major Barton, while attempting to escape from the Kentucky penitentiary was shot by a guard and killed."

The old squatter has given up his ferry and in Blue Jay keeps a mink, otter, 'coon and

bear skin house. Speaking of his son not long ago he said: "I reckon he's among the smartest fellers in the country. Why, he kin read all the things they paint on the fences—read 'em right off jest the same as ef they was put thar fur him, and when he comes round and reads to me the things what he has writ, I jest put aside the business of the day and titter fitten to kill myself. I tell you that fellow Tom is a man. And that lodge he started here has lifted up mighty nigh every boy in the whole community. He's been a school to my boy, and thar's only one thing I ask him to do for me—and that is to give me a chance to fight for him. But he don't need nobody to fight fur him. The folks know him."

(*The End.*)

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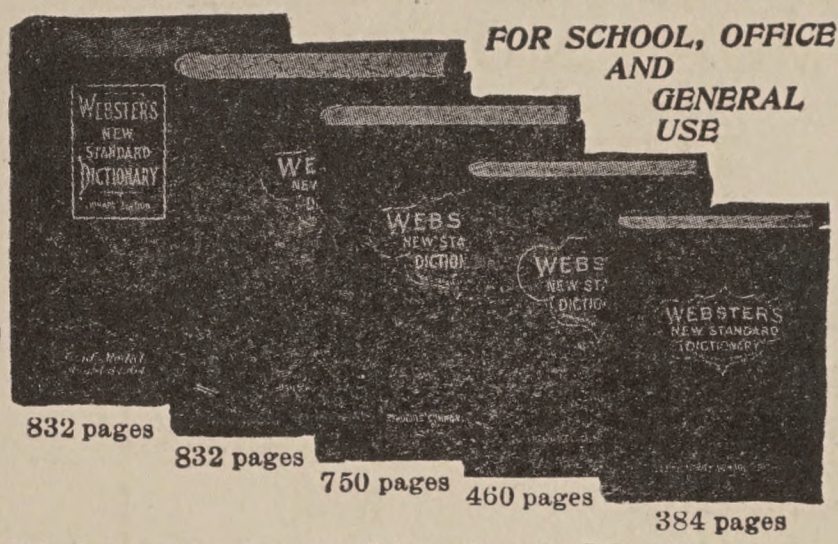

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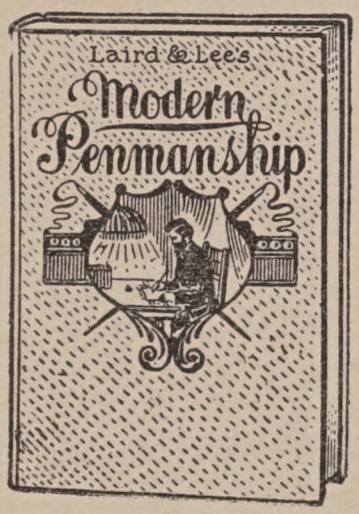

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