

FICTION

James Otis

The Princess and Joe Potter

A PUBLIC DOMAIN BOOK

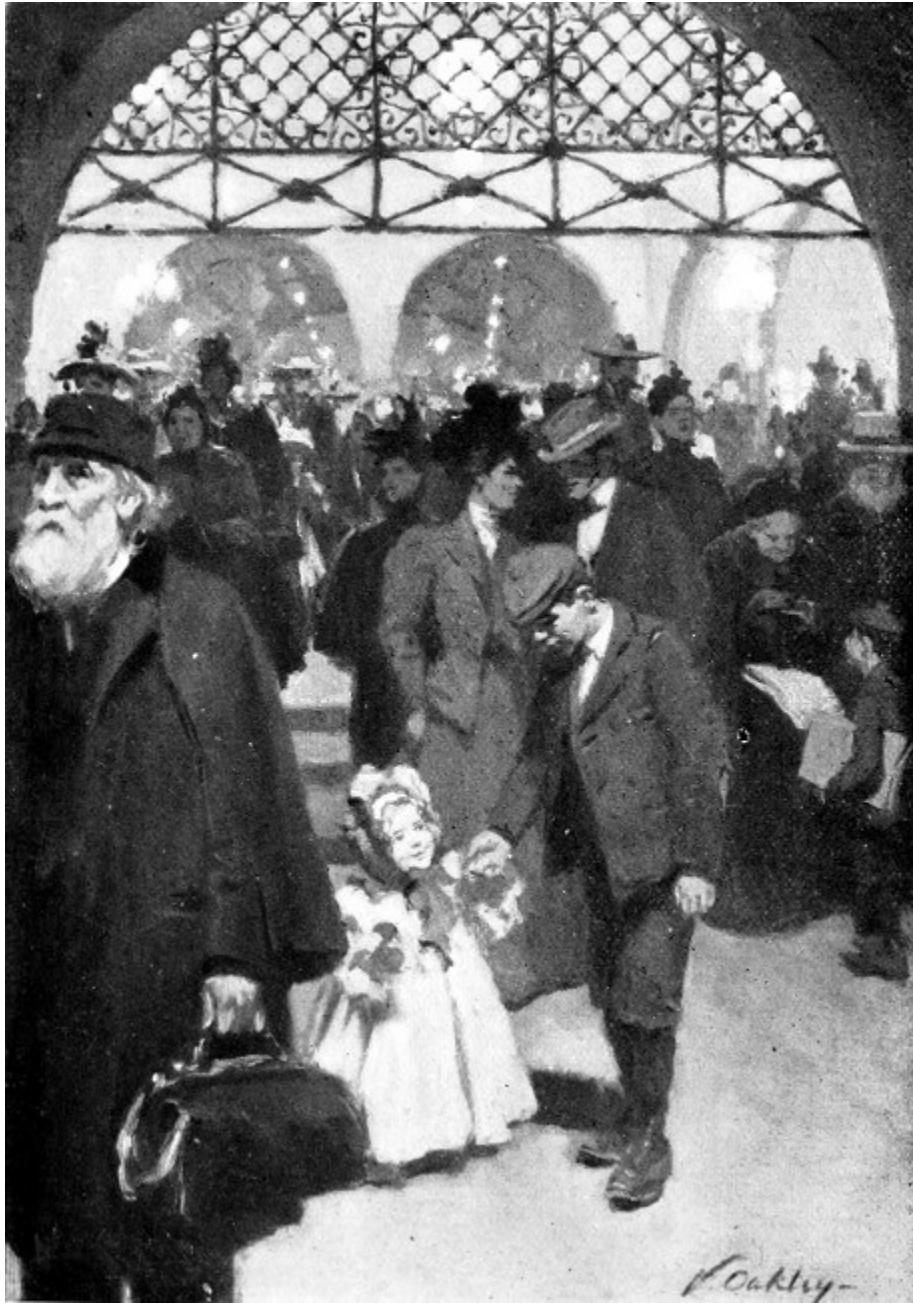
A PUBLIC DOMAIN BOOK



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FICTION

THE PRINCESS AND JOE POTTER



JOE FINDING THE PRINCESS.
(See page 22.)

THE PRINCESS AND JOE POTTER

BY

JAMES OTIS

AUTHOR OF

"JENNY WREN'S BOARDING-HOUSE," "TEDDY AND CARROTS," ETC.

Illustrated by
VIOLET OAKLEY



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TAILPIECE

THE PRINCESS AND JOE POTTER.

CHAPTER I.

A RUINED MERCHANT.

"Hello, Joe Potter! What you doin' up in this part of the town?"

The boy thus addressed halted suddenly, looked around with what was very like an expression of fear on his face, and then, recognising the speaker, replied, in a tone of relief:

"Oh, it's you, is it, Plums?"

"Of course it's me. Who else did you think it was? Say, what you doin' 'round here? Who's tendin' for you now?"

"Nobody."

"It don't seem as though this was the time of day when you could afford to shut up shop."

"But that's what I have done."

"Got some 'portant business up here at the *depot*, eh?"

Joe shook his head mournfully, stepped back a few paces that he might lean against the building, and looked about him with a languid air, much as if there was no longer anything pleasing for him in life.

Plums, or to give him his full name, George H. Plummer, gazed at his friend in mild surprise.

Any other boy of Joe Potter's acquaintance would have been astonished at the great change which had come over him; but Plums was not given to excesses of any kind, save in the way of eating. That which would have excited an ordinary lad only served to arouse Plums in a mild degree, and perhaps it was this natural apathy which served to give Master Plummer such an accumulation of flesh. He was what might be called a very fat boy, and was never known to move with sufficient energy to reduce his weight.

Sim Jepson stated that Plums sold newspapers in the vicinity of the Grand Central Station because he lived only a couple of blocks away, and therefore had sufficient time to walk to his place of business during the forenoon.

"How he ever earns enough to pay for fillin' hisself up is more'n I can make out," Master Jepson had said, with an air of perplexity. "By the time he's sold ten papers, he's ate the profits off of twenty, an' acts like he was hungrier than when he begun."

As Plums waited for, rather than solicited, customers, he gazed in an indolent fashion at the dejected-looking friend, who might have served, as he stood leaning against the building on this particular June day, as a statue of misery.

Joe Potter was as thin as his friend was stout, and, ordinarily, as active as Plums was indolent. His listless bearing now served to arouse Master Plummer's curiosity as nothing else could have done.

"Business been good down your way?" he finally asked.

"It's mighty bad. I got stuck on a bunch of bananas, and lost thirty-two cents last week. Then oranges went down till you couldn't hardly see 'em, an' I bought a box when they was worth two dollars. It seems like as if every *Italian* in the city, what ain't blackin' boots, has started a fruit-stand, an' it's jest knocked the eye out of business."

"I shouldn't think you could afford to lay 'round up here if it is as bad as all that."

"It don't make any difference where I am now, 'cause I've busted; Plums, I've busted. Failed up yesterday, an' have got jest sixteen cents to my name."

"Busted!" Master Plummer exclaimed. "Why, you told me you had more'n seven dollars when you started that fruit-stand down on West Street."

"Seven dollars an' eighty-three cents was the figger, Plums, an' here's what's left of it."

Joe took from his pocket a handful of pennies, counting them slowly to assure himself he had made no mistake in the sum total.

Master Plummer was so overwhelmed by the sad tidings, that two intending purchasers passed him by after waiting several seconds to be served, and Joe reminded him of his inattention to business by saying, sharply:

"Look here, Plums, you mustn't shut down on business jest 'cause I've busted. Why don't you sell papers when you get the chance?"

"I didn't see anybody what wanted one. I'm jest knocked silly, Joe, about your hard luck. How did it happen?"

"That's what I can't seem to make out. I kept on sellin' stuff, an' of course had to buy more; but every night the money was smaller an' smaller, till I didn't have much of any left."

"I felt kind of 'fraid you was swellin' too big, Joe. When a feller agrees to give five dollars a month rent, an' hires a clerk for a dollar a week, same's you did, he's takin' a pretty good contract on his shoulders. Did you pay Sim Jepson his wages all right?"

"Yes, I kept square with him, and I guess that's where most of my money went. Sim owns the stand now."

"He owns it? Why, he was your clerk."

"Don't you s'pose I know that? But he was gettin' a dollar a week clean money, an' it counted up in time. If things had been the other way, most likely I'd own the place to-day."

Master Plummer was silent for an instant, and then a smile as of satisfaction overspread his fat face.

"I'll tell you how to do it, Joe: hire out to Sim, an' after a spell you'll get the stand back ag'in."

"That won't work; I tried it. You see, when it come yesterday, I owed him a dollar for wages, an' thirty cents I'd borrowed. There wasn't more'n ninety cents' worth of stuff in the stand, an' Sim said he'd got to be paid right sharp. Of course I couldn't raise money when I'd jest the same's failed, an' told him so. He offered to square things if I'd give him the business; an' what else could I do? I left there without a cent to my name; but earned a quarter last night, an' here's what's left of it."

The ruined merchant mournfully jingled the coins in his hand, while he gazed dreamily at the railway structure overhead, and Master Plummer regarded him sympathetically.

"What you goin' to do now?" the fat boy asked, after a long pause.

"That's jest what I don't know, Plums. If I had the money, I reckon I'd take up shinin' for a spell, even if the *Italians* are knockin' the life out of business."

"Why don't you sell papers, same's you used to?"

"Well, you see when I went into the fruit-stand I sold out my rights 'round the City Hall, to Dan Fernald, an' it wouldn't be the square thing for me to jump in down there ag'in."

"There's plenty of chances up-town."

"I don't know about that. S'posen I started right here, then I'd be rubbin' against you; an' it's pretty much the same everywhere. I tell you, Plums, there's too many folks in this city. I ain't so certain but I shall go for a sailor; they say there's money in that business."

"S'posen there was barrels in it, how could you get any out?" and in his astonishment that Joe should have considered such a plan even for a moment, Master Plummer very nearly grew excited. "You ain't big enough to shin up the masts, an' take in sails, an' all that sort of work, same's sailors have to do."

"I'd grow to it, of course. I don't expect I could go down to the docks an' get a chance right off as a first-class hand on masts an' sails; but I shouldn't go on a vessel, you know, Plums. I'm countin' on a steamboat, where there ain't any shinnin' round to be done. Them fellers that run on the Sound steamers have snaps, that's what they have. You know my stand was on West Street, where I saw them all, and the money they spend! It don't seem like as if half a dollar was any account to 'em."

"But what could you do on a steamboat?"

"I don't know yet; but I'll snoop 'round before the summer's over, an' find out. Where you livin' now?"

"Well, say, Joe, you can talk 'bout steamboat snaps; but this house of mine lays over 'em all. I s'pose I've got about the swellest layout in this city, an' don't have to give up a cent for it, either. First off McDaniels counted on chargin' me rent, an' after I'd been there a couple of days he said it didn't seem right to take money, 'cause the place wasn't fit for a dog. I'll tell you what it is, if McDaniels keeps his dogs in any better shanty than that, they must be livin' on the fat of the land."

"Who's McDaniels?"

"He's the blacksmith what owns the shanty where I live. You see, it was like this: I allers sold him a paper every afternoon, an' when it rained, or business was dull, I loafed 'round there, an' that's how I found the place."

"Do you live in the blacksmith's shop?"

"Well I should say I didn't! Right behind it is a shed he built, to keep a wagon in, but I guess he ain't got any now, leastways he don't flash one up. There was a lot of old iron an' the like of that thrown in at one end, an' when I saw it, I says to myself, says I, 'That's a mighty good shanty for some feller what don't want to give up all the money he makes for a place to sleep in,' and I began to figger how it could be fixed. It took me as much as two days before I could see into it, an' then I had it all in my mind; so I tackled McDaniels about hirin' it. He was willin', so long's I 'greed to be careful about fire, an'--well, if you're out of business now there's nothin' to keep you from comin' down to-night an' seein' it."

"I'm not only out of business, but I'm out of a home, Plums. You see, when I sold the fruit-stand of course I hadn't any right to count on sleepin' there, an'--"

"Didn't Sim Jepson offer you the chance?"

"He seemed to think it wasn't big enough for two."

"He didn't have any sich swell notions when you first started there, an' he wanted a place to sleep."

"Yes, I remember all about that; but it's no use twittin' a feller. He was willin' enough to bunk in with me, but if he don't want to turn about an' give me the same show, it ain't any of my business."

"Of course you can come to my place, an' stay jest as long as you want to, Joe, an' I'll be glad to have you; but if you're countin' on workin' down-town it won't be very handy."

"I ain't certain but I'll try my luck hangin' 'round the *depot* here waitin' for a chance to carry baggage. I've done them kind of jobs before, an' they didn't turn out so terrible bad. You see, with only sixteen cents, a feller can't spread hisself very much on goin' into business."

"You might buy papers, an' sell 'em here. It ain't a very great show for trade, but you won't have to work very hard, an' there's a good deal in that."

"Yes, Plums, there is, for a feller like you, what don't want to stir 'round much; but I'm ready to hustle, an' it wouldn't suit me nohow. You don't earn more'n fifteen or twenty cents a day."

"Not a great deal more," Master Plummer replied, in a tone of content, and a probable customer approaching just at that moment, he succeeded in making sufficient exertion to offer his wares for sale.

"That's jest about the way of it!" he exclaimed, as the gentleman passed into the building without giving heed to the paper held invitingly towards him. "There's no use to hustle 'round here, 'cause it don't pay. If they want to buy papers they buy 'em, an' if they don't, you can't give 'em away. There's one good thing about doin' business here, though, an' that is, the other fellers won't try to drive you out. It's mighty tough on you, droppin' all that money. If I'd had most eight dollars you can bet I wouldn't take the chances of losin' it. I'd sooner spend the whole pile buyin' swell dinners down on the Avenue."

"Yes, it's tough," Joe replied, musingly; "but I'd a good deal rather get rid of the money tryin' to make more, than spend it fillin' myself up with hash. When do you knock off work?"

"Oh, somewhere 'bout dark, 'less I've sold out before. Say, I know of a place where you can get the biggest bowl of stew in this city, for five cents,--'most all meat. Of course there'll be a bone now an' then,--you expect that; but it's rich! We'll go there to-night, eh?"

"I ain't so certain whether a feller with only sixteen cents ought'er spend five of it fer stuff to eat," Joe replied, reflectively; "but if I make a few nickels 'tween now an' night, perhaps we'll take a whirl at it."

"A feller's bound to eat, whether he makes anything or not. So long's you've got that much money you might as well enjoy yourself. Now I say it's best not to go hungry, else you can't do so much work, 'an then--"

"I'll see you later," Joe interrupted, not caring just at the moment to listen to his friend's ideas on the subject of food, for it was well known among Master Plummer's acquaintances that his highest idea of happiness consisted in ministering to his stomach.

The fat boy gazed after the ruined merchant until the latter was lost to view amid the throng of pedestrians, and then in a dreamy, indolent fashion he turned his attention once more to the business of selling newspapers to such of the passers-by as requested him to do so, murmuring mournfully from time to time:

"Seven dollars an' eighty-three cents, an' a feller can buy custard pies two inches thick for a dime apiece!"

Having assured himself of a lodging-place, and decided as to what business he should pursue, Joe Potter wasted no more time, but set about earning his livelihood in as cheery a fashion as if the depression in the fruit market had brought him great gains instead of dire failure.

Before the night had come he was richer by forty cents, through having carried to their several destinations, a satchel for a gentleman, a basket containing a kitten for a lady, and a message for one of the employees at the station.

"Business is boomin' right along. At this rate I guess I can afford to stand one of Plums's bowls of stew," he said to himself, in a tone of satisfaction, and was about to seek other employment when his name was called from a shop on the opposite side of the street.

Turning quickly, he saw a boy with whom he had had slight acquaintance while in the fruit business, who stood in the door of the shop, and said, as Joe crossed the street:

"I'm workin' here now. It's a good deal more tony than down on West Street. You ought'er move your stand up this way somewhere."

"I haven't got any to move," Joe replied, and then explained why he was no longer connected with the business.

The young clerk did not appear particularly surprised by the information.

"I thought that's 'bout the way it would turn out, when I heard you hired Sim to help you. He's got the business, an' you've got the shake."

"Sim was square with me," Joe replied, stoutly.

"Well, I'm glad you think so, for you're the only one he ever acted square with, an' it wouldn't astonish me a bit to know he'd done you up."

Joe was a boy who would not willingly listen to evil words against one he called a friend, and was about to begin a wordy war in Sim's behalf, when his friend's employer put an end to the conversation by demanding that the clerk "get in and attend to business."

"I won't believe Sim ever did a thing crooked to me," Joe said, recrossing the street and taking up his station where he could have a full view of those who came from the building. "He saved his money while I was losin' mine, an' that's all there is to it. It seems like as if everybody wanted to jump on him 'cause he had sense enough to do jest what he has done."

This was not the first time Master Potter had heard such an accusation against his late clerk, and, while he would not believe Sim had been dishonest, the suggestion so troubled him that he had some difficulty in banishing the matter from his mind.

As the passengers from the incoming train appeared, he had other affairs than Sim's possible dishonesty to think about, as he did his best to attract the attention of those whom he thought might prove to be patrons.

In this manner, but yet without earning any more money, the remainder of the afternoon was passed, and when one by one the electric lights began to appear, telling that the day had come to a close, he decided it was time to seek out Master Plummer.

Now the thought of that bowl of stew for five cents was particularly pleasing, and he had made up his mind to indulge in such a hearty meal, when a little tot of a girl, who could not have been more than three years old, came out from among the throng of pedestrians and stood looking up into Joe's face.

"Well, say, but you are a dandy!" Master Potter exclaimed, in genuine admiration, as he surveyed the tiny figure, allowing his eyes to dwell almost lovingly upon the sweet, baby face. "You are a dandy, an' no mistake; but them as owns you must be crazy to let sich a mite of a thing snoop 'round here alone."

The child came nearer, and Joe stooped down to look at her more closely, for she was the most dainty little maid he had ever seen.

"I'd ask you to speak to me if I was any ways fit," he said, holding out a not over-cleanly hand.

The little maid must have judged the boy by his face rather than his apparel, for hardly had he spoken when she came boldly towards him and laid her tiny hand on his cheek with a caressing movement that captivated Joe immediately.

"Talk about daisies! Why, you're a corker! You look jest like a pink an' blue image I've seen in the shop windows. What's your name?"

"Essie," the little lady replied, and added what may have been words; but might equally well be Greek so far as Joe was concerned.

"What's that you say? I didn't jest catch on."

Miss Essie cooed at him once more, and Joe winked and blinked, trying most earnestly to understand what she said; but all to no purpose.

Then he stood erect, fearing lest the little maid's parents should appear and reprove him for having dared to speak to her; but the moments passed and no one came to claim the child.

It was evident Essie had not been accustomed to neglect, for when Joe ceased speaking, she put a tiny little hand in his and told him in her childish dialect what may have been a very interesting story.

Joe looked at the pink hand, and then at his own soiled palm.

"I'd give a nickel if I was a little bit cleaner! It seems like it was wicked to hold her hand while mine is so dirty. She takes the shine off of anything I ever saw before. Say, Essie, where's your mamma?"

"Mamma dorn," and the little lady clutched Joe's finger yet more tightly.

"Well, say, do you s'pose this kid's lost?" and now Joe began to look alarmed. "Anybody what would lose their grip of a dandy little thing like her ought to be horsewhipped, an' I'd like to do it."

Again he tried to get some information from the little maid, and again she replied readily; but Joe was no wiser than before.

The night had come; those who passed this way or that on the sidewalk moved rapidly as if in haste to get home; but no one gave any heed to the ruined fruit merchant or the charming little child by his side.

"Look here, baby," Joe said, after what seemed to him like a long time of waiting, and no one came to claim the child, "will you let me take you up in my arms, if I try not to muss your clothes? I'm 'fraid folks can't see sich a bit of a thing down there, an' I'll hold you high, so's your mother can find you easier."

Miss Essie certainly understood something of what the fruit merchant said, for she held out her hands towards him as if to be taken, and he lifted her carefully, saying, as he did so:

"It's pretty rough for a feller like me to handle a kid like her! It seems like I was holdin' some of that swell candy you see in the shop windows. It'll be a wonder if I don't daub her all up with my great, dirty hands. I never knew how big they was till she took hold of 'em."

The little maid must have thought he was speaking for her especial benefit, for she made reply in language which apparently gave her the most intense satisfaction, but failed to enlighten Master Potter, and during perhaps five minutes the two stood on the sidewalk near the curbstone, jostled rudely now and then by the homeward-bound throng, but seeing no one who laid claim to the baby.

"This won't do at all," Joe said. "It ain't right for you to stay out in the night, and I don't know what's to be done, unless you could stand it for a spell in Plums's shanty. Say, I wonder if that wouldn't go down? Will you be willin' to hang 'round with us till mornin', if I buy a slat of good things? When it comes daylight I can find your folks without much trouble, 'cause of course they'll be right here huntin', don't you see? Is it a go?"

From what the little maid said, Joe concluded it was a "go," and, since she made no protest when he walked swiftly down towards where he knew his fat and hungry friend would be waiting for him, believed he had chosen such a course as met with her approval.

CHAPTER II.

THE PRINCESS.

It was no easy task for Joe Potter to carry his burden, light though it was, amid the throng of pedestrians, without being pushed rudely here or there by those who were so intent upon their own business or pleasure as to give but little heed to the boy and the child.

Had he been alone, he could readily have forced a passage, but fearing lest the little maid might be injured by rough contact with one or the other, he proceeded so cautiously as to make but slight headway, until, forsaking the sidewalk, he betook himself to the street.

There was a fear in his mind lest Master Plummer, grown weary with long waiting, had gone home, and this would have been a serious matter, because Joe had no idea as to the whereabouts of his friend's lodgings.

Once out of the throng, he pressed on at a swift pace until he was nearly overturned by a boy coming from the opposite direction, whom he had failed to see in the shadows.

"What's the matter with you, chump? Can't you see where you're goin'?" he cried, angrily, and the tightening of the little maid's arm around his neck told that she was frightened.

"How much of this street do you own? Why don't you mind your--Hello, Joe Potter, is that you?" and the ruined merchant recognised the voice as that of his friend with whom he had spoken a short time before in front of the fruit store.

"Course it's me. You ought'er look out how you run 'round here, when folks has got babies in their arms."

"I didn't see you, Joe, an' that's a fact. Where'd you get the kid?"

"She's lost, I reckon, an' I'm takin' her home for to-night," Joe replied, and, without waiting to make further explanation, hastened on, leaving his friend, the clerk, staring after him in open-mouthed astonishment.

"Don't you be afraid, little one," Joe said, as Essie clung yet more tightly to him. "They sha'n't hurt you, an' if there's any more funny business of runnin' into us tried, I'll break the feller's jaw what does it."

The child seemed reassured by the sound of his voice, and at once began to tell him something which was evidently interesting to herself.

"If I could understand what you say, things would be all right," Joe said, with a laugh, and then, as he emerged from the shadows cast by the overhead railway structure, he came face to face with Master Plummer.

"Well, I'd begun to think you never was comin'," that young gentleman began, but ceased speaking very suddenly, as he observed the burden in Joe's arms. "What you got there?"

"Can't you see for yourself?" and Joe lowered the little maid gently to the sidewalk, that Master Plummer might have a full view of his treasure.

"Well, I'll be blowed! Where'd you get it?"

"She's lost, 'cordin' to my way of thinkin', an' I've been tryin' to find her folks, but it's no use huntin' 'round in the night, an' I'll tell you what it is, Plums, we've got to take care of her till mornin'."

"Take care of her! What's creepin' on you, Joe Potter? How do you think we're goin' to look after a kid like that?"

"I don't know why we can't," Joe replied, sharply. "It'll be pretty tough if a couple of fellers ain't able to tend out on a mite of a thing such as her. Say, Plums, don't she look like somethin' you see in the store windows?"

"She's fine as silk, there's no gettin' over that," and Master Plummer would have touched one pink-and-white cheek but that his friend prevented him.

"Now don't go to hurtin' her! She's in hard luck enough as it is, without your mussin' her all up."

"Who's a-hurtin' of her? I was jest goin' to put one finger on her cheek."

"There's no need of doin' so much as that. It might frighten the little thing, and besides, she's too fine to be handled by you and me, Plums. She's a reg'lar little princess, that's what she is," and Joe raised the child quickly, as if to remove the

temptation from Master Plummer's path.

"What's her name?" the fat boy asked, as he gazed admiringly at the child.

"I can't seem to make out, she talks so queer," and as if to illustrate his meaning, Joe's princess began to chatter, while she clasped both tiny arms around her self-elected guardian's neck.

"Well, say, I'd give up what I made this afternoon jest for the sake of havin' her hug me like that! Ain't she a daisy?"

"It would be mighty hard to find anything finer in this town."

"That's a fact; but say, Joe, it's no kind of use, your talkin' 'bout our takin' care of her, 'cause it can't be done."

"I'd like to know why?"

"Jest run your eye over her, an' then look at us! Why, she's been kept rolled up in silk all the time, an' you talk 'bout takin' her down to the blacksmith's shop!"

There was little need for Master Plummer to make further explanation. Joe had so thoroughly lost himself in admiration of the treasure he had found that, until this moment, he had not realised how poor was the home to which he proposed to carry her.

Now he looked about him in perplexity, and the princess, impatient because of the delay and her guardian's silence, began to protest most vehemently.

"See here, Plums, we've *got* to take her down to your place, an' that's all there is to it! There ain't any chance of findin' her folks to-night, so what else can we do?"

"It's goin' to be mighty tough on her," Master Plummer replied, with a shake of the head, and Joe put an end to further discussion by starting off at a rapid pace down the street, regardless of the fact that he was in ignorance of the whereabouts of his friend's lodging-place.

The princess, satisfied now that they were moving, cooed and chattered in Joe's ear, much to his delight, and Master Plummer was forced to follow or allow himself to be left behind.

"There's no use in rushin' as if we hadn't another minute to live," he cried, when, by dint of rapid running, he overtook his friend. "I don't like to race 'round when we can jest as well go slow."

"It would be a good deal better if you walked fast once in awhile, 'cause then you wouldn't be so fat."

"S'pose I'd rather be fat than as lean as some fellers I know?"

"Then it would be all right to creep along the street same's we're doin' now. Say, how far off is your shanty?"

"Down here a bit; but you don't count on goin' right there, do you?"

"Why not? Where else should we go?"

"Seems to me it would be better to get that stew first, an' then we sha'n't have to come out again to-night."

"Look here, Plums," and Joe spoke sharply, "do you think I'm goin' to take the princess into a place where they sell five-cent stews?"

"She's got to go somewhere, if she wants anything to eat."

"We'll bring her supper to your shanty. I won't carry this little thing into a saloon for a crowd of toughs to look at."

Master Plummer sighed. He had been anticipating a feast of stew from the moment Joe left him to engage in his new vocation, and it was a grievous disappointment that the pleasure should be so long delayed.

"We'll go down to your place an' try an' fix things up; then you can leave us there--"

"But you want somethin' to eat as well as I do."

"I guess I can get along without anything, for a spell. It's the princess I'm thinkin' about; she's got to have somethin' fine, you know. Stew'd never do for her."

"How's custard pie? I know where they've got some that's great,--two inches thick, with the crust standin' up 'round the edge so the inside won't fall out while you're eatin' it."

"Perhaps the princess might like the custard; but I ain't so sure about the crust. It seems to me she's been fed mostly on candy, an' sich stuff as that. Anyhow, you take my money an' buy whatever you think she'd like. Got any candles down to your place?"

"I did have one last week; but the rats ate most of it, an' I don't s'pose it would burn very well now."

"Take this nickel, an' buy some in that grocery store."

"Why don't you come, too?"

"I don't believe the princess would like to go into sich a place, an' besides, folks might want to take hold of her. I ain't goin' to have any Dutch groceryman slobberin' over her."

Master Plummer took the nickel and crossed the street in his ordinarily slow fashion, while Joe and the princess held a long and animated conversation, to the evident satisfaction of the little maid and the mystification of the boy.

Owing to his being thus engaged, Joe did not grow impatient because of Master Plummer's long absence, as he might have done under other circumstances, and said to his princess when the newsdealer rejoined them:

"Now, little one, we're goin' to Plums's home, an' you must try not to feel bad 'cause it ain't very swell. It's bound to be better'n stayin' out in the street all night, for I've tried that game a good many times, an' there's nothin' funny 'bout it."

The little maid, perched on Joe's arm something after the fashion of a bird, chirped and twittered a reply, and Plums, who had fallen in the rear that he might secretly touch the arm which was around Joe's neck, said, reflectively:

"I s'pose we'll have a high old time between now and mornin', 'cause that kid, sweet as she's lookin' jest now, ain't goin' to be quiet in a place like mine. It's fellers like you an' me, Joe, who've knocked 'round the city a good many times when we didn't have the price of a lodgin' in our pockets, what can 'preciate a home where the wind an' rain can't get in."

"You're talkin' straight enough, Plums, an' I 'gree to all you say; but this 'ere princess ain't like the general run of kids,--that you could see if you was blind. She's a reg'lar swell, an' you can bet there won't be any kick 'cause we ain't stoppin' at the Walledoff. Couldn't you get a little more of a move on? At this rate we sha'n't have supper much before mornin'."

Master Plummer was willing to comply with this request, and did indeed appear to be making strenuous efforts to walk at a more rapid pace; but having patterned after a snail so many years, it seemed impossible for him to overcome what had become a habit.

Not once during the short journey did the princess make any protest against the plan her temporary guardian had suggested.

She was very comfortable, and although Joe's arms ached from long holding the light burden, she knew it not,--perhaps it would have made no difference had she been aware of the fact.

Finally, and after what had seemed a very long journey to the princess's guardian, the little party arrived in front of the blacksmith's shop, and Master Plummer conducted his guests through a narrow alley to the rear of the building, where was a small, shed-like structure, the end of which was open, save for a pile of boxes and boards directly in front of it.

"This is the place," Master Plummer said, with an air of proprietorship; "an' seein's you've got the kid in your arms, I'd better light a candle so's you can see the way, 'cause there's a lot of stuff out here at this end. I've been countin' on clearin' it up some day, but can't seem to find the time. Besides, it wouldn't make any difference to us,--it's only 'cause we've got the princess to lodge with us that I'd like to see it a little cleaner. Say, Joe, what *is* a princess, anyhow?"

"Why, it's a--you see, it's--it's a--well, look at her, can't you see? That's what it is. *She's* a princess. Now don't be all night lightin' one candle."

It did really appear as if Plums was even slower than usual, and so awkward that two matches were consumed before the wick was ignited.

"You see I don't often swell out in so much style as to have candles, an' it takes me quite a spell to get one goin'," he said, in an apologetic tone. "She's all right now, though. Jest come 'round the end of that box, an' look out for this pile of iron, 'cause you might trip. There *would* be a mess if your princess was dumped down on this stuff."

"You get on with the candle, an' I'll see to the rest of the business," Joe said, impatiently, for by this time his arms ached severely.

Master Plummer obeyed, and a moment later Joe and the princess were surveying the home, which occupied six square feet or more in one corner of the shed, was walled in by barrels and boxes, and furnished with a pile of straw and a

disreputable-looking gray blanket.

"I've slept here some mighty cold nights, an' I know jest how good the place is," the proprietor said, proudly. "She's tight as a brick, an' there can't so much as a sniff of wind get in. Then look here!"

He raised the lid of a small box, thereby displaying two tin tomato cans in which were fragments of biscuits, a broken cup half full of sugar, two wooden plates, a knife, a fork, and a spoon.

"When trade is dull, I buy stuff at the grocery store, an' bring it in here. Why, Joe, things will keep jest as well in that box as they would in one of your tony 'frigerators, an' I ain't sure but it's better. I have had ice in there two or three days, though I don't know as it 'mounted to anything 'cept to wet everything."

Joe gave little heed to his friend's cupboard. He was looking around for some spot where the princess could sit down without danger of soiling her garments, but failed to find that for which he sought.

"See here, Plums, you'll have to spread some papers over that blanket; it'll never do to put this little thing down where everything is so dirty."

"I don't see what there is 'round here that's dirty. It seems like she couldn't come to much harm on the straw. It's only been here two weeks."

"Put the papers down, an' we'll talk 'bout it afterwards. It seems as though my arms would break."

Master Plummer obeyed, but with an ill grace, for this fault-finding without reason was not agreeable.

There was no lack of newspapers in the house, and in as short a time as Plums could compass it the straw was covered.

It was with a long breath of relief that Joe sat his charming burden down, and then were the boys treated to an exhibition of the princess's temper.

Cleanly though the couch was, she had no idea of sitting bolt upright when there were two subjects at hand to obey her wishes.

She positively refused to be seated, but held out her hands as if for Joe to take her in his arms once more, and when the boy attempted to explain that it was necessary she remain there a few moments, the little maiden made protest at the full strength of her lungs.

"I guess I'll have to take her up again," Joe said, with a long-drawn sigh, "an' I don't know as she's to be blamed for not wantin' to stay there."

"Well, I'd never believed anything so pretty could screech so loud!" Master Plummer exclaimed, in a tone of wonderment. "She yells jest 'bout the same's old Mis' Carter's kids do, an' there's nothin' swell about them."

Joe made no reply. He was too deeply engaged in trying to hush the princess to give any heed to his friend's remark, and fully five minutes passed before the imperious little maid was reduced to silence.

Then she nestled down in his arms with such apparent content, and looked so charming, that he was her willing slave, without one disagreeable thought concerning her temper.

"If my face was washed, I'd kiss her this minute," he said, half to himself, and immediately Master Plummer looked jealous.

"If you can do that, I reckon I can."

"Well, there won't either of us try it yet awhile, so s'posin' you go after your supper, an' bring something for the princess when you come back. Don't be gone any longer'n you can help, will you, Plums, 'cause she must be gettin' hungry by this time."

"I'll take the cans an' get the stew in them, else I'd be gone quite a spell if I waited to eat my share. Will I buy custard pie for her?"

"Yes, an' anything else you think she'd like. Don't get cheap stuff, 'cause she ain't used to it."

Then Joe emptied the contents of his pocket in Master Plummer's hands, and the latter asked, in surprise:

"Are you goin' to spend the whole of this?"

"It don't seem as though you'd have to, an' besides, we ought to leave a little something for breakfast. Do the best you

can, Plums."

With an air of responsibility, the proprietor of the establishment walked slowly out, and Joe was left alone with his baby.

Swaying his body to and fro to delude her with the idea of being rocked, Master Potter did his best to please the princess, and evidently succeeded, for in a very short time after Plums had departed, the sleep-elves soothed her eyelids with their poppy wands until she crossed over into dreamland.

Now Joe would have laid the tiny maid on the straw to give relief to his arms, but each time he attempted anything of the kind she moved uneasily, as if on the point of awakening, and he was forced to abandon the effort.

"I must be a chump if I can't hold a bit of a thing like her till she's through sleepin'," he said to himself, "an' I ought'er be mighty glad to have such a chance."

It was monotonous work, this playing the nurse while seated on the ground with no support to his back; but never for a moment, not even when his arms ached the hardest, did Joe Potter regret having taken upon himself such a charge.

He had given little heed as to how the princess's parents might be found, because he believed that would prove an exceedingly simple task. He had only to go to the railroad station in the morning, and there deliver the child to her mother, who, as a matter of course, would be in waiting.

There was never a thought in his mind that, by bringing her to this home of Master Plummer's, he had in fact secreted her from those who must at that moment be making eager search.

He had done what seemed to him fitting under all the circumstances, and felt well satisfied that no one could have cared for the child in a better fashion, save in the matter of lodgings, which last left much to be desired.

After a time, Joe succeeded in so far changing his position that it was possible to gain the use of one hand, and immediately this had been done, he set about carefully covering the princess's garments with a newspaper, lest he himself should soil the fabrics.

Then there was nothing to do save wait the leisurely movements of Plums, and it seemed as if fully an hour passed before that young gentleman finally made his appearance.

"If I haven't got all you fellers can eat, then I'm mistaken," Master Plummer announced, in an exceedingly loud tone as he entered the building; and Joe whispered, hoarsely:

"What are you makin' sich a row for? If you ain't careful, you'll wake the princess."

"Well, I'll be blowed, if she ain't gone to sleep jest like any of Mis' Carter's kids would do!" Plums said, in a tone of surprise, when he was where a view could be had of the sleeping child.

"Of course she has. You don't s'pose swells sleep different from other folks, do you?"

"I don't know, 'cause I never had a chance to see one close to, before. Say, here's the stuff."

Plums was literally laden with small packages, and, in addition, had the two tomato cans nearly filled with what he declared was "great stew."

"I tell you there's no flies on that stuff, an' here's the pie," he added, as he took a parcel wrapped in brown paper from under his arm. "I'm 'fraid it's got mashed a little, but I couldn't carry it any other way. Takin' the stew an' that, with what other things I've got, it'll be funny if your princess can't fill herself up in great shape."

Then, from one pocket and another, Master Plummer drew out two small cakes frosted with white and sprinkled with red sugar, three inches or more of Bologna sausage, a cruller, a small bag of peanuts, an apple, and two sticks of candy which looked much the worse for wear, because of having been placed in his pocket without a covering.

"Now if that ain't rich enough for any feller's blood, I'd like to know what you'd call it? Three or four princesses like you'r'n ought'er get through with a layout same's this, an' thank their lucky stars for havin' the chance."

CHAPTER III.

AN ADVERTISEMENT.

Having placed the packages on the straw near about his friend, in what he believed to be a most tempting display, Master Plummer seemed to consider that his duties as host had been performed properly, and gave himself wholly up to the pleasures of eating.

With one of the tomato cans between his knees, he gave undivided attention to the savoury stew, until, the first pangs of hunger having been appeased, he noted, as if in surprise, that Joe was not joining in the feast.

"Why ain't you eatin' somethin'?" he asked, speaking indistinctly because of the fullness of his mouth.

"I don't see how it can be done while the princess is asleep."

"Put her down on the blanket, where she belongs. You don't count on holdin' her all night, I hope?"

"It looks like I'd have to. Jest the minute I stir she begins to fuss 'round, an'--"

"Well, let her fuss. Old Mis' Carter says kids wouldn't be healthy if they didn't kick up a row every once in awhile."

"I guess she won't be sick any to speak of, if we keep her quiet till mornin'. The trouble is, Plums, there's bound to be an awful row jest as soon as she wakes up an' finds out where she is. I s'pose she's been tended like she was a piece of glass, an' the shanty must look pretty hard to her. You can tell by the way she acts that the princess has always had a reg'lar snap, an' I wouldn't be s'prised if this was the meanest place she was ever in."

"She'll be lucky never to get in a worse one," Master Plummer replied, emphatically; and added, after having filled his mouth once more, "There's no reason why you can't eat your share of the stew an' hold her at the same time."

"I'm 'fraid I might spill some of it on her dress."

"Look here, Joe Potter," and now Plums spoke sharply, "you'll be all wore up before mornin', carryin' on at this rate. It wouldn't hurt that kid a bit if she had every drop of stew we've got, on her clothes, an' she's playin' in big luck to be with us instead of walkin' 'round the streets. Take your share of the stuff while it's goin', for of course you haven't had anything to eat since noon."

"I had a pretty fair breakfast."

"An' nothin' since then?" Master Plummer cried, in astonishment.

"Well, I wasn't hungry,--that is, not very. You see, when a feller closes up business, the same's I've done, he don't think much 'bout eatin'."

"Well, think about it now, an' *do* it, too!"

Having thus spoken, and in his sternest tones, Plums placed the second can of stew where his friend could reach it conveniently, and waited until Joe had so changed his position that it was possible for him to partake of the food.

No better proof of Master Plummer's interest in his friend could have been given than when he thus voluntarily ceased eating to serve him.

The boys had not attempted to remove either the princess's hat or cloak, and she appeared anything rather than comfortable as she lay wrapped in newspapers, with her head pillowed on Joe's arm; but yet her slumbers were not disturbed when Master Potter, his appetite aroused by the odour of the stew, proceeded to make a hearty meal.

"I s'pose we ought'er wake her up, so's she'll get somethin' to eat," Joe said, thoughtfully, and Plums replied, very decidedly:

"Don't you do anything of the kind. So long's a kid's quiet you'd better leave 'em alone, 'cause it ain't safe to stir 'em up 'less you want a reg'lar row."

"Of course that wouldn't do; but say, Plums, if she keeps on sleepin' like this, it won't have been a terrible hard job to take care of her."

"Not 'less you count on holdin' her all night."

Joe was already cramped from sitting so long in one position, and as if his friend's remark had reminded him of the fact, he made another effort to relieve himself of the burden, this time being successful.

The princess moved uneasily when she was first laid upon the bed of straw, and the boys literally held their breath in suspense, fearing she would awaken; but, after a few moments, the child lay quietly, and Plums said, in a tone of satisfaction:

"I know a good bit about kids, I do, 'cause old Mis' Carter had sich a raft of 'em, an' I lived with her 'most a year. The right way is to chuck 'em 'round jest as you want to, an' they'll stand it; but once you begin to fuss with 'em, there's no end of a row."

"The princess ain't anything like Mis' Carter's youngsters."

"No, I don't know as she is; but I guess the same kind of handlin' will fetch her 'round all right in the long run. Can't you eat some peanuts?"

"I've had enough, an', besides, we must leave somethin' to give the princess, 'cause she'll be hungry in the mornin'."

"Yes, I s'pose we must. It always makes me feel bad to stop when there's good things in the house," and Master Plummer told his friend of the "great time" he had had on a certain rainy day, when it would have been useless to attend to business, and the larder was well filled.

"I kept right on eatin', from mornin' till it was time to go to bed; didn't rush, you know, but stuck at it."

"Didn't it make you sick?"

"Well, I did have a pretty bad ache before mornin'; but jest as likely as not that would have come whether I'd eat anything or not. Mis' Carter says if I don't stop bein' so hungry all the time I'll fill up a glutton's grave, but how can a feller keep from wantin' something to eat?"

"I don't s'pose it's anybody's business, Plums, what you do, so long as you pay the bills; but it does seem to me that it would be better if you'd get on more of a hustle when you're at work, an' stop thinkin' so much about vittles. I can't see how you earn money enough to keep this thing up."

"Seems like I've got some push to me if I do it, don't it?" Master Plummer replied, complacently, and there the conversation came to an end.

Plums, having ministered to his appetite, stretched himself at full length on the ground, and it seemed to Joe as if he had but just assumed that position when his heavy breathing told that he had fallen asleep.

Now and then from the street beyond could be heard the rumbling of a carriage, sounding unusually loud owing to the stillness of the night. At intervals the hum of voices told that belated seekers after pleasure were returning home, and, in fact, everything reminded the ruined fruit merchant that the time for rest was at hand.

Joe's eyelids were heavy with sleep, yet he resisted the impulse to close them, because it seemed necessary he should watch over the princess.

The candle, having burned down to the neck of the bottle in which it had been placed, spluttered and fretted because its life was so nearly at an end, and Joe replaced it with a fresh one.

With his back against the box which served as cupboard, he sat watching the little maid with a strong determination not to indulge in sleep, and even as he repeated for the twentieth time that it was necessary he remain awake, his eyes closed in slumber.

It was yet dark, and the second candle nearly consumed, when the princess suddenly opened her big, brown eyes, and during a single instant looked about her in silent astonishment.

Then, as the only way by which she could express her displeasure with her surroundings, the child opened her tiny mouth to its fullest extent, and from the little pink throat came as shrill a scream as was ever uttered by one of "old Mis' Carter's kids."

Joe Potter was on his feet instantly, and during the first few seconds after being thus rudely awakened was at a loss to understand exactly where he was, or what had aroused him.

The princess introduced herself to his attention very quickly, however, for she was a maid who had ever received, and was ever ready to demand, attention.

Joe had her in his arms as soon as might be, but just at this moment it was her mother she wanted, and the friendship previously displayed for her new guardian was forgotten.

In other words, the princess screamed passionately; Joe walked to and fro with her in his arms, whispering soothing words which did not soothe; and through all the uproar Master Plummer slumbered as sweetly as an infant.

"I know what you want, you poor little thing; but how am I goin' to get it for you to-night? Why won't you try to make the best of it till mornin', an' then we'll be sure to find your folks? Here, eat some of these peanuts; they must be awful good, 'cordin' to the way Plums pitched into 'em last night."

The princess had no appetite for peanuts just then, and, as the readiest way of giving her guardian such information, she struck the outstretched hand with her tiny fist, sending the nuts flying in every direction.

Joe was considerably surprised that such a dainty-looking little maiden could display so much temper, but did not relax his efforts to please.

One of the sugared cakes had escaped Master Plummer's cyclonic appetite, and with this the amateur nurse tried to tempt the screaming child into silence.

The cake shared the fate of the peanuts, and the princess gave every evidence in her power of a positive refusal to be soothed.

Joe had tossed her in the air, fondled her in his arms, paced to and fro as if walking for a wager, but all without avail, and now it seemed necessary he should have assistance.

Master Plummer's rest had not been disturbed by the noise, but he rose to a sitting posture very suddenly when Joe kicked him almost roughly.

"Wha--wha--what's the matter?" he asked, blinking in the light of the candle, which was directly in front of his eyes.

"I should think you might know by this time! Can't you hear the princess?"

"I thought there'd be a row if she waked up," Master Plummer replied, in a matter-of-fact tone, and then he laid himself down again, evidently intending to continue the interrupted nap.

"See here, Plums, you can't do that!" Joe cried, sharply. "I mustn't be left alone with this poor little thing. It ain't certain but she'll die, she's so frightened."

"Don't fret yourself. She'll come out of it after a spell; all Mis' Carter's kids used to."

"But she isn't like them, I tell you! They could stand 'most anything, an' she's been raised different."

"She cries jest the same's they did."

"Look here, George Plummer, get up on your feet an' help me! This thing is growin' dangerous!"

Plums had no fear the princess would injure herself by crying; but his friend spoke so sternly that he decided it was wisest to obey the command, and a very sleepy-looking boy he was, as he stood yawning and rubbing his eyes, with an expression of discontent amounting almost to peevishness upon his face.

"There ain't anything either you or I can do. Youngsters have to yell jest about so much,--it makes 'em healthy,--an' she'll quiet down after a spell. Why don't you give her somethin' to eat?"

"I tried that, but she wouldn't take a single crumb. The trouble is, we haven't got what she wants. Now, if there was some milk in the house--"

"But there ain't, so what's the use thinkin' of that?"

"It must be near mornin', an' if there is a bakeshop anywhere 'round, you could get some."

"Do you want a feller to turn out in the night an' travel 'round the streets lookin' for milk?" Plums asked, indignantly.

"It is better to do that than have a dear little baby like this die."

"But there's no danger anything of that kind will happen. I've seen lots of worse scrapes than this, but they always ended up all right."

"Look here, Plums, will you go out an' get some milk?"

"What's the use--"

"*Will* you go an' get the milk?"

Just for an instant Master Plummer stood irresolute, as if questioning the necessity for such severe exertion, and then a single glance at his friend's face decided the matter.

In silence, but with a decided show of temper, the fat boy picked up one of the tomato-cans, jammed his battered hat down over his head, and stalked out of the shanty.

During this brief conversation the princess's outcries had neither ceased nor diminished in volume, and when Plums had thus unwillingly departed, it was as if she redoubled her efforts.

Unfortunately, Joe had had no experience with "old Mis' Carter's kids," and when the child's face took on a purplish hue, he was thoroughly alarmed, believing her to be dying.

"Don't, baby dear, don't! You'll kill yourself if you act this way! I'm doin' the best I know how; but the trouble is, I can't tell what you want!"

Entreaties were as useless as any of his other efforts to soothe, yet he alternately begged her to be silent, and paced to and fro with her in his arms, until, when it seemed to him that at least one whole night must have passed since she awakened, the princess tired of her exertions.

Then it was a tear-stained, grief-swollen face that he looked into, and the childish sobs which escaped her lips gave him deeper pain than had her most energetic outcries.

Believing her to be suffering severely, the big tears of sympathy rolled down Joe's face as he told her again and again of all he would do towards finding her mother when the day had come.

The princess was lying quietly in Joe's arms when Master Plummer finally returned, bringing the can of milk, and yawning as if he had been asleep during the entire journey and had but just awakened.

"Now you can see that it was jest as I said!" he exclaimed. "When youngsters start in yellin', they've got to do about so much of it, an' there's no use tryin' to stop 'em. Here I've walked all over this city huntin' for milk when I might jest as well have been sleepin'."

"It won't do you any harm, Plums, an' I honestly think the princess is hungry."

"She can't be very bad off, with Bologna, an' cakes, an' peanuts 'round. I'll bet she won't touch this."

Joe broke into the milk such fragments of cracker as remained in the cupboard-box, after which, and first wiping the spoon carefully on his coat sleeve, he began to feed the little maid.



"HE BEGAN TO FEED THE LITTLE MAID."

To Master Plummer's disappointment, she ate almost greedily, and Joe said, in a tone of triumph:

"You may know a good deal 'bout Mis' Carter's babies, but you're way off when it comes to one of this kind."

"I don't know whether I am or not," and Plums laid himself down once more, falling asleep, or pretending to, almost immediately thereafter.

Having eaten with evident relish the food which had cost Plums so much labour, the princess's ill-temper vanished entirely, and she twittered and chirped to Joe until he forgot his former fears and anxieties in the love which sprang up in his heart for the tiny maid who was dependent upon him for a shelter.

The day was close at hand when the amateur nurse and his charge journeyed into dreamland for the second time, and although Joe had gained but little rest during the night, his slumbers were not so profound but that a hum of shrill voices near the building awakened him very shortly afterward.

The one fear in his mind was that the princess would be disturbed, and he stepped quickly outside the shanty to learn the cause of the noise.

"Here he is! Here he is now! We was in big luck to come 'round this way!" one of a party of boys said, excitedly, and

Joe recognised in these early visitors three friends and business acquaintances, all of whom were looking very serious, and evidently labouring under great excitement.

"What's brought you fellers up to this part of the town so early?" Joe asked, in surprise, and Dan Fernald, who had under his arm a bundle of morning papers, said, in a mournful tone:

"We've come after you."

"What for? I'm goin' to hang 'round here a spell till I can get enough money ahead to go into business ag'in. Did you fellers think I'd be so mean as to sell papers 'round City Hall after I'd sold out to Dan?"

"It ain't anything like that, Joe Potter," Master Fernald replied, so gravely that the princess's guardian could not fail of being alarmed.

"What's floatin' over you fellers?" he asked, sharply. "Ain't been gettin' into trouble, have you?"

"We're all right; but there's somethin' mighty wrong 'bout you, Joe. Say, did you do anything crooked when you sold that stand to Sim Jepson?"

"Crooked? Why, how could I? He'd been workin' for me at a dollar a week, an' when I hadn't any more money, he took the stand for what I owed him. If you call it crooked to sell out a business for a dollar an' twenty cents, when it cost pretty nigh eight times as much, you're off your base."

"Then what *have* you been doin'?" Tim Morgan asked.

By this time Joe began to understand that something serious had caused this early visit, and he began to grow alarmed, without knowing why it should disturb him.

"I don't want you to make any noise 'round here, 'cause Plums an' me have got a kid what we picked up in the street last night, an' she's asleep. It won't do to wake her 'less you want to hear the tallest kind of screechin'. But I've got to know what's givin' you fellers the chills; so out with it, but be as quiet as you can."

Dan Fernald looked at his comrades as if hoping one of them would act as spokesman; but since both remained silent, he began by saying:

"See here, Joe, you know we're your friends, an' are willin' to do all we can to help you out of a scrape?"

"Yes," Master Potter replied, growing yet more alarmed because of Dan's solemn manner.

"If you'd come right to us in the first place, we'd helped you, no matter how much money was wanted."

"Look here, Dan, don't give me a stiff like this!" Joe cried, imploringly. "If anything's wrong, out with it, 'stead of mumblin' 'bout helpin' me. I've allers managed to help myself, and you fellers, too, a good many times, so I don't know why you should stand 'round lookin' like as if somethin' was chewin' you."

"If we wasn't your friends, Joe, you might give us a bluff like that, an' even if we didn't take it, we'd make out as though we did. See here," and unfolding a newspaper, Dan pointed to an advertisement, as he added, "I saw this almost 'fore I got out of the *Herald* office, an' didn't stop for anything but jest to pick up Tim an' Jerry before I come to find you."

Joe looked at each of his friends in turn before taking the proffered paper, and then, after considerable difficulty because of the necessity of spelling out each word in turn, he read the following:

JOSEPH POTTER. Information wanted of a newsboy or fruit vendor answering to the name of Joseph Potter. He was last seen in front of the Grand Central Station at about seven o'clock on the evening of yesterday (Tuesday), holding in his arms a child three years old. A liberal reward will be paid for information as to the present whereabouts of the boy. Address Cushman & Morton, Attorneys at Law, 47-1/2 Pine Street, New York.

Immediately below this was an advertisement signed with the same names, requesting information concerning a little girl who had strayed from the Grand Central Station and was last seen in the company of a newsboy; but this Joe did not read.

The fact that he was advertised for, as if he had been a fugitive from justice, terrified him.

He could not so much as speak; but looked alternately at the printed sheet and his companions, until Dan said, sternly:

"Now, Joe, you can tell us 'bout this thing or not, jest as you have a mind. What we've come for is to help you get clear,

an' we're bound to do it."

"Get clear of what?" Joe repeated, in bewilderment.

"You know better'n we do, an' I ain't askin' questions if you think it ought'er be kept secret from us."

"But I haven't been doin' anything that wasn't square," Joe replied, with a trembling voice.

"Then what's a couple of lawyers advertisin' you for?" Tim Morgan asked, shrilly. "Do you s'pose sich folks want'er catch a feller what sells papers, jest to look at him?"



"DAN POINTED TO AN ADVERTISEMENT."

"See here, Tim, you know me, an' you know I never did a mean thing to anybody in my life."

"Then what they advertisin' yer for?"

"Say, fellers, I wouldn't try to make out--"

"Now, Joe, this ain't any time for you to stuff us," Dan Fernald said, impatiently. "If you hadn't done anything crooked, your name wouldn't be right there in them big letters. You've allers been willin' to do us a good turn, an' we're goin' to pay you back. You've *got* to skip! An' you've got to skip bloomin' quick!"

CHAPTER IV.

JOE'S FLIGHT.

It was literally impossible for Joe Potter to make any reply to Dan Fernald's positive statement that he must run away in order to escape punishment.

As a matter of course he knew he had done nothing of a criminal nature, and yet the advertisement, which seemed to stand out more conspicuously than any other item in the paper, could not be construed either by himself or his companions to mean anything else.

The fact that it was signed by attorneys seemed to Joe and his friends positive proof that a crime had been committed; otherwise why would representatives of the law have appeared in the matter?

Dan Fernald, as Joe's oldest and nearest friend, took it upon himself to act as master of ceremonies in the affair; and, understanding that his comrade was so overwhelmed by the impending danger as to be absolutely incapable of intelligent movement, led him towards the shanty, as he said, gravely:

"Never mind what it is you've done, Joe, us fellers are goin' to see you through, an' it won't do to hang 'round here very long, if you plan on givin' the perlice the slip. I reckon they'll be hot after you before nine o'clock, an' by that time I'm countin' on havin' you hid. Got anything here you want to take with you?"

Joe shook his head; but Master Fernald seemed to consider it necessary they should enter the building, and his two comrades followed close in the rear.

Once inside the shanty, the visitors, as a matter of course, saw the princess sleeping on the straw, and, despite the fact that her garments were not as cleanly as on the day previous, making a most charming picture.

"Well, I'll be blowed! Where'd you get that?"

Joe had been so bewildered by the terrible knowledge that the officers of the law were probably on his trail, as to have forgotten for the moment that the princess was in his charge, and he stood for an instant staring at her vacantly before making any reply, which odd behaviour served to strengthen the belief in the minds of his friends that he was guilty of some serious crime.

"Oh, that's the princess. She lost her folks somewhere near the depot last night, an' I was countin' on findin' 'em for her this mornin'. Plums an' me had to take her in, else she'd been layin' 'round the streets."

Dan looked at him sharply, while Tim and Jerry raised themselves on tiptoe to gaze at the sleeping child.

"Well, what you goin' to do with her now?" Dan asked, after waiting in vain for his friend to speak.

"I don't know," Joe replied, sadly, and added, in a more hopeful tone, "If you fellers would look after the little thing, she might--"

"We'll have all we can do keepin' you out of jail, without bein' bothered by a kid taggin' everywhere we go. You don't seem to understand, Joe, that it's goin' to take mighty sharp work, an' most likely every feller that ever knew you will be watched by the perlice from this time out."

"But I can't leave her here alone," Master Potter wailed.

"Why not take her down where Plums used to live? Mis' Carter's got a reg'lar raft of kids, an' ought'er know how to take care of another."

"It would jest 'bout break the little thing's heart to put her in with that Carter gang, an' I can't do it. I'd sooner the perlice nabbed me."

"Now you're talkin' through your hat. Of course you don't want to go up to Sing Sing for two or three years, an' that's what's bound to happen if them lawyers get hold of you. What's Plums snorin' away for, when things are all mixed up so bad?" Dan asked, impatiently, and without further delay he proceeded to arouse Master Plummer to a knowledge of the terrible danger that threatened Joe, by shaking him furiously.

"What do you want now,--more milk?" the fat boy asked, without opening his eyes, and Dan pulled him suddenly to his feet.

"Wake up, an' see what we want! Here's the perlice after Joe, red-hot, an' we've got to get him out'er town."

"After Joe?" Master Plummer repeated, stupidly. "What's he been doin'?"

"We don't know, an' he won't tell us."

"I haven't been doin' a thing, Plums, as true as I live; but there it all is in the paper," Master Potter replied, in a tearful voice. "Of course there's no gettin' away from that."

Not until Plums had spelled out for himself the ominous advertisement was it possible for those who would rescue Joe Potter from the impending doom to do anything towards his escape, and, once having mastered the printed lines, the fat boy gazed at his grief-stricken friend in mingled astonishment and reproach.

"Of course the perlice are goin' to know you slept here last night, an' jest as likely as not I'll be pulled for takin' you in."

"Course you will!" Jerry Hayes cried, shrilly. "You're in a pretty tight box, Plums."

Joe protested vehemently that he was innocent of any intentional wrong-doing; but with that unexplainable advertisement before him, Plums received the statement with much the same incredulity as had the others.

"Where you goin' to take him?" he asked of Dan; and the latter replied:

"I don't know; but we've got to get him out of town by the shortest cut, an' I reckon that'll be Thirty-fourth Street Ferry. How much money you fellers got?"

Master Plummer took from his pocket that which remained of the amount given him by Joe the night previous, and, after counting it twice, replied:

"Here's sixteen cents what belongs to Joe, an' I've got twenty of my own."

"Us fellers have anteed up a dollar an' a quarter towards seein' you through, an' here it is," Master Fernald said, as he gave Plums a handful of small coins.

Joe did not so much as glance at the money, and Dan said, impatiently:

"Now, don't hang 'round here any longer, you two, 'cause it's mighty near sunrise."

"But what about the kid?" Plums asked, as if until that moment he had entirely forgotten the sleeping child.

"I reckon she'll have to take her chances," Dan replied, carelessly. "Some one will look out for her, of course,—turn her over to McDaniels, the blacksmith."

This suggestion aroused Joe very suddenly, and he glanced at each of his companions in turn, as if to read the thoughts of all, after which he said, sharply:

"You fellers can believe me or not, but I haven't done anything to set the perlice after me. I can't say as I blame you for thinkin' it ain't so, 'cause there's that advertisement; but it's a fact all the same, an' I'm goin' to let the cops take me."

"What?" Tim Morgan screamed. "You're goin' to jail?"

"What else can I do?"

"Run away, of course, the same's we're fixin' it."

"In the first place, we haven't got money enough to go very far, an' then, ag'in, I won't leave the princess knockin' 'round the streets."

"You'd have to if you went to jail."

"I could take her with me for a spell, anyhow."

Joe appeared so thoroughly determined to give himself up to the officers of the law that his comrades were seriously alarmed.

Although there was but little question in their minds that he was guilty of some crime, not one of them was willing he should yield to the order of arrest which they believed had already been issued.

Plums looked at Dan imploringly, and the latter said, as he laid hold of Joe's arm:

"Now see here, old man, we ain't goin' to stand by with our hands in our pockets while you go to jail, 'cause there's no

need of it. The perlice won't be 'round for two or three hours, an' it's pretty hard lines if we can't get you out of town before they come."

"I won't leave the princess," Joe replied, doggedly.

"Then take her with you. Of course there's a good deal of risk in it, seein's how the advertisement said you had her; but it's a blamed sight better'n givin' right up same's any chump would do."

"I counted on findin' her folks this mornin'."

"The way things have turned out, you can't; an' what's the odds if you wait two or three days? I'll see that you have money enough to keep you goin' for a spell, anyhow, 'cause all the fellers what know you an' Plums will chip in to help."

"Am I goin', too?" Master Plummer asked, in surprise.

"I can't see any other way out of it. When the perlice find where Joe slept last night, they're bound to pull you in. It don't look to me as if it was goin' to be sich a terrible hard thing to go off in the country for a spell, now the weather's warm, an' if it wasn't for the kid here, I'd say you'd have a great time."

At this moment the princess awakened, and, fortunately, in an amiable mood.

She raised her hands towards Joe as if asking to be taken in his arms, and, instantly the mute request was complied with, the ruined merchant's courage failed him.

Burying his face in her dress, regardless of the possible injury to be done the delicate fabric, the poor boy gave way to tears, and the little maid must have understood that he was suffering, for she patted him on the ear, or ruffled his hair gently with her hands, all of which served but to make his grief more intense.

"Now's the time to get him right away," Dan said, in a low tone to Master Plummer. "We've fooled 'round here too long already, and if he kicks ag'in goin', why, we've got to lug him, that's all. I won't see Joe Potter put in jail if it can be helped."

"What do you s'pose he's been doin'?" Plums asked, in a terrified whisper.

"Blamed if I know; but it must be somethin' pretty tough, else they wouldn't spend money advertisin' for him."

"I don't b'lieve he'd kill anybody."

"Neither do I; but it must be somethin' 'bout as bad as that. While he's takin' on so we can get him off without much trouble. We'd better walk to the ferry, 'cause there might be somebody on the horse-car what would know him."

"If I've got to leave the town, I don't want to hang 'round Long Island, 'cause there ain't so much chance of gettin' further away," Plums objected, and Dan began to show signs of ill temper at being thus thwarted in his efforts to do a favour.

"You'll be blamed lucky if you get anywhere, except to jail."

"But what's the difference if we go over to Jersey? It ain't much further to the Weehawken Ferry than it is Thirty-fourth Street way."

"All right, go there, then,--anywhere, so's you get a move on."

Master Plummer took the precaution to gather up such provisions as remained in the cupboard, and, after one long look around at the home he might be leaving for ever, shook Joe gently.

"Come on, old man; this thing's got to be done, an' the sooner we start the better. There's no show for you to give yourself up 'less I'm with you, 'cordin' to what Dan says, an' you can bet I ain't countin' on goin' to jail so long as it can be helped."

Joe rose to his feet obediently, still holding the princess tightly in his arms, and Dan ordered Jerry to precede them into the street, in order to make certain the officers of the law were not in the vicinity.

"If you whistle once, we'll know nobody's there, an' twice means that we're surrounded."

Jerry, looking as important as the occasion demanded, set about doing the scouting for the party, and an instant later a shrill call rang out on the morning air, telling that the coast was clear.

Dan and Plums ranged themselves either side of Joe; Tim marched in advance, wary as an Indian hunter; and in this

order the little party gained the street, the princess in high glee because of the numbers who were escorting her.

Joe neither spoke nor looked back. His heart was as heavy as though the shadow of a real crime hung over him, and, had he been going directly to prison, could not have appeared more despondent.

On the other hand, Dan Fernald was enjoying himself hugely.

Aiding a desperate criminal to escape from the clutches of the law was to him a most exciting adventure. He had always believed he possessed remarkable detective ability, and this was the first time an opportunity of establishing such fact had presented itself.

"If I don't get you two fellers out of this scrape, then I'm willin' to lay right down," he said, as Tim and Jerry led the way towards the west side of the city at a rapid pace. "I've kept myself posted on the detective business pretty sharp, 'cause I've made up my mind to go into it before long, an' by the time we finish this job I guess the perlice will find out what I'm made of. I ain't so sure but I shall join the force after you're straightened out."

"They wouldn't take on a feller of your size," Master Plummer said, with something very like a sneer; which was not seemly, in view of the fact that Dan was at this moment giving him the full benefit of his wonderful ability, simply through friendship.

"It don't make any difference about a feller's size; it's the head what counts. Before long you'll find out whether I've got one or not."

Joe gave no heed to his friend's words. His grief was so great that probably he knew nothing whatever regarding that morning journey, save that the princess, when not laughing and chattering at him, was eating, with evident relish, the sugar-besprinkled cake which Plums had slipped into her chubby hand.

The boy did not realise that he might be doing a grievous wrong against the parents of the princess by thus taking her from the city. He knew she would be cared for to the best of his ability, and it seemed as if those who loved her must realise the same. Of course he understood that she was to be restored to her father and mother as soon as it should be possible, but he failed to take into consideration the suffering which might be theirs because of her disappearance.

Therefore it was that, in all this wretched business, at the end of which he could see nothing but the open door of a prison, the only bright thing to him, amid the clouds of despair, was the companionship of the princess.

After the first slight sorrow at being forced to leave his home, Plums began to enjoy this flight, and discussed with Dan the possible enjoyment of a detective's life until the party arrived within a block of the ferry-slip.

It was yet so early in the morning that but few were on the street; but Dan had no intention of allowing the boy whom he was saving to enter the slip like an ordinary citizen.

Ordering a halt near the entrance of an alleyway which led between two stables, he said, with the air of a general:

"Tim, you scout along down towards the ferry-slip, an' see if anybody's there on the watch. We'll stay here so's we can sneak up through this alley if you should whistle twice. Jerry, you're to walk back about half a block, so's to make certain the perlice don't creep up on us from behind."

"But there ain't a dozen people in sight, an' we can see that there's no cop 'round!" Master Plummer exclaimed. "What's to hinder our goin' right on board the boat?"

"Look here, Plums, if you know more 'bout this kind of business than I do, take hold an' run the thing. We'll see how far you'll get before the whole crowd is nabbed."

"I don't know anything about it, of course; but I can see there's nobody between us an' the ferry-slip that would likely make trouble."

"If we depended on you, we wouldn't have got so far as we have," Master Fernald replied, disdainfully. "Jest likely as not, there's a dozen cops hid close 'round here, an' I ain't goin' to be fool enough to walk right into their arms."

Plums was silenced by this exhibition of superior wisdom, and Joe indifferent to whatever steps might be taken for his own safety; therefore Dan was not interfered with in his management of the affair.

The scouts set about their work, and not until fully ten minutes had passed did the amateur detective give the word for the fugitives to advance.

"I reckon it's all straight enough now, an' we'll go on board the boat; but there's no tellin' what might have happened if I hadn't 'tended to the work in the right way."

Then Master Fernald walked a few paces in advance of his friends, moving stealthily, as if knowing danger menaced them on every hand, and casting furtive glances up and down the street until, had any one observed his movements, suspicions must have been aroused as to the innocence of his purpose.

Jerry paid for the ferry tickets out of his own funds, for it was the purpose of these rescuers to remain in the company of the fugitives until they should have escaped from the State.

Once on the boat, Joe wanted to remain in the ladies' cabin, because of the princess; but Dan would not countenance any such rash proceeding.

He insisted that they must take up their stations in what was, for the time being, the bow of the boat, where they could prevent possible pursuers from "sneakin' up on 'em."

The princess made no objection to this breezy position, otherwise the boy who was being rescued by Master Fernald would have flatly refused to obey orders; and thus the fugitives and their friends remained where every passenger on board must of necessity have seen them.

Dan gave his friends what he considered good advice during the passage, and when the boat was nearing the slip on the Jersey side, summed up his instructions with a statement which electrified them all.

"You fellers are to hang 'round Weehawken till 'long towards dark, when Plums must come down to the ferry-slip. I'm goin' back to New York to fix up my business, so's I can stay with you till the worst of the trouble is over."

"Are you countin' on runnin' away with us?" Master Plummer asked, in surprise.

"That's jest the size of it. You fellers don't seem to know scarcely anything at all about takin' care of yourselves, an' if I don't 'tend to business you'll both be in jail before to-morrow mornin'. I'm goin' to size up things 'round perlice headquarters to-day, an' then come over to look after you. Jest as soon's the boat touches the slip, you two take a sneak, find some place where you can hide till night, an' then watch out for me."

Five minutes later, the fugitives stepped on Jersey soil, and Master Fernald's scouts were deployed to guard against an attack from the enemy until the two boys were lost to view in the distance. Then the amateur detective said, in a tone of grim determination, "Now, fellers, we'll go back, an' size up the cops in New York."

CHAPTER V.

IN THE CITY.

When Dan Fernald and his two assistants returned to their usual place of business in the city, they found Joe Potter's mercantile friends in a state of high excitement.

It seemed as if the eyes of each boy who was acquainted with Joe had been attracted to that particular advertisement, and business among a certain portion of the youthful merchants in the vicinity of City Hall Square was almost entirely suspended because of the startling information that "the lawyers were after Joe Potter."

It was only natural for each fellow to speculate as to the reason why the unfortunate fruit merchant should be "wanted," and many and wild were the theories advanced.

Some of the boys even went so far as to suggest that Joe had robbed a bank, and, in order to make such a proposition plausible, insinuated that he had failed in the fruit business simply for the purpose of deceiving the public as to the true state of his finances.

Little Billy Dooner ventured the opinion that "perhaps Joe had killed a *Italian*," but no one gave weight to the possible explanation, for Master Potter enjoyed the reputation of being as peaceable a boy as could be found in the city.

When each one of those more particularly interested had in turn given his theory regarding the mystery, without throwing any positive light on the subject, the conversation was always brought to a close with something like the following words:

"At any rate, he's gone a mighty long ways crooked, else the lawyers wouldn't spend money advertisin' for him."

The arrival of Dan Fernald and his assistants only served to heighten the mystery, for these young gentlemen positively refused to make any statement either for or against the missing boy, and the natural result was that they were credited with knowing very much more regarding the affair than really was the case.

Dan immediately assumed such an air as he believed befitted detectives, and hinted more than once that Joe's friends "would be s'prised before the day was ended."

Not until noon was there any change in the situation of affairs, and then a bootblack who worked in the vicinity of the Grand Central Station came down to City Hall Square with information that Plums was no longer attending to business.

"If he wasn't so bloomin' slow, I'd say he'd run away with Joe Potter," the informant added; "but as it is, he couldn't get out of the town in much less than a week, even if he humped hisself the best he knew how."

Under ordinary circumstances, Plums might have disappeared without causing a ripple of excitement among his business acquaintances, but since Joe Potter was missing also, it began to look as if the two might be together.

At three o'clock in the afternoon Sim Jepson startled the community of newsboys by announcing that he had been closely questioned by a man in citizen's clothing, who "looked for all the world like a cop got up in disguise," concerning Joe's habits, and Master Jepson added, on his own responsibility:

"They're after him hot, an' no mistake. He'll be mighty smart if he can keep out of sight when they've gone reg'larly to work huntin' him up."

This information disturbed Dan Fernald not a little.

Although quite positive he was a match for any detective or policeman in the city, Dan would have preferred to work on a case where there appeared to be less danger. This affair of Joe's was growing more serious each moment, and he who meddled with it might come to grief, but yet never for a moment did Master Fernald think of abandoning his friend.

"I'll do jest as I told him I would, no matter what kind of a scrape I get into," he said, confidentially, to Tim and Jerry. "You fellers must hang 'round here so's to find out all that's goin' on, an' be sure to let me know if any more men come here searchin' for Joe."

"But you ain't goin' to stay in Weehawken?"

"Well, I guess not."

"Then how shall we know where to find you?"

"Look here, Jerry Hayes, if you ain't smart enough to find us three when you know we're somewhere in Jersey, it ain't any kind of use for you to try to be a detective, 'cause you'll never make one. You must come over to Weehawken, an' get on our trail; then the rest of it will be easy enough."

"I'd like to know how we're goin' to do that?"

"If I've got to explain every little thing, I might jest as well run this case all by myself. Findin' a man when you don't know where he is, is the first thing a detective has to learn, an' you'd better put in a good part of your time studyin' it up. Now I'm goin' to see how much money I can raise, an' 'long 'bout five o'clock you can count on my sneakin' out of town."

While his friends were thus speculating, and working in what they believed to be his behalf, Joe was spending a most wretched day.

Immediately after landing from the ferry-boat, he, carrying the princess and followed by Plums, walked directly away from the river, believing that by such a course he would the sooner arrive at the open country.

Now that he was really running away, his fears increased momentarily.

While in the city, it had seemed to him as if he could summon up sufficient courage to surrender himself to those people, who most likely wanted to commit him to prison; but having once begun the flight, all his courage vanished,-- he no longer even so much as dreamed of facing the trouble.

The princess, well content with this morning stroll and the cake Joe had given her, appeared willing to continue such form of amusement indefinitely.

She laughed and crowed until the young guardian trembled lest she should attract undue attention to him, and when, ceasing this, the little maid poured some wondrous tale in his ear, his heart smote him, for he believed she was urging to be taken home.

"I'll find your mother, baby darling, the very first thing after I get out of this scrape; but there couldn't any one blame me for runnin' away when the perlice are after me."

Plums was more discontented than alarmed during this journey. There was altogether too much walking in it to please him, and Joe pushed ahead so rapidly that he nearly lost his breath trying to keep pace with him.

"If you go on this way much longer I'll have to give the thing up," he said, in despair, when they were a mile or more from the ferry-slip.

"But you surely ought to walk as fast as I can when I am carrying the princess."

"Perhaps I ought'er, but I can't. I'm pretty near knocked out of time already. Why not slack up a little now, we're so far from the city?"

"I don't dare to, Plums. We haven't gone any distance yet, an' jest as likely as not the perlice here have had orders to stop us. Do the best you can a spell longer, an' perhaps we can find a place to hide in till you get rested."

Master Plummer made no reply; but his companion could readily see that he was suffering severely from such unusual exertions. His fat face was of a deep crimson hue; tiny streams of perspiration ran down his cheeks, and he breathed like one affected with the asthma.

There was little need for Master Plummer to explain that a halt would soon be necessary, for this Joe understood after but one glance at the unhappy-looking boy.

The princess's guardian had hoped they might gain the forest, where it would be possible to hide, or at the least find a small thicket of trees or bushes; but as yet there were dwellings on every hand, and each instant the sun was sending down more fervent rays.

At the expiration of an additional ten minutes Plums gave up the struggle by saying, despondently:

"It's no use, Joe, I couldn't keep on my feet half an hour longer, to save the lives of all hands. S'posin' you leave me here, an' go on by yourself? That will be better than for both of us to be arrested."

"I'm not sich a chump as to do anything of that kind, old man. You got into this trouble through tryin' to help me, an' I'll stay right side of you till it's over."

"But it ain't safe to hang 'round here."

"I know it; yet what else can we do? We're bound to take the chances, an' I'm goin' to stop at one of these houses."

Master Plummer appeared thoroughly alarmed, yet he made no protest against the proposed plan.

At that moment imprisonment had less horrors for him than such severe exertions.

Joe's greatest fear was that, while asking for shelter, he would be forced to explain why he was taking the princess with him for a long tramp, when the day was so warm; and, dangerous though such a course might be, he was resolved to tell only the truth.

"If I can't get through without lyin', I'll go to jail, an' take my medicine like a man," he said to himself, and once this resolve had been made he stopped in front of the nearest dwelling.

His timid knock at the door was answered by a motherly-looking German woman, who appeared surprised at seeing the visitors.

"If we'll pay whatever you think is right, may we come in an' stay a little while?" Joe asked, falteringly. "It's awful hot, an' the princess must be tired."

"Kannst du kein deutch sprechen?"

Joe looked at her in bewilderment, and Plums said in a whisper:

"She talks a good deal the way the princess does. I guess the kid must know what she says."

"We want to come in for a little while, an' are willin' to pay you for it," Joe repeated, and the old lady shook her head doubtfully as she leaned over and kissed the princess squarely on the mouth.

"Ich kann nicht Englisch sprechen."

As she spoke, the good woman gave Joe a smile which went far towards reassuring him, and he in turn shook his head.

"I guess we'll have to give it up," Plums said, mournfully. "It's too bad, for she must be a real good kind of an old woman, or she wouldn't have kissed the princess."

Joe hesitated an instant, and had half turned to go when the old lady stretched out her hands towards the child, who immediately displayed a very decided desire to forsake the boy who had ministered to her wants so devotedly during the past twelve or fifteen hours.

"Komme herein aus der hitze."

This was said with a gesture which could not be misunderstood, as the old lady took the princess in her arms; and Joe followed without hesitation, Master Plummer saying, meanwhile:

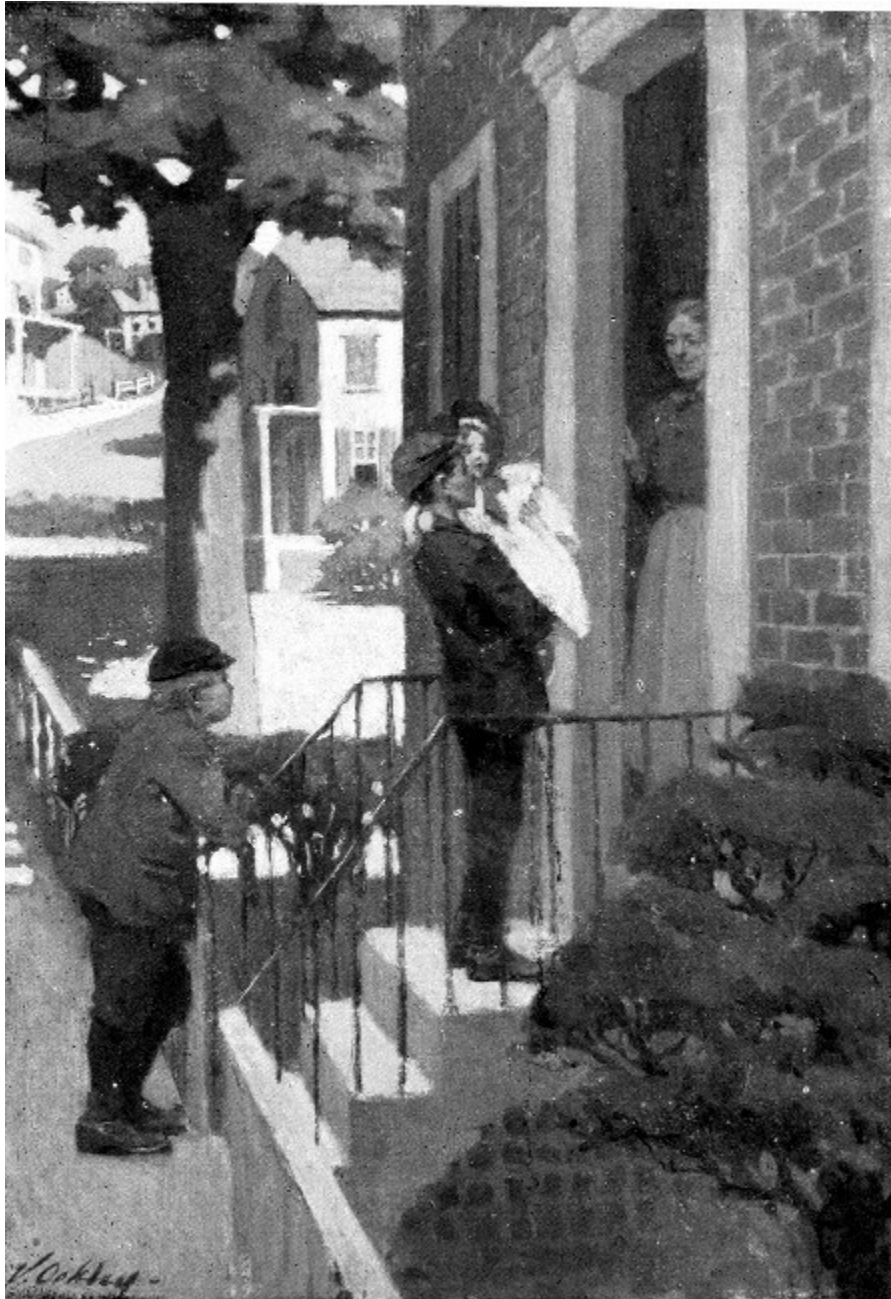
"If she can't talk United States, an' that seems to be about the size of it, there ain't any chance she can tell where we are. It's mighty lucky we struck her, 'cordin' to my way of thinkin'!"

Joe was of the same opinion, when the old lady ushered them into a cleanly but scantily furnished room, so darkened as to make it seem cool by comparison with the scorching rays of the sun on the pavements, and then gave her undivided attention to the baby.

She took off the child's hat and cloak, and, carrying her into an adjoining room, bathed her face and hands, much to the delight of the princess.

"I'd 'a' washed her up this mornin' if I hadn't been 'fraid she'd get mad about it," Joe said, regretting most sincerely that he had not attended to the little maiden's toilet in a proper manner.

"What's the good? Old Mis' Carter says dirt makes children healthy, an' if that's straight I should say your princess needs a couple of quarts to put her in trim."



"MAY WE COME IN AN' STAY A LITTLE WHILE?"

"She ain't like Mis' Carter's kids, so what's the use to keep throwin' them up all the time. Say, Plums, look at the old woman now! Why didn't I think of cuddlin' the princess in that style?"

Their hostess, having made the little maid more presentable, gathered the child to her breast, as she rocked to and fro in a capacious armchair, singing a lullaby, which speedily closed the two brown eyes in slumber.

"I shouldn't feel very bad if the old woman served me in the same way," Master Plummer said, with a long-drawn sigh, as he straightened himself up in the wooden chair. "I'd rather lay right down on the floor an' go to sleep than do anything else I know of."

"But you mustn't, Plums, you mustn't," Joe whispered, nervously. "If you should do anything like that she'd think we was more'n half fools, both of us."

"Seid ihr kinder hungrich?"

The old lady spoke so abruptly that the boys started as if in alarm, both looking at her with such a puzzled expression on their faces that she must have known they failed to understand the question.

"Perhaps she thinks we can't pay our way," Plums whispered. "You might let her know we've got money, even if you

can't do anything better."

Joe acted upon the suggestion at once by taking several coins from his pocket, holding them towards the old lady.

She shook her head and smiled cheerily. Then, laying the princess on a chintz-covered couch without disturbing the child's slumbers, she left the room.

Again was Master Potter surprised by the apparently careless, yet deft manner in which she handled the child, and he said, in a tone of admiration to his friend:

"Don't it jest knock your eye out to see the way she fools with the princess, an' yet the little thing seems to like it? If I'd done half as much as that she'd be screechin' blue murder by this time."

"Women know how to take care of kids better'n boys do, though I ain't any slouch at it, 'cause I've tried it so many times down to Mis' Carter's."

"I notice you couldn't stop her from cryin' last night."

"I didn't try, did I? Perhaps if you hadn't sent me racin' all over the city for milk I might'er done somethin'."

This conversation was interrupted by the German lady, who returned, bringing two plates, one of which was heaped high with seed-cakes, and the other filled with generous slices of boiled ham.

If a boy's mouth ever did water, Plums was in that peculiar condition just at that moment.

Alarmed by the news which Dan Fernald brought, he had, for perhaps the first time in his life, forgotten to eat breakfast, and nothing could have been more welcome in his eyes than this plentiful supply of food.

"Better pay her for it," he whispered to Joe, "an' then she'll be likely to bring on more. I could eat all she's got there, an' not half try."

Joe did as his companion wished; but the old lady positively refused to take the money until the boy urged her in dumb show, when, with the air of one who complies with a request against her will, she took from Master Potter's outstretched hand a dime.

Plums had not waited for this business to be finished before he began the attack, and when Joe turned he saw that his comrade had assumed a position of supreme content, with three seed-cakes in one hand, and a large slice of ham in the other.

"You're awfully good to us, an' I wish you'd taken more money," Joe said, as he helped himself to a small portion of the food, knowing, even as he spoke, that his words would not be understood.

The old lady smiled, and went out of the room again, returning almost immediately with a glass of water and more ham, much to Master Plummer's satisfaction.

"I guess we're fixed jest about as well as we could be, an' it'll pay us to hang on here till Dan comes over. This beats walkin' 'round the streets."

"Perhaps she wouldn't like it if we stayed a great while," Joe suggested.

"Well, s'posin' she shouldn't? So long's she can't talk United States there's no chance of her turmin' us out, or tellin' where we are."

"Would you stay here when you thought she didn't want us?"

"I'd stay in most any place where we was strikin' it as rich as we are jest now," and then Master Plummer ceased speaking, in order that he might give more attention to this unexpected meal.



CHAPTER VI.

DAN, THE DETECTIVE.

It was sunset, and Master Plummer stood at the ferry-slip in Weehawken, awaiting the coming of Dan, the detective.

Much against his will had the fat boy left the home of the German lady to set out on this long tramp. He understood that it would not be safe for Joe to come out of hiding, and, because of the arrangements made by Dan in the morning, it was absolutely necessary some one should meet the amateur detective at the ferry-slip.

Hence it was that Master Plummer was loitering around just outside the gate, keeping a close watch upon all who came from the boat, and on the alert for anything bearing the resemblance of a blue coat with brass buttons.

Dan Fernald, believing that a detective who knew his business would not make a single movement without a certain attendant mystery, had decided it was not safe for him to leave New York in the daytime, and therefore Plums's time of waiting was exceedingly long.

Not until eight o'clock did Dan appear; and then, instead of answering his friend's hail, he marched gravely out through the gate, crossed the street, and, during several seconds, stood peering first to the right and then the left, while from the opposite side Plums looked at him in bewilderment.

Master Plummer had spoken to his friend, but received no reply; had followed a certain distance without being apparently recognised, and stopped in bewilderment when Dan indulged in these curious antics.

Finally the fat boy grew impatient, and, crossing the street, asked, sharply:

"What's the matter with you, anyhow, Dan?"

Master Fernald glanced at his friend only sufficiently long to wink in a most mysterious fashion, and then, turning quickly around, marched gravely up the street without speaking.

Plums watched in anxiety until, seeing his friend dart into a doorway, it suddenly dawned upon him that Dan was desirous of avoiding a too public interview.

Then Plums hastened after him, muttering to himself:

"That feller thinks he's awful smart, scrimpin' an' scrapin' 'round here as if there was a dozen perlicemen right on his track. If he'd go on about his business nobody'd notice him; but when he's kitin' 'round in this fashion folks are bound to wonder what's the matter."

On arriving at the doorway, he looked in, but without seeing any one, because of the gloom.

Thinking he had made a mistake, Plums would have hurried on, but for a hoarse whisper which came from out the darkness.

"Come in here, quick! Don't stand there where everybody'll tumble to who you are."

Plums obeyed immediately, as was his custom when any one spoke harshly, and Dan seized him by the arm.

"Keep quiet, now, whatever you do, 'cause I wouldn't be s'prised if more'n a dozen cops followed me over on the boat."

"I didn't see any," Plums replied, in astonishment.

"That's 'cause you didn't keep your eye peeled. Of course they wouldn't try to get on my track while they was dressed in uniform. I saw one I felt certain about; he was disguised like a truckman, an' drivin' a team, but he couldn't fool me."

"Do they know where Joe an' I are?"

"I don't think so; but jest as soon as I left the town they was bound to have their eyes open mighty wide, 'cause I guess it must be known up to perlice headquarters that I'm in on this case. Where's Joe?"

Master Plummer told the amateur detective of the very pleasant refuge they had found, and concluded by saying:

"First off we couldn't talk with the old woman at all; but at dinner-time a kid about half as big as me, what calls her 'grandmarm,' come home, an' he knew how to talk United States. Little as he was, he could chin in the old woman's lingo as fast as she. That fixed things for us. Joe said he was out lookin' for work, which is the dead truth when you come to

that, an' made a trade for us to stay there a couple of days. I was 'fraid they'd ask about the princess, but it seems like they didn't. They thought she belonged to us straight enough, so it's been all plain sailin'."

"I didn't get over here any too soon, if you fellers have gone to stoppin' at a house."

"But why shouldn't we, when we found one like that where they'll take us in mighty cheap? An' say, that old woman is the boss cook!"

"An' she'll get in jail, too, if you keep on this way. Here's you an' Joe advertised for by the lawyers, an' yet are sich chumps as to settle right down where the detectives will get on to you the very first thing."

"I ain't been advertised for."

"Well, that's where you make a mistake, Master Smartie. Perhaps you haven't seen the evenin' papers."

"What's in them?" Plums cried, in a tone of alarm.

"Pretty much the same as what you saw in the *Herald* this mornin', only that they're offerin' to pay for any news of Joe Potter an' a feller what's called 'Plums.'"

"Do you mean that, Dan? Are they really advertisin' for me?" Master Plummer asked, in a tone of terror.

"That's what they're doin', an' the way the cops are chasin' 'round town huntin' up bootblacks an' newsboys is a caution. Three different ones asked Jerry Hayes if he knew you or Joe; but you can bet they didn't find out very much. Jerry's sharp enough to keep his mouth shut."

"But what do they want me for? What have I done?"

"I reckon it's 'cause Joe slept at your house. Now the only safe thing is for us to strike off into the country as quick as we know how. We've got to walk all night before we so much as think of stoppin'."

"But what about the princess? We can't make that little thing travel from post to pillar."

"If Joe Potter hadn't been a fool he'd left her in town. It jest makes my blood boil when I think of his havin' a kid taggin' 'round after him, an' every detective in New York on his track!"

"I don't believe he'd be willin' to leave the princess, not even if he knew he was goin' to be 'rested the next minute."

"He's got to, or I'll throw up the job of tryin' to save him. Now we'll go up to this Dutch woman's house that you've been talkin' 'bout, an' snake him out. All I hope is we'll get away in time."

Master Plummer turned to walk out of the hallway in obedience to this command, when Dan, clutching him by the arm, brought the boy to a sudden standstill.

"What kind of a way is that to go out when the streets are full of detectives huntin' after you?"

"How else can I go?" Plums asked, in surprise.

"I'll show you. Watch out on what I do, an' act the very same way. I'll go on one side of the street, an' you on the other, so's folks sha'n't know we're together."

Master Plummer was puzzled to understand why it might work them mischief if the public knew they were acquainted with each other; but Dan was so peremptory in his commands that the boy did not venture to ask a question.

Then Master Fernald went out from the hallway, in what he evidently believed was the most approved detective fashion of walking, and, as Plums confidentially told Joe later, "he acted like he was a jumpin'-jack, with some one pullin' the string mighty hard."

The two went slowly up the street, one on either side, and such of the citizens of Weehawken who saw them were mystified by their singular method of proceeding.

Dan quieted down somewhat after half an hour had passed, for no slight amount of labour was required to continue the supposed detective manner of walking, and, before arriving at the house where Joe had taken refuge, he behaved very nearly like other and more sensible boys.

"No, I won't go in," he said, decidedly, when Plums proposed that he call upon the old lady. "You don't catch me showin' myself 'round this place any more'n I can help, 'cause there's no tellin' when the perlice will be here askin' questions, an' I'm goin' to steer clear of trouble."

"Shall I tell Joe to come out?" Plums asked, timidly, for Dan's superior wisdom awed him.

"Of course, else how can I see him? Don't let that kid tag on behind, for it's mighty dangerous to be on the street with her. That advertisement about you had in it that you was last seen with a little girl."

Master Plummer entered the dwelling, and Dan paced to and fro on the sidewalk, with a consequential air, until Joe appeared.

"Why don't you come in?" the latter asked. "Mrs. Weber--that's the name of the lady who owns the house--is mighty nice, even if you can't talk to her."

"I ain't so foolish as to show myself in such places, an' you ought'er let your head be cut off before takin' all these chances."

"But we couldn't keep the princess out-of-doors from mornin' till night, an'--"

"That's what's makin' all the trouble, Joe Potter. If you hadn't brought the kid along we'd get through this scrape in good style."

"But I couldn't have left her in Plums's shanty alone."

"It was a fool business pickin' her up in the first place, 'cause if you never'd done it, them lawyers couldn't say you had a kid with you. That's the very best way they have to let folks know who you are. Anyhow, you've got to give her the dead shake now, if you want me to keep hold of this case."

"Then I'll have to get along the best I can without you, for I won't run away from a poor little baby, who counts on my findin' her folks."

Joe spoke so decidedly that the amateur detective understood he could not easily be turned from his purpose, and Master Fernald was astonished. He had supposed that his threat to "drop the case" would have reduced the unfortunate merchant to submission, and it seemed little less than madness for Joe and Plums to continue the flight without the guiding hand of one so wise as himself.

"Of course, if you don't want me, that settles it," he said, sulkily. "I ain't throwin' my time away when folks had rather I wasn't 'round; but you'll get into a heap of trouble without somebody what knows the ropes, to steer you."

"I would like to have you with us, Dan; but I won't leave that poor little princess when she needs me so much."

"But how you goin' to fix it nights? We've got to sleep outdoors mostly all the time, an' she'd soon get wore up with that kind of knockin' 'round."

"Why must we sleep outdoors?"

Dan explained that the search for the supposed criminal was to be prosecuted with such vigour that even Master Plummer was included in the advertisements, which piece of news both alarmed and mystified Joe.

"What are they after him for? Does anybody claim he's been goin' crooked?"

"I s'pose it's 'cause he let you sleep in his shanty. You see, Joe, the lawyers are bound to nab you if the thing can be done, an' you've got to give up sleepin' in houses. It might work once or twice; but you'd be sure to run across somebody what had read the papers, an' then you'd find yourself an' the princess in jail mighty quick. The evenin' papers said a large reward would be paid, an' perhaps, by mornin', they'll raise the price to as much as ten dollars."

It can well be understood how disturbed in mind Joe was at learning that his enemies were so eager to capture him; but yet he had no intention of abandoning the princess, until Plums made a suggestion which seemed like an exceedingly happy one.

"Why not pay old Mis' Weber somethin' to take care of her for two or three days?" he asked. "The little thing would get along a good deal better with a woman, an' we can sneak back here once in awhile to make certain she's all right. I don't believe them lawyers will spend very much more money huntin' for us, 'cause we ain't worth it, no matter what we've done."

"That's the very best snap you could fix up!" Dan cried, approvingly. "I'd been thinkin' of somethin' like that myself; but didn't have time to tell you about it. I've got more'n two dollars that I borrowed to help you fellers through with this scrape, an' that ought'er be a good deal more'n enough to keep her till we can earn more."

Joe understood that it would be to the princess's advantage if he left her with the kind old German lady, and at once

decided in favour of the plan.

Never for a moment did he fancy they might be as safe in this house as anywhere else, but firmly believed a continuation of the flight was absolutely necessary, as Dan had announced.

"I'll see what Mis' Weber says about it, an' if she's willin', we'll go right away."

"Don't stay in there all night chinnin', 'cause it's mighty dangerous for us to be hangin' 'round here," Dan called after him as he entered the dwelling, and Joe hastened the matter as much as possible.

The princess was in bed sleeping quietly, and looking, as Plums expressed it, "fit to eat." Mrs. Weber's grandson was ready to act as interpreter, and in a few moments Joe had made the proposition.

The good woman asked no questions concerning the parents of the child it was proposed she should keep, and her silence on this point may have been due to the fact that, even with her grandson's aid, it was difficult to understand all the boys said.

She was willing to take the princess for a week, but not longer, and decided that one dollar would repay her for the labour.

"Tell your grandmother we'll make the trade," Joe said, quickly, delighted because the sum named was so much less than he expected. "I'll be back here in two days at the longest, an' she's to take the very best care of the little thing."

"Granny would be kind even to a mouse," Master Weber replied, with an air of pride, and Joe added, promptly:

"I ought'er know as much by this time, an' if I didn't, the princess wouldn't be left with her. That poor little swell hasn't got anybody to look out for her but me, till we find her folks, an' I ain't takin' chances of her comin' to harm. Here's the dollar, an' you tell your granny I'll be back by the day after to-morrer if all the cops in New York are close after me."

The little German boy looked up in perplexity, for he failed to understand the greater portion of what Joe had said, and the latter was in too great a hurry to heed the fact.

A shrill whistle from the outside told that detective Dan was growing impatient, and Joe started towards the door, after seeing the old lady take the money; but halted an instant later.

"Is there something more you want granny to do?" the German boy asked, and Joe was at a loss for a reply.

"I was thinkin', perhaps,--if, course, it wouldn't make any difference to your granny,--say, I'm goin' to sneak in an' kiss the princess!"

The boy nodded carelessly, but Joe made no effort to carry his threat into execution.

Again the amateur detective whistled, and Master Potter stepped towards the bedroom door, but halted before gaining it.

"Perhaps her folks wouldn't want a duffer like me doin' anything of that kind," he muttered, and straightway walked out of the house as rapidly as his legs would carry him, much as if he feared to remain longer lest the temptation should be too great to resist.

"It begun to look as if you was goin' to stay all night," Dan said, petulantly, when Joe appeared. "There's more'n a hundred people walked past here, an' I'll bet some of 'em was huntin' for us; we've got to get out of this place mighty lively, if you don't want to be chucked into jail."

Plums looked so thoroughly terrified that Joe at once understood the amateur detective had been frightening him by picturing improbable dangers, and said, almost sharply:

"There's no use makin' this thing any worse than it really is."

"That can't be done, Joe Potter. You're in an awful scrape, an' don't seem to know it."

"I wish I'd stood right up like a man till I'd found the princess's folks, an' then gone to jail, if the lawyers are so set on puttin' me there."

"What's comin' over you now?"

"I'm thinkin' of that poor little swell we've brought out here."

"She's a good deal better off than if you let her tag along behind."

"That may be; but I ought'er found her folks instead of runnin' away."

"Now, see here, Joe Potter, you're makin' a fool of yourself, an' all about a kid what's goin' to have a soft snap while she stays here. Of course if you want to be put into jail for two or three years, I won't say another word, an' you can rush right straight back to the city."

"Don't stand here talkin'!" Plums cried, in an agony of apprehension. "We've got to leave, else nobody knows what may happen!"

Dan seized Joe by the arm, literally forcing him onward, and the two who were ignorant of having committed any crime continued the flight from the officers of the law.



CHAPTER VII.

AUNT DORCAS.

When the three had set out from Mrs. Weber's home, the amateur detective announced that no halt would be made until sunrise.

Joe, whose thoughts were with the princess, gave little heed to this statement, if, indeed, he understood it, and Master Plummer had been so terrified by Dan's positive assertion regarding the possibility of an immediate arrest that he had failed to realise the labour which would be required in thus prolonging the flight.

Before an hour passed, however, even the detective himself began to think he might have made a rash statement, and Plums, unaccustomed to such violent exercise, was well-nigh exhausted.

By this time Joe had come to understand what might be the result if Dan's advice was followed implicitly, and this, together with the knowledge that each moment he was increasing the distance between himself and the princess, served to make him reckless.

"Look here, Dan Fernald," he said, coming to a second halt. "Let's talk over this thing before we go any further."

"Perhaps you think we can afford to loaf 'round here," the amateur detective said, sternly. "If you fellers want to keep your noses out of jail, you'd best hump yourselves till daylight, an', even then, we won't be far enough away."

"We're jest as far now as I'm goin'," and there was that in Joe's voice which told his companion that he would not be persuaded into changing his mind.

"What?" Dan screamed.

"That's all there is to it. I'll stop here, an' you fellers can keep on if you like."

"But, Joe, if there was woods somewhere near I wouldn't say a word. How can you hide where there's so many houses close 'round?"

"I don't count on hidin', 'cause I can't afford it. Even if them lawyers get hold of me to-morrer mornin', I'm goin' to stop here."

"Right here in the road?" Plums asked, with less anxiety than he would have shown an hour before, when he was not so tired.

"Well, I don't mean to say I'll camp down in the road. But you fellers listen to me. If the detectives are out after us, an' I s'pose, of course, they are, we sha'n't be any safer twenty miles away than in this very spot. We've got to stop sometime, an' it may as well be now. I promised to go back to see the princess in two days, an' I'll keep my word."

"But where'll you stay all that time?" Dan asked, as if believing this was a question which could not be satisfactorily answered.

"I don't know yet; but I'm thinkin' of goin' up to that house," and Joe pointed to a tiny cottage, which in the gloom could be but dimly seen amid a clump of trees. "There's a light in the window, so of course the folks are awake. I'll ask 'em if they haven't got work enough about the place sich as I could do to pay my board over one day, an' if they say no, I'll try at the next house."

"You might as well go right into jail as do a thing like that," Dan said, angrily.

"I ain't so sure but it would have been a good deal better if I had, for by this time the princess would be with her folks, where she belongs."

"It seems to me you're terribly stuck on that kid."

"Well, what if I am!" and Joe spoke so sharply that Master Fernald did not think it wise to make any reply.

During fully a moment the three stood silently in the road looking at each other, and then Joe asked of Master Plummer:

"Will you come with me?"

The possibility of resting his tired limbs in a regular bed appealed strongly to the fat boy, and, understanding that he was about to agree to Joe's proposition, Dan said, gloomily:

"This is what a feller gets for tryin' to help you two out of a scrape. I've kept the detectives away so far, an' now you're goin' to give me the dead shake."

"There's no reason why you couldn't stay with us--"

"You won't catch me in a house for another month, anyhow."



"JOE POINTED TO A TINY COTTAGE."

The argument which followed this announcement was not long, but spirited.

Joe explained that it was his intention to remain in that vicinity, and within forty-eight hours to return to Weehawken, according to the promise he had made Mrs. Weber.

Dan continued to insist that it was in the highest degree dangerous to loiter there, and professed to believe himself deeply injured, because, after having "taken up the case" in such an energetic fashion, he was probably in danger of arrest through having aided these two supposed criminals.

Master Plummer had but little to say; the thought of walking all night was nearly as painful as that of being imprisoned, and he was willing to throw all the responsibility of a decision upon his friend.

Before ten minutes had passed, the matter was settled,—not satisfactorily to all concerned, but as nearly so as could have been expected.

Joe and Plums were to call at the cottage with the hope of finding temporary employment, and the amateur detective was to conceal himself in the vicinity as best he might, until he should be able to learn something definite regarding the purpose of the lawyers who had advertised.

When Joe, followed by Master Plummer, turned from the highway into the lane which led to the cottage, the amateur detective scrambled over the fence on the opposite side of the road, and scurried through the field as if believing he was hotly pursued.

Not until they had arrived nearly at the house did Master Plummer make any remark, and then he said, with a long-drawn sigh:

"Dan Fernald makes too much work out of his detective business to suit me. I couldn't walk all night if it was to save me life."

"I don't believe there's any reason why we should, Plums. Because Dan thinks the cops have followed us over to Weehawken doesn't make it so, an' if we can't hide here, we can't anywhere, 'cordin' to my way of thinkin'. Besides, it wouldn't be fair to go off so far that we can't get back to the princess."

Then Joe advanced to the side door, and knocked gently, Plums whispering, hoarsely, meanwhile:

"Be ready to skip, if you hear a dog. I've been told that folks out this way keep reg'lar bloodhounds to scare away tramps."

"I ain't 'fraid of dogs as much as I am that the man who lives here will run us off the place the first minute he sees our faces," Joe replied, and at that instant the door was opened.

Holding a lamp high above her head, and peering out into the gloom as if suffering from some defect of vision, stood a little woman, not very much taller than Joe, whose wrinkled face told she had passed what is termed the "middle age" of life.

Joe's surprise at seeing this tiny lady, when he had expected to be confronted by a man, prevented him from speaking at once, and the small woman asked, with mild curiosity:

"Whose children are you?"

This was a question Joe was not prepared to answer, and he stammered and stuttered before being able to say:

"I don't know as we're anybody's, ma'am. You see we ain't got any place to stop in for a day or two, an' thought perhaps a farmer lived here what would have work we could do to pay for our board."

"Are you hungry, child?" the small woman asked, quickly, and, as it seemed to Joe, anxiously.

"Not very much now, 'cause we've had a good supper; but we will be in the mornin', you know."

And Master Plummer interrupted, as he pinched his companion's arm to reduce him to silence:

"We've been walkin' a good while since then, an' it seems like I was most starved."

"You poor child! Come right into the house, an' it'll be strange if I can't find something to eat; though, to tell the truth, I didn't have real good luck with this week's batch of bread; but if custard pie—"

"If custard pie!" Master Plummer cried, ecstatically. "Why, I'd be fixed great if I could have some!"

He was following the small woman as he spoke, and, after closing and barring the outer door, the hostess ushered them into such a kitchen as they had never seen before.

A spacious room, in which it seemed as if a hundred persons might have found ample elbow-room, with a yellow, painted floor, on which not a grain of dirt could be seen, and with numerous odd, stiff-looking chairs ranged around the sides at regular intervals. At one end an enormous fireplace, in front of which was a cook-stove actually glittering with polish, and on the mantel behind it an array of shining tins.

As seen from the road, in the gloom, the cottage had not appeared even as large as this kitchen, and because of such fact the boys were more surprised than they otherwise would have been.

Once in the room, where everything was so cleanly that, as Master Plummer afterwards expressed it, "it come near

givin' him a pain," the boys stood awkwardly near the door, uncertain as to what might be expected of them.

"You can sit right here while I get you something to eat," and the hostess placed two chairs in front of a small table in one corner of the room.

Master Plummer advanced eagerly, thinking only of the pleasure which was about to be his, when the small lady exclaimed, as if in alarm:

"Mercy on us, child! You're tracking dust all over the floor. Go right back into the entry, and wipe your feet."

Plums failed to see that he had soiled the floor to any extent, but both he and Joe obeyed the command instantly, and while they were engaged in what seemed to them useless labour, the small woman wiped carefully, with a damp cloth, the dusty imprints of their shoes from the floor.

"I never had any experience in my own family with boys," the odd-looking little woman said, half to herself, "and perhaps that's why I don't understand 'em any better; but I never could make out why they should be so reckless with dirt."

"I didn't think my shoes were so dusty when I come in, else I'd taken them off," Joe said, apologetically. "You see, ma'am, we never saw a floor as clean as this one."

This compliment was evidently pleasing, for the small woman looked up kindly at her guests, and said, in a friendly tone:

"Don't call me 'ma'am,' child. I've been 'aunt Dorcas' to all the children in this neighbourhood ever since I can remember, and anything else doesn't sound natural."

"Do you want us to call you 'aunt Dorcas'?" Joe asked, in surprise, and Plums winked gravely at his companion.

"Of course I do. Now, if your feet are clean, sit down, and I'll get the pie."

The boys tiptoed their way to the table, as if by such method they would be less liable to soil the floor, and aunt Dorcas, taking the lamp with her, disappeared through a door which evidently led to the cellar, leaving them in the darkness.

"Say, ain't this the greatest snap you ever struck?" Plums whispered. "I'll bet aunt Dorcas is a dandy, an' if Dan Fernald knew what he's missin', he'd jest about kick hisself black an' blue."

Master Plummer was still better satisfied with the situation when their hostess returned with a large custard pie, which she placed on the table, and immediately afterwards disappeared within the cellar-way again.

"She's gone for more stuff!" Plums said, in a tone of delight. "If there ain't too much work to be done 'round this place, I'd like to stay here a year."



"SHE HAD A PLATE HEAPED HIGH WITH COOKIES."

When aunt Dorcas entered the kitchen again, she had a plate heaped high with cookies, on the top of which were three generous slices of cheese.

This collection was placed by the side of the pie; the odd little woman brought plates, knives, and forks, and two napkins from the pantry, and, having arranged everything in proper order, said, as she stood facing the boys, with her head slightly inclined to one side, until to Joe she presented much the appearance of a sparrow:

"If you can eat all there is here, I'll bring more, an' willingly. Afterwards, we will talk about what is to be done for the night."

"I can eat an' talk, too, jest as well as not," Plums said, as he drew the pie towards him.

Perhaps aunt Dorcas thought he intended to appropriate the whole to himself, for she hurriedly cut it into four pieces, one of which she placed on his plate.

From Plums's manner of beginning the feast, there was good reason to believe he had told the truth when he said he was starving, and, as she watched him, an expression of deepest sympathy came over aunt Dorcas's face.

"It's too bad I haven't some meat to give you, child, for you must be famishing."

"I'd rather have this," Plums replied, speaking with difficulty, because of the fullness of his mouth, and it appeared to his hostess as if he had no sooner begun on a quarter of the pie than it disappeared.

She gave the fat boy another section of the yellow dainty, watching him like one fascinated, as he devoured it. Then Plums began an onslaught on the cookies, after casting a wistful glance at the remaining quarter of the pie.

Joe was ashamed because his companion ate so greedily, and kicked him, under the table, as a warning that he restrain his appetite; but Master Plummer failed to understand the signal, and ate all the more greedily, because he believed Joe thought it time to bring the feast to a close.

"You mustn't think anything of his stuffin' hisself like this, ma'am,—I mean, aunt Dorcas," Joe said, apologetically. "Plums always was the biggest eater in New York, an' I guess he always will be."

"What did you call him?" aunt Dorcas asked.

"Plums was what I said. That ain't exactly his name, but it comes mighty near to it. George H. Plummer is what he calls hisself when he wants to be swell."

"I think 'George' sounds much better than 'Plums,'" aunt Dorcas said, thoughtfully.

"Perhaps it does; but it don't fit him half so well."

Meanwhile, the subject of this conversation was industriously engaged devouring the cookies, and one would have said that he had no interest in anything else.

Aunt Dorcas stood looking questioningly at Joe, and, thinking he understood that which was in her mind, he said:

"My name is Joe Potter. I used to keep a fruit-stand down on West Street, in New York, till I busted up, an' then I found the princess, but--"

Joe checked himself in time to preserve his secret. An instant later he wished he had explained to aunt Dorcas why he was there, because of the sympathy he read in her face.

The little woman waited a few seconds for him to continue, but, since he remained silent, she asked, with mild curiosity:

"Who is the princess?"

"She's a swell little girl what's lost her folks, an' I'm takin' care of her for a spell. Say, ma'am,—I mean, aunt Dorcas,—is there any work Plums an' I can do to pay for a chance of stoppin' here over to-morrow?"

"I suppose I might find enough, Joseph, for there's always plenty to be done around a place, no matter how small it is; but I'm not certain you'd be strong enough to spade up the garden, and clear the drain, even if you knew how. They say city boys are dreadful unhandy when it comes to outdoor work."

"Jest you try us an' see!" Joe cried, with animation. "We ain't sich chumps but that we know how to do most anything, after we've studied over it a spell. Will you let us stay if we do work enough?"

"I surely ought to be willing to do that much for my fellow creatures, Joseph, even though I get nothing in return; but I can't say it won't be a trial for me to have two boys around the house after I've lived alone so long. Martha, Mary, and I took care of this place, with the help of a man in summer, a good many years after our parents died, and I suppose we got fussy and old-maidish-like in our ways," aunt Dorcas said, growing reminiscent. "Martha went home to heaven seven years ago in September, and Mary followed her the next January. Since then I've been alone, and it stands to reason I'm more old-maidish than ever; but I hope I could keep two homeless boys twenty-four hours without fretting."

Then aunt Dorcas crossed the room to the mantel, in order to light another lamp, and Plums whispered, hoarsely:

"Say, Joe, what do you s'pose she put this clean towel here for? I've got custard on it, an' I'm afraid that'll make her mad."

Joe unfolded his napkin inquisitively, and looked at it an instant before he understood for what purpose it must have been intended.

Then, his cheeks reddening, he replied, in a low tone:

"She must have counted on our bein' willin' to wash our faces, but didn't want to say so right out, so put the towels here to remind us, an' I'm as ashamed as I can be 'cause I didn't think of it before."

The meal had come to an end, for the very good reason that there was nothing more on the table to be eaten.

While aunt Dorcas was talking with Joe, Plums had slyly taken the last remaining section of pie, having previously devoured the cookies and cheese, and, with a long-drawn sigh of content, he replied to his friend's remark by saying:

"I guess I couldn't eat any more if I'd washed my face a dozen times, so it don't make much difference."

Joe arose from the table, and seated himself in one of the chairs which were ranged precisely against the wall, Master Plummer following his example.

Aunt Dorcas, having lighted the second lamp, said:

"I'll leave you boys here alone while I attend to making up a bed. You could sleep in the spare-room, I suppose; but my best sheets are there, and I don't just like to--Why, you didn't use the napkins!"

Joe's face was of a deep crimson hue, as he replied:

"If I'd seen any soap an' water I'd known what they meant; but it's been so long since I was in a reg'lar house that I've kind'er forgot how to behave."

Aunt Dorcas turned away quickly, and when she had left the room Plums said, as he unbent from the awkward position he had at first assumed in the straight chair:

"Dan Fernald ain't in this! He may be a mighty big detective, but he slips up when it comes to hustlin' for these kind of snaps!"

"Aunt Dorcas is nice, ain't she?"

"She's a corker!"

"If the princess was only here we'd be jest about as snug as any two fellers that could be found in this world."

"I'm going to give you the chamber over the kitchen; it is clean and comfortable, but, of course, not as nice as the spare-room," aunt Dorcas said, as she entered suddenly, causing Master Plummer to instantly assume a less negligent attitude.

"Plums an' me ain't slept in a reg'lar bed for so long that a blanket spread out on the floor would seem mighty good to us," Joe replied, and the little woman held up both hands in astonishment.

"Haven't slept in a bed! Well, I've heard of the heathen in our midst, but never believed I'd be brought in contact with them. How did you--But, there, I won't ask questions to-night, when I know you must be tired. We'll read a chapter, and then you can go to bed. I will wash the dishes afterwards."

Reverentially the little woman took a well-worn Bible from the small table beneath one of the windows, and while the two boys who were fleeing from the officers of the law, as they believed, gazed at her in wonderment and surprise, but not understanding that which they heard, she read one of the psalms.

Then kneeling, she prayed in simple language which reached their hearts, for the homeless ones within her gates.

Joe's eyes were moist when she rose to her feet, and Plums whispered, in a voice choked with emotion:

"She's a daisy, that's what's the matter with her!"

CHAPTER VIII.

A HUNGRY DETECTIVE.

When aunt Dorcas had ushered the boys into the "room over the kitchen," and left them with a kindly "good night," they gazed around in such astonishment as can best be depicted by Master Plummer's emphatic remark shortly after the little woman went down-stairs.

"I've always thought swells had a pretty soft snap when they went to bed; but I never counted on its bein' anything like this. Do you s'pose she means for us to get right into that bed, an' muss it all up?"

Joe did not reply for several seconds, and then said, doubtfully:

"It seems as if that's what she must have meant, else why did she tell about her best sheets bein' in the other room? I thought the old German woman's house was mighty nice; but it wasn't a marker 'longside of this. If the princess was only here!"

"You can bet I don't bother my head 'bout no princesses when I've got a chance to crawl into that nest. I almost wish now I'd had sense enough to use one of them towels we had on the table, 'cause my hands look pretty dirty when you get 'emside of that sheet."

"Well, see this, Plums! If you'll believe it, here's a pitcher full of water, an' soap, an' everything! Let's wash up now, will you?"

Ordinarily, Master Plummer would have met this suggestion with a decided refusal; but, being surrounded as he was by so much luxury, it seemed necessary he should do something in the way of celebrating.

It was not a very careful toilet which Plums made on this night, for he was in too great a hurry to get between the lavender-scented sheets to admit of spending much time on such needless work as washing his hands and face; but he was more cleanly, and perhaps felt in a better condition to enjoy the unusual luxury.

"Say, Joe, it's a mighty big pity we've got to go to sleep."

"Why?"

"'Cause we ought'er keep awake jest to know how much swellin' we're doin'. I stopped at a Chatham Street lodgin'-house one night, when I was feelin' kind of rich, an' thought the bed there was great; but it wasn't a marker 'longside of this one. I shouldn't wonder if there were feathers in it."

Joe was quite as well pleased with the surroundings as was his companion; but he said less on the subject because his mind was fully occupied with thoughts of the princess,--sad thoughts they were, for he was beginning to believe he had been wickedly selfish in taking her away from the place where her parents might have been found, simply to save himself from arrest.

He fell asleep, however, quite as soon as did the boy on whose conscience there was no burden, and neither of the fugitives were conscious of anything more until aroused by a gentle tapping on the chamber door, to hear aunt Dorcas say:

"It's five o'clock, children, and time all honest people were out of bed."

"We're gettin' up now," Joe cried, and he was on his feet in an instant; but Master Plummer lazily turned himself in the rest-inviting bed, as he muttered:

"I don't see how it makes a feller honest to get up in the night when he's out in the country where he hasn't got to go for the mornin' papers, an' I guess I'll stay here a spell longer."

"You won't do anything of the kind," and Joe pulled the fat boy out of bed so quickly that he had no time for resistance.

It was seldom Plums lost his temper; but now he was on the verge of doing so because of having been thus forcibly taken from the most comfortable resting-place he had ever known.

"Now, don't get on your ear," Joe said, soothingly. "Aunt Dorcas has told us to get up, an' that settles it. We're bound to do jest as she says, 'cause all these things are hers. It won't pay to turn rusty, Plums, else we may find ourselves fired out before breakfast, an' I *would* like to stay till to-morrow."

"Don't you want to stop any longer than that?" and Master Plummer began hurriedly to dress himself.

"Course I'd like to; but you see I've got to go back to the old German lady's in the mornin'."

"What good will that do? It ain't likely you can bring the princess here."

"I know that as well as you do; but I promised to be there in two days, an' I'm goin', so we won't have any talk about it."

Five minutes later, aunt Dorcas's guests were in the kitchen, where the little woman was preparing a most appetising breakfast, and he would have been a dull boy who did not understand that she must have been up at least two hours before arousing her visitors.

"It ain't right for you to wait on us jest like we was reg'lar folks, an' we ain't used to it," Joe said, in a tone of mild reproof. "Anything would have been good enough for us to eat, without your gettin' up so early an' workin' hard to cook it."

"Bless your heart, Joseph, I'm doing no more than if I was alone, except perhaps there may be more victuals on the table. My appetite isn't as hearty as it used to be; but I've got a pretty good idea how it is with growing boys."

"You're mighty good to us, aunt Dorcas, an' I'll feel a heap better if you'll give me some work to do before breakfast."

"I might have let you bring in the wood, if I'd thought; but I'm so accustomed to doing such things for myself that it never came into my mind. I wonder if you could split up a few kindlings? That is the most trying part of keeping house alone, for whenever I strike a piece of wood with an axe I never know whether it's going to break, or fly up and hit me in the face."

"Of course we can do it. Where's the axe?"

Aunt Dorcas led the way to the shed, where was her summer's store of wood, and before she returned to the kitchen Joe was causing the chips to fly in a way which made the little woman's heart glad.

"It does me good to see you work, Joseph. I have always lived in mortal terror of an axe; but you seem to know how to use one."

Joe earned his breakfast that morning fairly, and Plums appeared to think he had done his full share by sitting on the saw-horse, watching his comrade.

Then came the summons to breakfast, and Master Plummer was eyeing greedily a particularly large roasted potato, which he intended to take from the plate, if an opportunity presented itself, when aunt Dorcas suddenly bent her head, and invoked a blessing on the food.

Plums kicked Joe, under the table, to express his surprise at this, to him, singular proceeding, but, otherwise, behaved in a proper manner.

The meal was prolonged because of the fat boy's hearty appetite, and, when it was finally brought to a close, Joe said, as he rose from the table:

"Now, aunt Dorcas, if you'll show us something more to do I'll be glad, 'cause we've got to pay for what we've had, else it won't be a fair shake."

"You boys may go out and look around the place until I do the dishes, and then we will see what I am to set you about."

This was so nearly a request for them to leave the kitchen, that they lost no time in obeying, and when they were in the open air Master Plummer said, with an air of perplexity:

"She's a mighty fine woman, an' all that kind of thing; but I'd like to know what she's hintin' at by leavin' them towels on the table; they was both there jest the same's last night, even though she must have known that we was washed up in great shape."

"I noticed 'em, but don't believe there's anything out of the way about it. She's kind of funny, an' perhaps that's one of her queer spots."

Aunt Dorcas's property was not extensive, as the boys learned after walking over it.

There was an orchard either side of the lane which led from the highway, and, in the rear of the house, an acre of ground, which had been cultivated at some time in the past.

The buildings consisted of the cottage itself, the wood-shed, a second shed which might once have been used as a carriage-house, and a small barn or stable.

By the time they had concluded their investigations, aunt Dorcas joined them, and said, with an odd smile on her withered face:

"It isn't much of a farm, as farms go nowadays, boys, but it's my home, and very dear to me. Mr. McArthur, one of the neighbours, cuts the grass in the orchards, and pays me a little something for it. I usually have a garden out here; but this year it was neglected, until now it seems too late for early vegetables."

"It wouldn't take us long to chuck in a pile of seeds, if that's all you want," and one to have seen Master Plummer, at that moment, would have believed him the most energetic of boys.

After aunt Dorcas explained that it would be necessary to spade up the ground, Plums's enthusiasm for gardening diminished; but Joe begged for the privilege of showing what he could do, and the little woman supplied them with such tools as she thought necessary.

"If you want to know about anything, come right up to the house. It is baking-day with me, and I shall be busy in the kitchen until dinner-time."

Then she left them, and Plums seated himself within the shadow of the barn, explaining, as he did so, that perhaps it would be better if he "kinder got the hang of the thing by seein' Joe work."

Eager to repay aunt Dorcas for her kindness, Joe Potter laboured industriously, despite the blisters which soon appeared on his hands, for half an hour or more, and then the two boys were startled by a warning hiss, which apparently came from one end of the barn.

"There must be snakes 'round here!" and Plums sprang to his feet, in alarm. "Jim Flannigan says they always hiss like that before they bite."

"Take hold of this spade for a little while, an' they won't bite you. It seems to me I'm doin' all the work, an' I know you ate more'n your share of the supper an' breakfast."

The hissing noise was heard again, and, as the two gazed in the direction from which it came, the head of Dan, the detective, appeared from behind the barn.

"What are you doin' there, tryin' to frighten us?" Plums asked, indignantly. "Why didn't you come right up like a man? There's nobody 'round here but aunt Dorcas, an' she wouldn't hurt a fly."

The amateur detective rose slowly to his feet, looking displeased.

"You two are the most careless fellers I ever saw. Here's all the cops in New York City out on your trail, an' you hollerin' fit to scare a horse."

"S'posin' we are?" and Master Plummer spoke boldly. "S'posin' the road was full of perlicemen, how could they see us while we're behind this barn?"

"It don't make any difference whether they could or not. You've got to mind your eye, if you want to keep out of jail, an' yellin' to me ain't the way to do it. If the folks 'round here should know I was on this case, jest as likely as not some of 'em would send word to the city, an' then your game would be up."

Plums had lost faith in Dan's detective ability, because of the fact that the latter had failed to take advantage of the opportunity to spend the night in aunt Dorcas's home, therefore he replied, boldly, to his friend's reproof:

"We're jest as safe here as we could be anywhere, an' I tell you what it is, Dan, you ought'er seen the layout we had last night an' this mornin'! Why, we slept in a bed that would make the tears come into your eyes, it was so soft; an' talk 'bout spreads! You couldn't get a breakfast down to McGinnis's restaurant, no matter how much you paid, that would come up to what we had!"

"Yes, you fellers are takin' all the chances, an' I'm pretty nigh starved to death. I haven't had so much as a smell of anything since yesterday noon."

"You ought'er seen the custard pie aunt Dorcas put out before us last night; thick as that!" and Plums measured on his finger the length of three inches or more. "An' a crust that went to pieces in your mouth like ice-cream."

"If I had a cold boiled potato I'd be mighty glad."

"We had a slat of hot roasted ones with nice butter on 'em, this mornin'," Plums continued, as if it were his purpose to increase the detective's hunger.

"I'd give a dime for a sandwich," Dan wailed, and Master Plummer described the fresh bread and sweet boiled ham with which aunt Dorcas had regaled them.

"Say, what's the use of tellin' 'bout what you've had, when I've been fillin' up on wind? It only makes a feller feel worse. Why can't you sneak in an' get something for me?"

Plums hesitated, as if willing to act upon his friend's suggestion, when Joe said, sharply:

"Look here, Dan, I'm awful sorry if you're hungry; but Plums can't sneak into aunt Dorcas's house an' get anything without her knowin' it, not while I'm 'round. It seems kinder tough to ask her to put out more stuff, after all we've had; but since you're starvin', we'll do it, an' offer to pay for what you eat."

"You mean to tell her I'm here?"

"Of course. I wouldn't lie to her, not for any money."

"Then I'll have to starve," Dan replied, angrily, "for I wouldn't let anybody know I was here while I'm tryin' to keep you fellers out of jail. But--"

"Here comes aunt Dorcas now!" Plums exclaimed, as he turned towards the house, and, in a twinkling, the amateur detective was screened from view by the barn.

"I thought you boys might be hungry, working so hard, and I brought out this plate of fresh doughnuts," the little woman said, as she placed on the grass a dish covered with a napkin. "Mr. McArthur always likes a bite of something when he is here, and it will do you good. How well you have gotten along! I wouldn't have thought you could have spaded up so much in such a short time."

Joe, feeling guilty, because he was keeping from aunt Dorcas the fact that detective Dan was on the premises, was at a loss for a reply, but Plums said, promptly:

"We'll be glad of 'em, aunt Dorcas, 'cause we're kinder tired jest now," and he would have begun to devour the doughnuts, but for a warning look from his comrade.

"You must eat them while they are hot," aunt Dorcas said, gravely, and Joe promised to do so as soon as he had finished a certain amount of work.

Then the little woman went back to her cooking, and she had hardly entered the dwelling before the amateur detective, with a hungry look in his eyes, came out, hurriedly, from his hiding-place.

"Now you've got somethin' to eat without our lyin' about it, so pitch in before aunt Dorcas comes back."

Dan did not need a second invitation, and an expression of deepest regret came over Plums's face, as he watched the cakes disappear with amazing rapidity.

"I guess I can stand it, now, till night," the detective said, in a tone of relief, as the meal was brought to a close, because all the food had been eaten.

"Are you countin' on stayin' 'round here?" Joe asked.

"Of course I am. How else would you fellers get out of the scrape, if I didn't?"

"Now, look here, Dan, there's no sense in anything like that. You ain't doin' any good, sneakin' 'round this house, 'cause, if the cops should come, how could you prevent their luggin' us off?"

"There's a good many ways that I might pull you through," Master Fernald replied, with an air of mystery. "If you knew as much about this business as I do, you'd be mighty glad to have me stay, 'specially when it ain't costin' you a cent."

"But I don't like to think of your bein' hungry, when it won't do the least little bit of good. Take my advice, an' go right back to the city."

"If I should do that, it wouldn't be two hours before you'd be in jail."

"We sha'n't go there any sooner if you leave us, an' it ain't jest square to aunt Dorcas."

"You can't give me points on detective business, Joe Potter, an' I've told the fellers in town that I'll look out for you."

That's what I'll do, whether you like it or not," and, after assuring himself, by stalking to and fro and gazing in every direction, that there were no enemies in the immediate vicinity, the amateur detective disappeared around the corner of the barn.

"It's too bad for Dan to act the way he's doin'," Joe said, with a long-drawn sigh. "I'm 'fraid, if aunt Dorcas gets a sight of him, we'll have to clear out."

"I don't s'pose it would do any good to ask her to let him bunk in with us, would it?" Plums said, hesitatingly.

"It would need big nerve, an', even if she was willin', he'd scare the hair off her head talkin' 'bout lawyers an' detectives hoverin' 'round."

Then Joe continued his interrupted work, and Plums assisted him by looking on, until the task was completed after which it became necessary to ask for further instructions.

Although aunt Dorcas could not perform the labour herself, she knew how gardening should be done, and under her directions, given during such moments as she could safely leave the kitchen, the ground was prepared in a proper manner by the time dinner had been made ready.



CHAPTER IX.

A FUGITIVE.

Plums enjoyed his dinner quite as much as if he had performed his full share of the gardening, and, when the meal was concluded, there came into his mind the thought that aunt Dorcas Milford's home was a most pleasant abiding-place.

Even though he was, so to speak, in temporary exile, he was exceedingly well content, save for the disagreeable fact that Joe had stated positively he should go back to Weehawken on the following day.

It seemed as if the thoughts of both the guests were running in the same channel, for Joe, after gazing a moment at aunt Dorcas's placid face, gave vent to a sigh of regret, and then looked out of the window, abstractedly.

"I s'pose we'd better get that garden planted this afternoon, if you've got the seeds, aunt Dorcas, an' even then we sha'n't be payin' for what we've had," Joe said, after a long pause, while the three yet remained at the table.

"Perhaps it will be as well to wait until to-morrow, and give the newly turned earth a chance to get warm," the little woman said.

"It seems as though we ought to do it to-day, if it would be jest as well for the garden, 'cause we don't count on your keepin' us for ever; an' after we leave here to-morrow it wouldn't be right to come back."

"I did think boys would be a dreadful nuisance around the house," aunt Dorcas began, as if speaking to herself, "but somehow I've felt real contented-like while you've been here, and it's a deal more cheerful with three at the table than to sit down alone."

"It's the first time I was ever in a house like this," Joe added, in a low tone. "It's awful nice, an' fellers what have a reg'lar home must be mighty happy."

"Where did you live in the city?" aunt Dorcas asked, after a pause.

"I knocked 'round, mostly. Twice I've bunked with some other feller in a room what we hired,—of course it wasn't anything like the one up-stairs, but payin' so high for a bed was a little too rich for my blood."

"But you had to sleep somewhere," aunt Dorcas suggested, her eyes opening wider, as she gained an insight into a phase of life which was novel to her.

The interest she displayed invited Joe's confidence, and he told her of the life led by himself and his particular friends in a manner which interested the little woman deeply.

It was not a story related for the purpose of exciting sympathy, but a plain recital of facts, around which was woven no romance to soften the hardships, and there were tears in aunt Dorcas's faded eyes when the boy concluded.

"It seems wicked for me to be living alone in this house, when there are human beings close at hand who haven't a roof to shelter them," the little woman said, softly. "Why don't boys like you go out to the country to work, instead of staying in the city, where you can hardly keep soul and body together?"

"We couldn't do even that, if we turned farmers," Master Plummer replied, quickly. "Nobody'd hire us."

"Why not?"

"I know of a feller what tried to get a job on a farm, an' he hung 'round the markets, askin' every man he met, but all of 'em told him city boys was no good,—that it would take too long to break 'em in."

"But what's to prevent your getting a chance to work in a store, where you could earn enough to pay your board?"

"I had a notion last year that I'd try that kind of work," Plums said, slowly, "an' looked about a good bit for a job; but the fellers what have got homes an' good clothes pick up them snaps, as I soon found out. It seems like when you get into the business of sellin' papers, or shinin', you can't do anything else."

"Selling papers, or what?" aunt Dorcas asked, with a perplexed expression on her face.

"Shinin'; that's blackin' boots, you know. Here's Joe, he scraped together seven dollars an' eighty-three cents, an' said to hisself that he'd be a howlin' swell, so what does he do but start a fruit-stand down on West Street, hire a clerk, an' go into the business in style. It didn't take him more'n two months to bust up, an' now he ain't got enough even to start in on sellin' papers, 'cause he spent it all on the princess."

"Who is the princess?" aunt Dorcas asked, with animation.

"She's a kid what he picked up on the street."

"Oh!" and the little woman looked relieved. "I thought, last night, when he spoke of the princess, that it was a child he meant."

"Why, didn't I tell you it was?"

"You said she was a kid."

"So she is, an' ain't that a child, or the next thing to it,--a girl?"

"Joseph, what does he mean? Who *is* the princess?"

"She's a little girl, aunt Dorcas, who's lost her folks, an' I found her in the street. She hadn't anywhere to go, so I had to take care of her, 'cause a bit of a thing like her couldn't stay outdoors all night, same's a boy."

"And, even though having just failed in business, you took upon yourself the care of a child?"

"I couldn't do anything else, aunt Dorcas. There she was, an' somebody had to do it."

"You're a dear, good boy," and, leaning across the table, aunt Dorcas patted one of Joe's hands, almost affectionately. "Where is the little creature now?"

"We hired an old German woman down in Weehawken to take care of her for a week, an' paid a dollar. You see the fellers lent us some cash when we came away."

"But what made you leave, Joseph, if you were convinced it would be impossible to earn any money in the country?"

"You see, we had to, when--"

Joe ceased speaking very suddenly. He could not bring himself to explain to aunt Dorcas exactly why they had left New York, fearing lest she would not believe him when he declared he was innocent of having committed any crime, and it seemed to him it would be worse than any ordinary lie to tell this kindly little woman that which was not strictly true.

He hesitated, made several vain attempts at an explanation, and finally said, his cheeks reddening with shame:

"I'd rather not tell you about that part of it, aunt Dorcas; but I didn't do anything that wasn't jest straight, though all of 'em believe I did."

The little woman thought she understood something of the situation, and, once more caressing Joe's hand, said, kindly:

"I don't believe a boy who would try to help a child when he was in want himself could do anything very wicked, Joseph. Sit right here while I do the dishes, for that will give me a chance to think."

Then aunt Dorcas set about her household duties, while the boys remained at the table, Plums sitting in such a position that he could gaze through the window which overlooked the lane.

After five minutes or more had passed, during which time the silence had been broken only by the rattling of dishes, aunt Dorcas asked, abruptly:

"If you paid the child's board for a week, why do you feel that you must go there to-morrow?"

"Because I promised Mis' Weber I'd come, an', besides, I want to make certain the princess is all right."

Aunt Dorcas gave her undivided attention to the dishes once more, and Joe was looking straight before him, but without seeing anything, for his thoughts were of the advertisements which had made him a wanderer, when he became aware of the singular gestures in which Master Plummer was indulging.

It was some time before Joe understood that his comrade wanted him to look out of the window, and when he did realise this fact sufficiently to do as Plums wished, he saw that which disturbed him not a little.

Dan was making his way up the lane from the road in the same ridiculous fashion which he appeared to think necessary a detective should employ, and Joe was positive aunt Dorcas would be seriously alarmed, if she saw Master Fernald indulging in such antics.

"Go out, Plums, an' make that bloomin' idjut keep away," he whispered to his comrade. "I won't have him dancin' 'round here in that style, an' if he does very much more of it I'll tell aunt Dorcas the whole story. I'd rather be arrested ten times

over than have her scared 'most to death."

It was evident this was not a mission which pleased Master Plummer, for he feared to incur the anger of one who professed to be so powerful, and he asked, tremulously:

"S'posin' he says the same thing he did this forenoon?"

"Tell him to go back to the city, or I'll make it my business to send a reg'lar detective here to fix things up."

"If he gets mad, Joe, there's no knowin' what he might do."

"He sha'n't stay 'round here, an' that settles it; tell him I said so, an' I mean it."

Plums stole softly out of the kitchen, but aunt Dorcas was so intent on her thoughts that he might have made very much noise without attracting her attention.

Looking through the window, Joe could see Plums as he performed his mission, and, judging from the gestures in which the amateur detective indulged, it was quite evident he was displeased at receiving such a command.

After conversing together a short time, the two climbed over the fence, and disappeared in the orchard, going, as Joe believed, towards the barn.

The threat had failed of immediate effect, and there came into Joe's mind the thought that it was necessary he go out to make it more emphatic, when aunt Dorcas, having finished the work in hand, seated herself by the boy's side as if for a chat.

"Where is George?" she asked, and Joe looked about him in astonishment, not recognising the name for an instant. Then, finally understanding to whom she referred, he explained that Plums had gone out for a few moments, and proposed to summon him.

"There is no need of that, for it is with you I want to talk. I've been thinking about that little child, Joseph, and wondering what you could do with her. You said the German woman had promised to keep her only a week."

"Yes, aunt Dorcas, and I was in hopes by that time I could go back to New York."

"What will you do to-morrow, after you have seen her?"

"Jest hang 'round, I s'pose. I've got to go, 'cause I promised, an' then, ag'in, it ain't right to leave the princess alone so long. I don't know but what she's frettin'."

"How old is she, Joseph?"

"Not more'n six or seven years; but she can't talk."

"Then she must be much younger than you think."

"Well, perhaps she ain't more'n a year old; I don't know much about kids, anyhow."

"It seems as if my duty was plain in this case," aunt Dorcas said, solemnly. "The little property I've got is enough to take care of me, with economy; but surely a child wouldn't be very much expense, an' if you'd do what you could towards helpin', I believe I'd say that she might be brought here. It's a great responsibility; but if a woman like me turns a deaf ear to such a story as you have told, it is almost a crime. There's that poor child without father, or mother, or home, and I have no right to fold my hands in idleness."

Joe was about to explain that he hoped soon to find the princess's parents, for aunt Dorcas's words sounded much as if she believed the child to be an orphan; but, before he could speak, the little woman said, emphatically:

"You shall bring her here, Joseph, and I rely upon you to help me take care of her."

"Of course I'll promise that, aunt Dorcas, an' I'll do my best to find a job somewhere near here, so I can come over evenings."

"But I'm depending on your staying here, Joseph."

"Do you mean for me to live in this house till I can go back to New York?" and Joe looked bewildered.

"Certainly; I shouldn't think of trying to take care of a child and do my housework at the same time, even though there isn't a great deal to be done. You see I'm not accustomed to children, an' wouldn't be as handy as some other people."

"But, aunt Dorcas, you can't afford to have two big chumps like Plums an' me livin' on you."

"We'll do all that lies in our power. If you and George are industrious, you can do considerable gardening, and the vegetables you raise will go a long ways towards our living."

"You're awful good, aunt Dorcas,—you're the best woman I ever saw, an' I wouldn't think of hangin' 'round here if I couldn't do somethin' more'n run that little bit of a garden. Things will get straightened out, after a spell, an' then I can go back to town, where I'm certain of earnin' money."

Again Joe was on the point of explaining that it was his duty to make search for the princess's parents at the earliest possible moment, but aunt Dorcas, fancying she understood the entire matter thoroughly, checked him by saying:

"We won't talk any more about it now, Joseph. Wait until the experiment has been tried, and then we shall know better how to make our arrangements. You're going to Weehawken in the morning?"

"That's what I counted on."

"But how can you get the child out here? It is three or four miles, Joseph."

"I'd walk twice that far, an' carry the princess all the way, for the sake of havin' her where I am."

Aunt Dorcas was not satisfied with this arrangement; but she could think of nothing better just then, and appeared determined there should be no further discussion on the subject.

"We'll go into the garden and finish the task there. I don't suppose it is anything more than one of Mr. McArthur's whims to let the upturned ground remain twenty-four hours before putting the seed in; and even if it is necessary, we can't afford to wait, because there won't be much chance for such work after the baby is here."

While she was speaking, the little woman had been putting on her sunbonnet, and Joe was seriously alarmed.

Unquestionably, detective Dan was in the vicinity of the garden, and, not expecting aunt Dorcas to come out, neither he nor Plums would be on the alert.

Joe knew that if Dan was brought face to face with the little woman, without an opportunity of escape, he would boldly declare himself a detective, and this would be sufficient to cause her anxiety, if not alarm, for she could hardly be expected to know that he was a detective only in his own mind.

"Let me go out and find Plums first," he said, hurriedly. "He ought'er know what we're talkin' about, so if we don't get through with the work to-night, he can finish it while I'm gone."

Without waiting for her to reply, lest she should insist on going with him, Joe ran out-of-doors, and, as he had expected, found Dan Fernald and Plums behind the barn.

"What did you come up here for, in the daytime, when anybody might have seen you? I thought it wasn't safe to be hangin' 'round here."

"Well, it ain't; but you don't s'pose I'm goin' to starve to death, do you?"

"Starve! Didn't you have somethin' to eat, this forenoon?"

"How long do you think I can stand it on four doughnuts? Here are you fellers livin' high, an' I'm goin' 'round jest about ready to die."

"Well, that ain't our fault. I don't want to have a row with you, Dan, 'cause I s'pose you think you're helpin' us out. But I tell you you ain't, an' carryin' on in this way only makes matters worse. Why can't you go back to town an' leave us alone?"

"Why can't I? 'Cause I promised the fellers I'd see you through, an' I'm goin' to do it. Besides, by this time folks know I'm on the case, an' would arrest me 'bout as quick as they would you."

"Do you count on three of us livin' on one poor little old woman like aunt Dorcas? Ain't you ashamed to hang 'round here when there's no need of it, tryin' to make us steal something for you to eat?"

"There's no reason for your stealin'. I've been thinkin' over what Plums said 'bout that bed, an' the custard pie, an' I don't see why I shouldn't get my share. You could tell her I am your pardner, an' in hard luck."

Now Joe was positively alarmed. If Master Fernald had made up his mind that he desired to become an inmate of aunt Dorcas's family, he would most likely do everything in his power to bring about such a result; and the happiness which

had been Joe's because the little woman had decided to give the princess a temporary home, suddenly vanished.

Rather than ask aunt Dorcas to support three boys, as well as a child, he would go his way alone, after telling her exactly the truth of the matter.

"I'll loaf 'round here till 'long towards night, an' then I'll start up to the house through the lane," Dan said, believing Joe did not dare oppose him. "That'll give you a chance to tell her what hard luck I'm in; an' lay it on as thick as you know how, so's she'll be willin' to take me. Plum says this is about the softest snap he ever struck, an' I want my share of it."

Joe remained silent while one might have counted ten, trying to restrain his anger, and then he said, quietly, but firmly:

"Aunt Dorcas is too good a woman for us to beat in such a way as that, an' I promise, Dan Fernald, that if you show your head on the lane to-night, or try to come into the house, I'll first tell her the whole thing, an' then go straight to the city. I ain't givin' you any fairy story; I mean every word. There's no need of your starvin' 'round here, 'cause you can go back to town. The folks there don't think you're sich an awful big detective that they're goin' to keep their eyes on you all the time. I'll bet there ain't a single soul, except some of our crowd, that know you've ever talked with us 'bout this."

Dan looked at his friend in mute astonishment. It seemed to him the height of ingratitude that Joe Potter should thus threaten, when he had made so many sacrifices to aid him in escaping from the officers of the law.

More than all this was he hurt by the insinuation that his detective ability was not of a high order, and in a very short time his astonishment gave way to anger.

"You can put on as many airs as you want to, Joe Potter, an' we'll see whether I'm a detective or not. I went 'round among the fellers borrowin' money, didn't make any account of my own time, an' walked 'way out here, jest to help you. Now I'm goin' to do as much the other way, an' we'll see what'll happen between now an' to-morrow night! You'll be in jail, that's where you'll be, an' Plums with you!"

"Here comes aunt Dorcas," Master Plummer whispered, hoarsely, and instead of stalking away in a dignified fashion, as he had intended, the amateur detective ran hurriedly around the corner of the barn to screen himself from view of the little woman.

"We're in an awful mess now," Plums whispered to Joe. "It's a good deal worse than it was before, 'cause Dan will do everything he's threatened, an' we can count on seein' as many as a dozen perlicemen here before to-morrer night."

Joe did not dare reply, for, by this time, aunt Dorcas was so near that his words would have been overheard; but he appeared quite as disturbed as did Master Plummer.



CHAPTER X.

THE JOURNEY.

Aunt Dorcas was so intent on the plans for the future which had just been formed, that she failed to observe the constraint which had been put upon the boys by her coming.

There was in the little woman's mind only speculations concerning the proposed addition to her family, which she believed, owing to the fact that Joe had not had an opportunity of making the proper explanation, would be permanent, and in connection with this was the making of the garden.

Therefore it was she set about directing the young workmen in her customary manner, determined that no more time should be spent on the task than was absolutely necessary.

Aunt Dorcas had brought with her a small basket containing many tiny packages, each neatly tied and labelled, and she had her own opinion as to where the different kinds of seeds should be sown.

"George, you make the hills for the potatoes, while Joseph and I plant the sweet corn."

It was necessary for her to speak twice before Master Plummer realised she was addressing him, so unfamiliar did the name sound, and when he finally became aware of the fact, he asked, in a careless tone, as if planting potatoes were work with which he was thoroughly conversant:

"How many hills do you want, aunt Dorcas, an' how big do they generally run out this way?"

"Put in four rows, and there is no need of making them very large until after the plants are up."

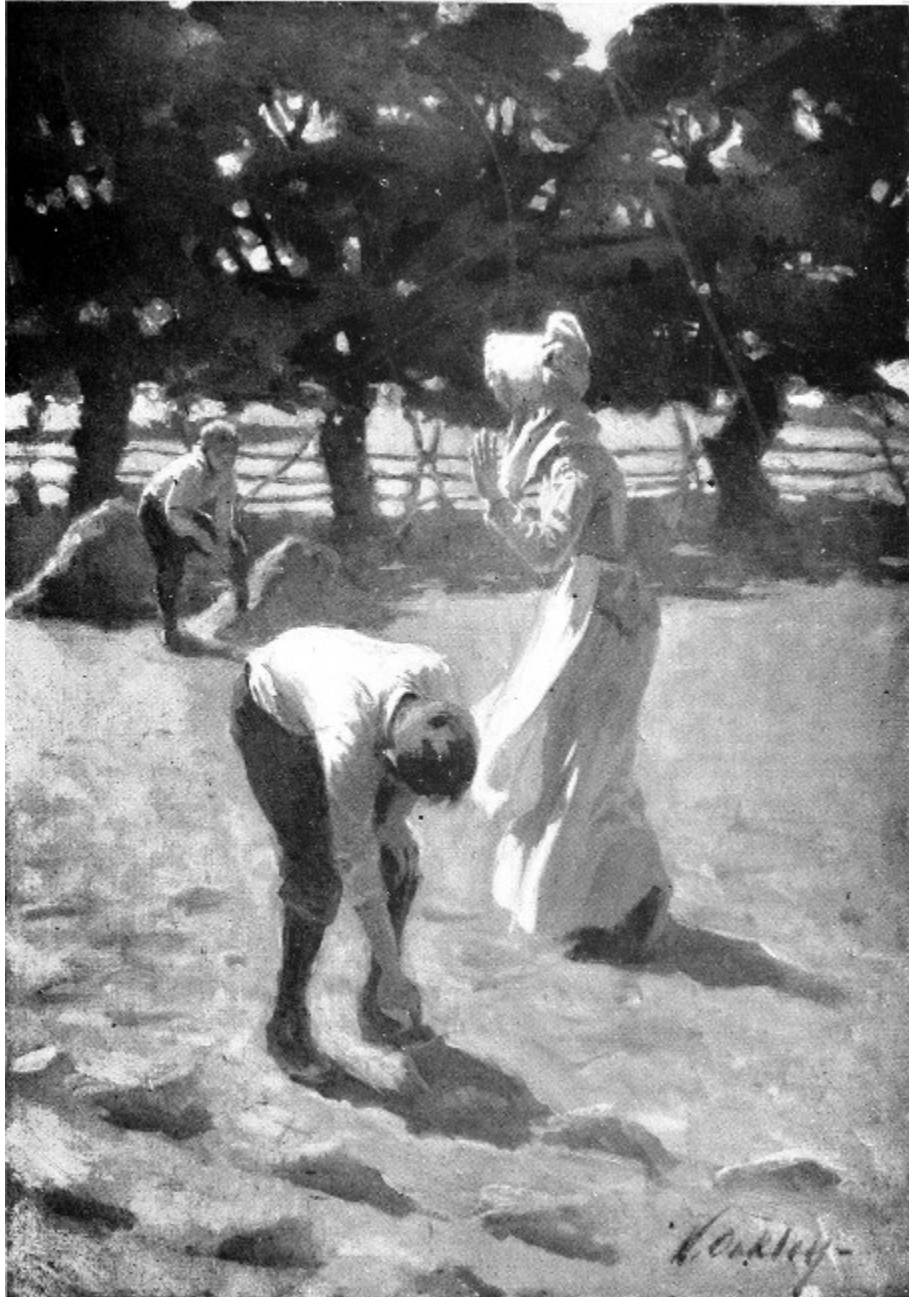
Then aunt Dorcas went with Joe to the opposite side of the garden, and, intent on having the corn planted after a certain peculiar fashion of her own, gave no heed to what Plums was doing, for ten minutes or more; but when she did observe that young gentleman's method of working, a cry of surprise and disapproval burst from her lips.

"Whatever are you doing, George?"

"Makin' these hills, of course," Plums replied, quietly, without ceasing his work of shovelling the soft earth up into huge mounds, each of which was twelve or fifteen times as large as it should have been.

"Well, bless the boy, he don't even know how to plant potatoes!" and the little woman regarded the results of Master Plummer's labour in dismay. "Weren't you ever on a farm, George?"

"I never was so far in the country as this before in my life," and Plums wiped the perspiration from his flushed face; for, strange as it may seem, he had, during these few moments, been working quite industriously.



"WELL, BLESS THE BOY, HE DON'T EVEN KNOW HOW TO PLANT POTATOES!"

"You need a hoe instead of a shovel, and the hills should be made something like these," aunt Dorcas said, as she pointed to where Joe, thanks to her minute instructions, was performing his part of the task in almost a workmanlike manner.

Plums would have grumbled when the little woman insisted on his demolishing the grotesque mounds which had cost him so much labour, but that he remembered how dependent he was upon aunt Dorcas for food and shelter, and held his peace.

The remainder of the work done on this afternoon was performed under aunt Dorcas's personal supervision, for she soon came to understand that her assistants were absolutely ignorant of such tasks, and, if left to their own devices, even for a few moments at a time, would succeed only in making blunders.

Thanks to her patience and Joe's willingness, however, the garden was planted before sunset, and Master Plummer did but a small share of the labour. After his exploit in building miniature mountains for potato-hills, he became discouraged, and aunt Dorcas soon realised that the task would progress more rapidly if he acted the part of spectator, instead of farmer.

"There is considerably more work to be done; but we must put it off until morning, for it is time to get supper now. Can you boys build a fire better than you can plant a garden?"

Joe ran on ahead, to show what he could do in that line, and Plums walked painfully by the side of aunt Dorcas towards the house.

"Whatever makes you limp so, George?" the little woman asked, solicitously, and Master Plummer replied, with a long-drawn sigh:

"I don't know, 'less it is I'm all tired out. You see I never did much farmin' before, an' it kind er strains me."

"Do you think you've been doing any now?" and aunt Dorcas looked up at the fat boy, with an odd twinkle in her eye.

"Ain't that what we've been doin'?"

"It's what Joseph and I have been about; but you were lying down most of the time. George, can it be possible you are lazy?"

"Some of the fellers say I am; but that's 'cause they don't know. It tires me all out to move 'round very much."

"You look as if you never had any very active exercise; but there's one thing we have to be thankful for: there isn't an indolent bone in Joseph's body. If I had seen any symptoms of it, I don't believe I should have had the courage to make such a change in my way of living as we have decided upon."

Plums quickened his pace; he understood, both from her words and her manner of speaking, that the little woman had no sympathy for "tired" people, and the thought came into his mind that it was possible he might not long remain an inmate of the cottage unless he proved he could be of some service.

When they entered the kitchen Joe was building a fire in such a manner as met with aunt Dorcas's warmest approval, and the glance she bestowed upon him told Master Plummer, even more strongly than her words had done, that he must exert himself if he wished to enjoy what he had believed was a "soft snap."

After supper, on this evening, aunt Dorcas took up her knitting, the boys seated themselves near the window, where they could see Dan, the detective, if he should be so bold as to come again after Joe's warning, and the three discussed the journey which the princess was to make on the following day.

Aunt Dorcas thought it would be only right for Mrs. Weber to return five-sevenths of the money which had been paid her to take care of the child for one week; but the boys were doubtful whether the old lady would take the same view of the case.

"I'll be willin' enough to let her keep it, so long's I can have the princess with me," Joe said, finally, and aunt Dorcas reproved him, gently.

"Remember, Joseph, 'a penny saved is better than a penny earned,' and you should never be careless about money matters. If the German woman has boarded the child only two days, there is no reason why she should be paid for seven."

"Except that we gave her the money at the start, and she may say there's no need to take princess away till the week is ended," Plums suggested, sagely, and aunt Dorcas brought the argument to a close by saying, severely:

"If she insists on keeping the whole dollar, I shall never look upon her as an honest woman."

On this evening aunt Dorcas read two chapters, instead of one, and her prayer was nearly twice as long as on the night previous.

Then, as before, she accompanied the boys up-stairs, to make certain everything in the chamber was in proper order, although it was already scrupulously clean, and when, after having bidden them "good night," they heard her light footsteps as she descended the stairs, Joe said, with an air of perplexity:

"I'm dead certain we don't do the right thing when she's prayin'."

"I didn't make any noise," Plums replied, indignantly.

"Course you didn't, else I'd thumped your head. I'd like to see the feller that would kick up a row, or even so much as laugh while aunt Dorcas was prayin'. What I mean is, that we ought'er do somethin', instead of settin' up there like a couple of chumps, an' she on her knees. Do you s'pose it would be right for us to kneel down when she does?"

"I don't know. It couldn't do much harm, I s'pose, an' if you think it would please her any better, why, I'm willin' to stay on my knees half a day."

"We'll try it to-morrer night, and see how she takes it. Say, I've found out what them towels are for. Aunt Dorcas had one side of her plate, an' she wiped her mouth on it."

"Perhaps she didn't have a handkerchief."

"Now, look here, Plums, you don't s'pose that a woman what's so slick an' clean as aunt Dorcas is would go 'round without a handkerchief, do you?"

"It seems as though she must, if she used the towel; but that ain't botherin' me half so much jest now as Dan Fernald is. I reckon he's pretty near wild by this time, an' it would be a terrible thing if the perlice should come an' drag us out of this place, wouldn't it?"

"I ain't afraid he'll kick up a row. That detective business is all in his eye. He don't 'mount to any more'n Sim Jepson does, when it comes to law matters."

"But he might do something for all that."

"If he does, it can't be helped. We'll know, whatever happens to us, that princess has got a good home."

"Of course, there's somethin' in that; but, all the same, I'd rather know *I* was goin' to stay in a good one," and Master Plummer crept between the lavender-scented sheets with an expression of most intense satisfaction upon his face.

Day had but just dawned, when Joe Potter awakened after a long and restful sleep.

"Come, turn out, Plums," he said, as he shook his friend roughly. "I'm goin' down-stairs to build a fire for aunt Dorcas before she gets up, an' you'd better come along. If we're goin' to eat her food an' sleep in her bed, it stands us in hand to try to pay our way."

Master Plummer promised to get up in "two minutes" but the fire had been built, and breakfast was nearly ready, when he made his appearance.

Aunt Dorcas had made no remark, when she came down-stairs and found Joe performing such of the household duties as he was familiar with; but he knew, by the expression on her face, that she was pleased, and this was sufficient reward for having left the rest-inviting bed at such an early hour.

According to the arrangements made on the previous evening, Joe was to set out on his three-mile journey immediately after breakfast, and, as soon as the meal was brought to a close, aunt Dorcas made up a reasonably large parcel of seed-cakes and doughnuts, intended, as she explained, to serve as lunch for the travellers.

"But I won't be hungry, aunt Dorcas, 'cause I'm about as full as I can be, now, an' the princess couldn't eat all you've got there if she tried for a week."

"I dare say you won't be sorry for taking it," and Joe made no further protest.

Aunt Dorcas actually kissed him, much to his embarrassment, as he left the house, and called after him, while he was yet in the lane:

"Don't try to make the child walk too far, Joseph, and be careful not to carry her very long at a time. You've got plenty of food, even if you shouldn't get back until nightfall, and it's better to go slowly than overtax yourself."

Perhaps never before in his life had Joe Potter been cautioned against undue exertion, and he fully appreciated the little woman's solicitousness.

"If I was any kind of a feller, I'd turn to an' tell her the whole story, but I don't dare to, for fear she'd believe I'd done somethin' awful wicked, an' turn me out of the house. Of course it's got to come some day, but it'll be tough,--mighty tough."

There was but little room for bitter thoughts in Joe's mind on this June morning when it seemed good to be alive, and before he had traversed half a mile he put far from him all forebodings, thinking only of what he would do to add to the comfort of aunt Dorcas, and the happiness of the princess.

There was in his mind a well-defined idea that it was his duty to search for the child's parents, but he wholly failed to realise the mental anguish which must be theirs while in ignorance of the baby's whereabouts, and believed there was no especial reason why he should inconvenience himself to find them.

"If she wasn't all right, it would be different," he said, arguing with himself. "After we get her into aunt Dorcas's home, she couldn't be fixed any better if she was living with the President, so of course her folks won't fuss so awfully much about her."

He enjoyed this journey, because every step was bringing him nearer to the princess, whose devoted slave he was, and the tramp of three miles came to an end before he was conscious of having walked one-third of the distance.

He had arrived within sight of Mrs. Weber's home, and was hoping to catch a glimpse of the princess's curly head in the window, when some one stepped deliberately in front of him, barring his passage.

"Hello, Dan, ain't you gone back to the city yet?" he cried, in surprise, as he recognised the amateur detective.

"I started last night, an' if I'd got there, you an' Plums would be in jail by this time; but I wasn't such a chump as to run right over without findin' out if things had been goin' wrong. You think I don't 'mount to anything as a detective, eh? Well, jest look at this, an' see what would have happened if I'd gone there same's you'd done!"

As he ceased speaking Dan handed his friend a copy of an evening paper, folded in such a manner that a certain advertisement stood out prominently.

Joe's face paled, as he read the following lines:

One hundred dollars will be paid for information concerning the whereabouts of a fruit vendor known as Joseph Potter, and two newsboys, one of whom answers to the nickname of "Plums," and the other known as Dan Fernald. The above reward will be paid to any one who will secure for the undersigned an interview with either of the boys named.

Address Cushman & Morton, Attorneys at Law, 47-1/2 Pine Street, New York.

As before, he failed to see immediately below this an advertisement requesting information concerning a little girl who had strayed from the Grand Central Depot, and offering one thousand dollars reward for the same.

"You see I got myself into a scrape tryin' to help you through and how's it turned out! You wouldn't so much as give me a bite to eat when I was starvin', even when you had plenty of it without costin' a cent. Now, if I'm caught, I've got to go to jail, jest the same's if I'd done whatever you did."

"But I haven't done anything crooked, Dan. I can't so much as guess what these lawyers want me for."

"Oh, you tell that to the marines! Fellers what get so swell they can't sell papers for a living, but splurge out into a fruit store, with a clerk, an' all them things, have to get money somehow. I don't say as you've robbed a bank, 'cause I don't see how you could get into one; but it must be something pretty nigh as bad, else who'd offer a hundred dollars jest to get hold of you? I ain't so certain but I shall snoop in that cash, an' take the chances of goin' to jail."

"I don't s'pose it's any use for me to keep on tellin' you I've been straight ever since I started out sellin' papers," Joe said, sadly. "It's true all the same, though, an' you can't find a feller what'll say I ever did him out of one cent."

"That's all in my eye, 'cause here's the advertisement what proves different. All I want to know is, how am *I* goin' to get out of the scrape?"

"I wish I could tell you."

"If you did, I s'pose you'd say, 'Get over to the city, an' let them do what they want to with you; but don't hang 'round me,' same's you did yesterday."

"Dan, I never believed the lawyers would know you had come away with us, 'cause it didn't seem reasonable, an' it's terrible to have you countin' on livin' with aunt Dorcas, when she is feedin' two of us already."

"What's the reason *you* couldn't step out an' let *me* have the snap for a spell? *I* ain't been stealin' money! *I* wasn't advertised for, till I took up *your* case! No, that don't suit you; but *I* must be the one to starve, an' sneak 'round anywhere I can, while *you're* bein' filled up with custard pie, an' sleepin' on a bed so soft that Plums thought it was feathers. You make me tired, you do!"

"See here, Dan, I'm willing to do anything you say, now that you're really in the scrape with us. Go to aunt Dorcas an' tell her I couldn't come back. Perhaps she'll take you in my place."

"Perhaps she will, an' perhaps she won't. I s'pose you've been coddlin' the old woman up so she thinks there's nobody in the world but Joe Potter; an' I wouldn't want to bet a great deal of money that you haven't been tellin' her I'm a chump, an' all that kind of stuff, so she wouldn't look at me if I should go there."

"I never told her so much as your name--"

"Where are you goin'?" Dan interrupted, suspiciously.

"To get the princess; aunt Dorcas said I might bring her there."

"So! You felt awful bad about lettin' your aunt Dorcas feed three when *I* was 'round starvin', yet you can make it three by luggin' in your bloomin' princess."

"Havin' a little baby in the house is different from a big boy like you, Dan. There's no use for us to stand here chinnin' about it. I'm ready to say I'm sorry for the way I talked to you yesterday, an' I'll 'gree never to go back to aunt Dorcas's. Now, what more can I do?"

"But I want you to go back," Dan replied, angrily.

"What for?"

"I'm no chump, Joe Potter, an' I know what kind of a stew would be served up to me if I went there alone. I want you to go an' introduce me to the family."

"It's a dead sure thing, Dan, we can't all live there. You know Plums won't work any more'n he has to, an' we're jest spongin' right off of a poor woman what ain't got enough for herself."

"It ain't any worse for me than it is for you."

Joe was in a pitiable frame of mind.

Believing that Dan was being searched for by the attorneys simply because of what he had done in the affair, Joe considered the amateur detective had such a claim upon him as could not be resisted; yet, at the same time, he was determined not to add a fourth member to aunt Dorcas's family.

"Dan, you go an' tell her all I said,--tell her the whole truth if you want to,--an' most likely she'll let you stay; but I can't ask her to open up a reg'lar 'sylum for us fellers. Course I'm bound to do anything you say, seein's you got into this trouble through me; but I won't 'gree to sponge a livin' off the best woman that ever lived, when there's three others doin' the same thing."

"Look here, you've *got* to go back with me."

Joe was in deepest distress, and after a pause of several seconds he said, slowly:

"If you lay right down on my goin' to her house with you, I'll do it; but I won't stay there a single minute. The princess can be left where she is till I get back."

Now was the time when Dan Fernald could exert his authority with effect, and he said, sharply:

"If you go back without the kid, the old woman'll lay it to me. Now this is what you've *got* to do. Take your bloomin' princess, an' act jest the same as if you hadn't met me. I'll wait till your aunt Dorcas gets through fussin' over the kid, an' then I'll flash up. Tell her I'm one of your friends, an' we'll see how she takes it."

"But I don't want to do that, Dan," Joe cried, in distress.

"You must, or I'll have to go to jail, an' when it comes to anything like that, the whole boilin' of us are in it. Go ahead, an' get the kid."

Joe was no longer able, because of his sorrow and perplexity, to contend against the amateur detective, and, without making any further reply, he walked slowly towards Mrs. Weber's home, his heart heavier even than on that morning when he first read the advertisement which seemingly branded him as a criminal.

CHAPTER XI.

A BRIBE.

It appeared very much as if Dan suspected Joe of treachery even in this matter of reclaiming the princess, for he followed him to Mrs. Weber's home, and there stood within a few paces of the door, where he might overhear all that was said.

Now that the amateur detective was thoroughly alarmed concerning his own safety, he had ceased his grotesquely mysterious movements, and behaved very much like an ordinary boy.

Not until Joe had knocked twice at the door was his summons answered, and then the old German lady stood before him, with the princess in her arms.

He had hoped the child would recognise him, but was not prepared for such a hearty greeting as he received.

The princess, looking less dainty than when he first saw her, because of a coarse calico frock which the careful Mrs. Weber had put on, in the place of her more expensive garments, leaned forward in the old lady's arms, stretching out both tiny hands to Joe, as she twittered and chirped, after her own peculiar manner, what was evidently a greeting to the boy who had acted a guardian's part to the best of his ability.

"She really knows me!" Joe cried, in an ecstasy of joy, forgetting for a moment his own sorrow, and, as the child nestled her face against his neck, he kissed the curly brown hair again and again.

Mrs. Weber welcomed the princess's guardian in her own language, which was as unintelligible to Master Potter as the baby's cooing, and only served to arouse the amateur detective's suspicions.

"What's that old woman sayin'?" Dan asked, sharply. "You don't want to try any funny games with me, 'cause I won't stand it."

Joe did not hear the unkind words; his heart had been made so glad by the princess's joy at seeing him, that he would hardly have been conscious of the fact had the officers of the law come forward at that moment to make him a prisoner.

Mrs. Weber, observing Dan for the first time, addressed him in a kindly tone, which only served to deepen the frown on the amateur detective's face.

"I dunno what you're drivin' at, missis; but you won't pull wool over my eyes by jabberin' away in that lingo."

It so chanced that Joe heard this remark, and, turning quickly towards the boy who, he believed, held him in his power, he said, sharply:

"Now, don't make a bigger fool of yourself than you can help, Dan Fernald! Mrs. Weber can't talk our way, an' is only tryin' to treat you decent."

"I'm keepin' my eyes open, all the same, cause I don't count on gettin' left the same as I was yesterday."

Accepting the invitation given by gestures, Joe entered the house with the princess in his arms, and followed by the boy who considered himself his master.

Now a serious difficulty presented itself.

Mrs. Weber's grandson was not at home, and it would be necessary to dispense with the services of an interpreter.

"I don't know how I'm going to fix it," Joe said, speaking half to himself, and Master Fernald believed he was addressed.

"What is it you can't fix?"

"I want to get back some of the money I paid Mrs. Weber; but how am I goin' to tell her I'll carry the princess away for good?"

"She must know what you say, of course. Who ever heard of a woman what didn't understand how to talk?"

"But she's a German, you know."

"I can't help that. If you tell her right up an' down what you mean, she's bound to know it, 'less she's a dummy."

There was little in the way of advice to be gained from the alleged detective, and Joe began a pantomime which he intended should convey the idea.

He pointed to the princess's clothes, then out of the window; put on his hat, and, with the child in his arms, walked towards the door.

Then he opened the parcel aunt Dorcas had given him, displaying the food, and pointed up the street in the direction from which he had just come.

After a time, Mrs. Weber appeared to understand something of what he was trying to convey, and, with a volley of words which sounded very much like a protest, took the princess from him.

The child screamed violently, clinging to Joe with all her little strength, and the boy was seriously disturbed; but the smile on Mrs. Weber's face told that she did not consider the outburst as anything very serious.

"What's she goin' to do with the kid?" Dan asked, as the German woman disappeared in an adjoining room.

"I s'pose she's gone to put on the princess's other clothes, 'cause it seemed like as if she understood what I'd been tellin' her."

"It would be a precious good job if she didn't come back. That kid has got you into a heap of trouble, Joe Potter, an' it'll grow worse instead of better so long as you stick to her."

Joe made no reply. It is doubtful if he heard the words, for the princess was crying so loudly he feared she might do herself an injury.

Five minutes later, Mrs. Weber reentered the room, bringing the princess clad in her own garments, and the little maid ran with outstretched arms to Joe, pressing her tear-stained face against his cheek in such a manner as went straight to his heart.

After a prolonged caress, Joe said to Dan, as if answering the remark which the amateur detective had made a few moments previous:

"No matter how much trouble she might get me into, I'd stick to this little thing as long as I lived, if she needed me."

"Course you've got the right to be jest as big a fool as you like; it ain't any of my business, so long's I don't have to starve to death on her account. What about the money you was goin' to try to get from the old woman?"

"I'll have to let that go, 'cause I can't make her understand what I mean. Will you carry the cakes?"

Master Fernald seized the parcel with avidity, and straightway began devouring its contents.

With the princess in his arms, Joe arose, put on his hat, and held out his hand in token of adieu.

Mrs. Weber looked at him in surprise an instant, and then, after saying something in German, hastened out of the room, returning a moment later with several silver coins in her hand.

Joe hesitated, and then took from the outstretched palm fifty cents, motioning that she keep the remainder.

The old lady shook her head, energetically, and literally forced him to take all the coins, which amounted in value to ninety cents.

"You've only kept a dime," he said, in protest, "an' it isn't enough to pay for takin' care of the princess two days."

Mrs. Weber smiled, kindly, patted Joe on the head, kissed the princess affectionately, and by opening the door signified that she would not accept further payment for her services.

"I'll come back some day an' square up for what you've done," Joe cried, as he stepped down on to the sidewalk, and then he remembered that if matters were arranged as seemed necessary, he would soon be in prison. "Anyway, I'll come back as soon as I can," he added to himself, and kissing the tiny hand which the princess had wilfully placed over his mouth, he set forward, resolutely, on the journey, followed by the boy who claimed the right to dictate as to his future movements.

During half an hour Joe walked steadily on towards aunt Dorcas's peaceful home, listening to the princess's childish prattle, and banishing all forebodings from his mind with the thought that the baby trusted and loved him.

Then Dan, who had been walking a few paces in the rear, came to his side, appearing a trifle more friendly than when they first met.

"At this rate you'll get back in time for dinner."

"It seems as though I ought to, but it's kind of hard work carryin' the princess. Aunt Dorcas gave me the cakes so's we wouldn't need to hurry on the road, an'--where are they?"

"Do you mean that little bunch of cakes you gave me?"

"Little bunch! Why, there was a stack of 'em!"

"It don't make any difference how many there was, 'cause I ate the whole lot."

Joe looked at the amateur detective as if about to make an angry reply; but checked himself, and Dan said, defiantly:

"The time's gone by when you can put on airs with me, Joe Potter. I ain't goin' to starve to death when there's anything 'round I can eat."

"No, you'd rather let a little baby like this one go hungry. I wouldn't have touched the cakes any sooner'n I'd cut my finger off, 'cause they was for her."

"You make me tired with your bloomin' princess. She's stuffed jest about as full as she can hold, an' I'm the same as starved."

Joe did not so much as look at the selfish boy, but walked more rapidly than before until fully one-half the distance from Mrs. Weber's to aunt Dorcas's had been traversed.

Light though the burden was, his arms ached from long carrying the child, and it seemed absolutely necessary to come to a halt.

The princess was more than willing to take advantage of the opportunity to search for flowers or wintergreen plums by the roadside, and Joe stretched himself out at full length on the cool grass, keeping jealous watch all the while over the happy little girl.

Dan seated himself near by, having once more assumed an air of injured innocence, and Master Potter could not longer delay having an understanding with this boy, who was bent on claiming even more than his right.

"So you're bound on goin' straight to aunt Dorcas's with me?" he said, after a brief pause.

"It's got to be that, or jail."

"I don't see why; there are other places 'round here besides hers."

"Yes; but I ain't sure of gettin' into 'em for nothin'. When you strike a house where Plums is so contented, it must be a pretty soft snap."

"It ain't certain you can get in there, an' it's dead sure you're drivin' the princess an' me away."

"I ain't doin' anything of the kind. You're gettin' on your ear 'cause I want to be treated decent, that's the size of it."

"You know very well we can't ask that poor little woman to take care of four, an' somebody must go, if you're comin'. Now, of course, I must take the princess with me, an' I don't want to leave the very minute I get there. Will you hang off a couple of days, an' give me a chance to find out how I can fix things?"

"I'd starve to death in two days, an' you know it."

"That's all foolishness; you've got plenty of money in your pocket that was borrowed from the fellers to help Plums an' me through."

"I haven't so much that I can go sportin' 'round the country like a swell, have I?"

"You've got enough to keep you from starvin' for a week."

"All the same, I'm goin' to live with you an' Plums," Dan replied, doggedly, and Joe remained silent while one might have counted twenty, after which he said, with the air of a boy who has suddenly decided upon a course of action:

"Mis' Weber gave me back ninety cents. Now I'll turn over seventy-five of it if you agree not to show up at aunt Dorcas's until three o'clock to-morrow afternoon."

"What kind of a game are you tryin' to play on me now?" Master Fernald asked, suspiciously.

"It ain't any game. I'm hirin' you to stay away, so I can stop there till that time, an' then I'll leave."

"Yes, an' you're goin' to tell her a whole lot of stuff 'bout me, so's she won't let me stop there."

"I'll promise never to speak your name except to tell her you come as far's this with us, an' was up behind the barn twice. Now with seventy-five cents you can live a good deal more swell somewhere else than at aunt Dorcas's, an' at three o'clock to-morrow afternoon you may do what you please."

"How do I know you'll keep your promise?"

"'Cause neither you nor anybody else can say I ever went back on my word, an' fix it any way you're a mind to, it's the best trade you can make. I'm certain she wouldn't take in four of us, an' the only show you've got is for me to leave."

"But where'll I find a chance to buy something to eat?"

"There are plenty of stores 'round here, an' you can get a lodging most anywhere, for twenty-five cents."

"Hand over your money."

"Do you 'gree not to show your nose 'round there till three o'clock to-morrow?"

"Of course I do."

Joe counted out the amount agreed upon, and said, warningly, as he gave it to Master Fernald:

"I'm reckonin' on your keepin' your word, same's I will mine; but don't make the mistake of goin' back on me, Dan Fernald, for if you come to aunt Dorcas's before the time we've 'greed on, I'll make it hot. You know I can do it, so be square, or you'll get into worse trouble than if the detectives found you."

"That's right; threaten a feller when you think you've got him in a hole!"

"I ain't doin' half so much threatenin' as you did, an' besides, I'm payin' for the privilege when I give you pretty nigh all the money I've got, an' you with a pocket full."

The amateur detective did not think it advisable to reply to this remark, and the two remained silent until Joe believed the time had come when the journey should be resumed.

The princess was weary with running to and fro, and willingly allowed the boy to take her in his arms again.

"The next time we stop it'll be at aunt Dorcas's," Joe said, as he set out, and then he halted suddenly, for Master Fernald was following close in the rear.

"Where you goin'?"

"With you, of course."

"Didn't I buy you off till three o'clock to-morrow afternoon?"

"Does that mean I can't so much as walk up the road when you're on it?"

"It means you mustn't follow me to aunt Dorcas's house, an', after all that's been said and done, I shouldn't think you'd want to do anything of the kind."

"I'll keep my promise, an' I'll do whatever else I please. You better not be too smart, 'cause I might back out of the trade."

"It would be a sorry job for you," Joe said, threateningly, and, turning once more, he continued the journey without heed to Master Fernald's movements.



"THE PRINCESS SUFFERED AUNT DORCAS TO KISS HER."

It was not yet eleven o'clock when Joe and the princess arrived at aunt Dorcas's home, and the little woman cried, in delight, as Master Potter led the child towards her:

"What a sweet little darling! What a beautiful baby! Why, Joseph, I had no idea she was such a lovely child as this!" and the princess suffered aunt Dorcas to kiss her rapturously.

"There's no flies on her, anyhow," Joe said, with an air of pride.

It is doubtful if aunt Dorcas heard this last remark. She was as pleased with the princess as a child would have been with a doll, and behaved much after the same fashion.

Joe and Plums listened with greatest satisfaction to her words of praise.

The little maid and the little woman had apparently conceived a most violent admiration each for the other, and straightway it seemed as if the boys were entirely forgotten, for the two went into the house without so much as a backward glance.

"Cordin' to the looks of things, I guess they'll get along pretty well together," Plums said, in a tone of satisfaction. "I'm mighty glad you've come back, 'cause aunt Dorcas kept me humpin' myself ever since you left. Why, I've finished up the whole garden, an' it seems to me as if I'd done the work of four men. Did you get the money from the German woman?"

"Yes; but it didn't do me any good;" and then Joe told in detail of the meeting with the amateur detective, and the bribe he had been forced to give.

"It seems as though Dan must be pretty smart if they're advertisin' for him, too," Plums said, reflectively. "I can't make out what them lawyers are up to, offerin' a whole hundred dollars for either one of us, an' when it comes right down to dots, I don't s'pose we're actually worth twenty-five cents."

"I can't understand it, either, and I expect aunt Dorcas will think I'm a terrible bad feller, when I tell her the story."

"But you ain't goin' to do anything like that?" Plums cried, in alarm.

"Yes, I am; I won't go away from here without tellin' her the truth, an' I've got to leave before three o'clock to-morrow afternoon."

"Now, look here, Joe, this ain't right to let Dan Fernald drive you off. Where'll we find another place like this?"

"I don't reckon we ever can; but it's got to be done. I'd be 'shamed enough to die if Dan should settle hisself down here, after we've brought the princess. That would make four of us for aunt Dorcas to feed, an' we know she has 'bout all she can do to pay her own bills. It seemed pretty tough when you an' I come; but I said to myself it was only for two or three weeks, an' we could patch it up somehow, after we got back to town."

"But Dan's a fool!" Master Plummer cried, excitedly. "It's no dead sure thing aunt Dorcas will take him in same's she has us, even if you do go away."

"But he thinks she will, so it 'mounts to the same thing."

"Where are you goin'?"

"I don't know," Joe replied, mournfully. "Perhaps it'll be better to go straight to town, an' let 'em arrest me. Aunt Dorcas will tell me what's best, an' I shall do as she says."

"You ain't goin' to talk to her to-night?"

"No, Plums, I'm countin' on holdin' out till to-morrow mornin', an' enjoyin' myself all I can, 'cause it ain't no ways likely I'll ever have the chance of stoppin' again in sich a place as this."

Master Plummer was silent for a moment, and then a different aspect of the case presented itself to him.

"Why, what's goin' to become of me?" he cried. "I don't believe aunt Dorcas'll keep me after you leave, an' what'll I do?"

"If I let the lawyers get hold of me, that'll ease up on you, 'cause I'm the only one they'd want to arrest, an' you can go back to town."

"Yes, perhaps I can; but I'll hate to, mightily. That shanty of mine won't seem half so nice, after we've lived here, an' I'll have to go to work sellin' papers!"

Master Plummer was now so absorbed in the contemplation of his own unfortunate position as to be wholly unable to sympathise with his friend, and the two sat on the greensward just outside aunt Dorcas's door, in painful silence.



CHAPTER XII.

A STRUGGLE IN THE NIGHT.

During the remainder of this day it appeared to Joe and Plums as if they were abandoned by the little woman who had hitherto treated them with so much attention.

Immediately after Joe arrived with his charge, aunt Dorcas and the princess disappeared inside the house, and neither of them seemed to desire the companionship of the boys until, at an unusually late hour, they were summoned to dinner.

To Plums's great disappointment, the noonday meal was a lunch, rather than a dinner, and aunt Dorcas apologised, by saying:

"I was so interested in making the acquaintance of your princess, Joseph, that, for perhaps the first time in my life, I forgot my household duties, and it was half past eleven before I remembered we hadn't had dinner."

"'Cordin' to the slat of stuff you've got here on the table, I should think you'd been at work all the forenoon," Joe said, approvingly, but there was the faintest suspicion of jealousy in his heart because the princess no longer demanded his attention.

Aunt Dorcas had arrayed her in some plain garments which might once have belonged to herself or her sisters, and the little maid was so well content with this new friend that she had but curt greetings for the boy who considered himself her guardian.

Perhaps aunt Dorcas understood from the expression on Joe's face something of that which was in his mind, when the princess chattered and cooed to the little woman, paying no attention to the others at the table, for she said, in a kindly tone:

"It's to be expected, Joseph, that a baby like this one would take more readily to a woman than a boy."

"Oh, I know that, aunt Dorcas," Joe replied, with a poor assumption of carelessness, "an' I'm awful glad you like her."

"Indeed I do, Joseph. Even in the short time she has been here I have realised what a comfort it is to have a child around the house, and I believe God has been very good in sending you and her to me."

Aunt Dorcas made no mention of being grateful because Plums was a member of the family, but that young gentleman gave no apparent heed to the omission, so intent was he upon the pleasure of eating.

Joe had expected aunt Dorcas would question him closely concerning the journey, and want to know if the princess had eaten the cookies she sent. He feared he might not be able to answer her questions without revealing some of the disagreeable events of the morning; but, to his surprise, she never so much as referred to the subject. All her thoughts were centred upon the child; how she should amuse her; how provide her with new garments, and the little woman even went so far as to speculate upon the time when it would be necessary to send her to school.

Joe did not enjoy the food as he would have done but for having met with Dan, the detective.

A big lump came into his throat, with the thought that this might be the last dinner for him in the cottage, the last time he would see aunt Dorcas, and it was only with difficulty he could swallow.

He had said he would give himself wholly up to the pleasure of being there during the remainder of this day, and not until morning came should aunt Dorcas hear his story; but before the dinner was eaten, he began to question whether it might not be wiser to make the explanations at once, and have done with them, so painful was the suspense.

While the little woman washed the dishes, Joe was permitted to amuse the princess, but, as soon as aunt Dorcas was at leisure, she took the child in her arms, and said, preparatory to seating herself in the comfortable rocking-chair near the west window:

"The princess and I are going to have our nooning now, and you boys had better go out-of-doors, where you can't disturb us with your noise."

The lump in Joe's throat seemed to increase in size, but he forced it back bravely, as he asked:

"Isn't there any work we can do, aunt Dorcas? There's no reason why we should hang 'round here with our hands in our pockets."

"I'll venture to say George isn't eager to be doing anything, for I kept him busy this morning. It appears to me he isn't a great lover of hard work, and I am certain you need rest. A walk of six miles--and I dare say you carried the child a good deal more than half the distance--is as much as ought to be expected of a boy in one day."

"But I'm not so awful tired, an' I guess Plums can hold out a spell longer, so if there's anything you'll be wantin' done for the next week or two, I wish you'd let me know it now."

"I don't think of a thing, Joseph. Go into the orchard, and amuse yourself in almost any way except by throwing rocks at the birds, until the princess and I have had our nap."

Joe could do no less than obey, and, once they were out of the house, he said to Plums:

"Of course I'm a big fool to think any such things, but I can't help feelin' sorry because the princess had rather be with aunt Dorcas than me."

"I'd say it was a mighty lucky thing if we were goin' to stay here; but, in case you stick to what you said about goin' away to-morrow, it will be kinder tough on both of 'em."

"I wouldn't wonder if aunt Dorcas wanted us to go, after I tell her why I left the city. She's too good a woman to keep a feller 'round, if she thinks he's been doin' something wicked."

"But you say you haven't."

"An' it's the truth, Plums; but I can't make other folks believe it, not even you, on account of that advertisement. Everybody says I must have been up to something crooked, else the lawyers wouldn't try so hard to get hold of me."

Plums could give no consolation. Although he had never known Joe to do anything which was not absolutely just and honest, he was convinced that some wrong had been committed, otherwise the advertisement would never have appeared.

Joe lay down on the grass, under one of the apple-trees, and, despite the sorrow in his heart, the chirping of the birds, the soft murmur of the leaves as they were moved to and fro by the breeze, and the hum of insects, soon lulled him to sleep.

The sun was far down in the west when he awakened, and, leaping to his feet, surprised that he had spent nearly the entire afternoon in slumber, he looked around for Master Plummer.

That young gentleman was sitting with his back against the trunk of a tree, looking idly up at the fleecy clouds, while an expression of discontent overspread his face.

"I guess I must have had a pretty long nap," Joe said, as if to make an apology for his indolence. "I don't believe I ever did a thing like that before. Hasn't aunt Dorcas called us yet?"

"Not as I know," Master Plummer replied, curtly.

"Then she an' the princess must be sleepin' as sound as I was. Of course you'd heard if she'd called?"

"I haven't been here all the time."

"Where have you been?"

Master Plummer hesitated an instant, and then replied, speaking rapidly, as if to prevent Joe from interrupting him:

"I saw Dan Fernald sneakin' 'round down by the road, an' went to see him. We've been talkin' this thing over, Joe, an' it don't seem to me as though there was any need for you to go off with the princess. You might walk 'round the country for a week without findin' so good a place as this. I'm sure aunt Dorcas had rather keep half a dozen boys than let that youngster go, now she's begun to like her."

"I wish I'd known Dan Fernald had come here. It was in the agreement he should keep away, an' I'd 'a' pounded him if I'd caught him sneakin' 'round."

"But, say, why can't you keep quiet, an' let him do as he's a mind to? Perhaps aunt Dorcas won't take him in, after all."

"I ain't goin' to say a word against him; but I shall tell her the whole story to-morrow morning, an' then clear out."

"Even if she wants you to stay?"

"Yes; 'cause I'd be ashamed to own I was alive if I'd let her take care of such a crowd as ours."

Plums showed plainly that he was displeased by the stand his friend had taken, and walked in silence down the lane to the road.

"Any decent feller'd do the same's I'm countin' on." Joe said to himself, as he went slowly towards the cottage. "He wants to stay 'cause he gets plenty to eat an' no work to speak of, so he won't look at the thing the way he ought'er."

Arriving near the rear door of the cottage, he saw aunt Dorcas and the princess playing on the grass with two dolls made of aprons, and the little woman appeared to be enjoying herself as hugely as did the little maid.

"I declare, I'm almost ashamed of myself, Joseph, to be seen at such games; but I couldn't resist your princess's coaxing, and I believe I've really had a good time. We must find some more Christianlike name for her than princess. I think she calls herself Essie."

"I thought so, too; but I couldn't make out what kind of a name that was. Did you call us after you got through with your nap, aunt Dorcas?"

"Certainly I did, Joseph; but I suppose you were too far away to hear me."

Joe explained how he had spent the afternoon, whereat the little woman laughed merrily, and invited him to play with them at keeping house.

Not until fully half an hour after her usual time for preparing the evening meal, did aunt Dorcas cease her share in the childish sport, and then Joe had his princess all to himself until they were summoned to supper.

Meanwhile, Master Plummer had returned from his walk, but without having concluded his fit of the sulks, and he apparently gave no heed to anything around him until he was called to partake of supper.

On this night aunt Dorcas's prayer was one of thanksgiving rather than supplication; there was a cheery ring in her voice which the boys had never heard before, and Joe wondered at it, without once guessing that the coming of the princess had made the little woman more womanly and younger.

When the boys were in their room, Joe, who had almost forgotten, since the moment he joined in the game of "keeping house," that, on the morrow, he was to leave this pleasant abiding-place, realised even more keenly than before how hard it would be to carry out the purpose he had formed; but yet he did not falter for a single moment.

"I'll do it in the mornin', sure, an' I wish I'd told her to-night; then the hardest part would be over," he said to himself, as he crept into bed by the side of the yet indignantly silent Master Plummer.

Owing to his long sleep during the afternoon, and also the unpleasant thoughts in his mind, Joe's eyes refused to close in slumber. He tossed to and fro on the rest-inviting bed, while Plums slept audibly, until it seemed to him as if the night must have passed and the morning was near at hand.

This belief was strengthened when he heard a noise as if the kitchen window was being raised, and he leaped out of bed, vexed with himself because he had not gone down sooner to build the fire.

It was yet dark in the room, and he turned to pull aside the curtain, when he found that it was already raised at full height.

"It ain't mornin', that's certain," he said to himself. "I wonder what aunt Dorcas is doin'? Perhaps the princess is sick."

He went to the door and listened. A certain faint rustling, as if some one was moving around in the room below, came to his ears; but it was so indistinct he questioned whether it might not be fancy.

One, two, three minutes he stood silent and motionless, and then, not satisfied that everything was as it should be, crept softly down the stairs.

On nearing the kitchen he became positive some one was moving around the room; but since no ray of light appeared from beneath the door when he stood at the foot of the stairs, the startling thought came into his mind that an evil-disposed person had effected an entrance.

It seemed preposterous burglars should come to the cottage in the hope of finding anything of very great value, and yet Joe felt convinced there was an intruder in the house.

Then it was that he believed he knew the person who was moving so stealthily in the adjoining room.

"Dan has broken in here to steal something to eat," he said to himself. "He thinks neither Plums nor I would dare do anything to him, for fear he'd tell the detectives where we are, and knows aunt Dorcas couldn't make much of a row if

she wanted to."

Determined to punish the amateur detective soundly for his misdemeanour, Joe crept softly to the door until his hand was on the latch, and at that instant it was suddenly opened from the inside.

Not anticipating any such movement as this, the boy, who had been partially leaning against the door, was precipitated into the room.

Only with difficulty did he prevent himself from falling, and had but just recovered his balance when he was seized from behind by some one who had evidently intended to clutch him by the throat, but, failing, grasped his shirt-collar.

Even now, Joe believed it was with Dan he had to deal, and wrenching himself free, which was not difficult, since the cloth tore in the hand of the intruder, he struck out right and left, with the hope of dealing an effective blow.

Before many seconds had passed, however, he understood that he was battling with a man, and not a boy.

Once he received a blow on the cheek which sent him staggering back several paces, and, when he would have renewed the battle, was met by a thrust in the face which almost dazed him.

The intruder made no outcry, probably hoping the other inmates of the house might not be aroused, and Joe remained silent, lest aunt Dorcas should learn of the burglar's presence.

After receiving a third blow, and not having been able to deliver one in return, Joe understood that the battle would speedily be brought to an end by his discomfiture, unless there was a change of tactics, and he closed with the man at once, seizing him around the waist in such a manner that the fellow could not do him much injury.

The boy had but little hope he would come off victor in this unequal battle; but yet he clung to his adversary, striving to overthrow him, until, in their struggles, the two were at the open door through which Joe had entered.

Leading from the kitchen by this way was a short hall, ending in three steps which led to the shed beyond, and Joe believed the time had come when he might gain an advantage.

At that instant, the burglar was standing with his back towards the passageway, and putting all his strength into the effort, Joe flung his whole weight upon the enemy.

The man, taken for the instant at a disadvantage, yielded a single step, and this was sufficient for his discomfiture.

Joe forced him back, until the fellow toppled down the stairs, striking his head against the threshold of the shed door with sufficient force to render him unconscious.

The crash which followed the burglar's fall literally shook the little cottage, and before Joe fully realised he had vanquished the foe, aunt Dorcas was calling him loudly by name.

"It's all right; don't you come down, but send Plums here if you can," he shouted, in reply, and then stood irresolutely wondering what could be done.

He had an ill-defined idea that the burglar should be made a prisoner; but how that might be accomplished was more than he could say at that moment.

Aunt Dorcas had ceased to call for him, when he understood that it would be more prudent on his part to secure a light before taking any steps to fetter the burglar, and he stepped back into the kitchen for this purpose; but he had not yet found a match when the little woman entered, holding high above her head a lamp, as she had done on the night when Joe first saw her.

"Goodness gracious, Joseph! What *is* the matter? You're covered with blood! Have you met with an accident?"

"Now don't get frightened, aunt Dorcas; I ain't hurt."

"Why do you tell me that, Joseph, when I can see for myself? You must be bleeding to death!"

"But I am not, I tell you. I jest got a clip on the nose, an' another one behind the ear; neither of 'em will do any harm. Now don't you get frightened; but I s'pose I've got to tell you what happened."

"Of course you have, Joseph. You don't fancy I can remain silent with such goings on in my house, and not attempt to understand them. What have you been doing to yourself? Why don't you answer? Can't you see you are making me very nervous?"

"I didn't want to tell you, aunt Dorcas, 'cause I was 'fraid you'd get scared; but there's a burglar out here in the shed. I

knocked him silly by pitching him down-stairs, an' now I'm tryin' to think how we can keep him from gettin' away."

"A burglar! Keep him from getting away? Why, Joseph Potter, we don't want any burglars 'round this house! For mercy's sake, if the poor, misguided creature will go, don't you try to stop him! Did you hurt him very much?"

Joe was relieved in mind because aunt Dorcas, instead of being terrified at the information that a burglar was in the house, was only solicitous lest he might have been injured, and he replied, grimly:

"I reckon I'm the one what got the worst of that little fuss. You needn't feel so very bad 'bout him, 'cause he's only bumped his head. But say, we mustn't let him go after what he's tried to do. I'll tie him, an' you call Plums to go for a perliceman."

"Joseph, I never would consent to have a poor fellow arrested; but he shall be talked to severely, for injuring you as he has done. The idea of a grown-up man striking a child so hard as to bring blood!"

However serious the situation, Joe could not have restrained his mirth.

Aunt Dorcas's pity for the burglar, and fear lest he had been injured, was to him very comical, and he laughed heartily, until the little woman said, in a tone of reproof:

"Joseph, that poor man may be dying, and by your hand, while you are making merry. Where is he?"

Joe stifled his mirth as best he could, and, taking the lamp, and the tender-hearted little woman's hand, led the way towards the shed door, as he replied:

"I'll show him to you, aunt Dorcas, an' then if you want to tie a rag 'round his throat, or put a plaster on his head, you can."

But Joe did not make as thorough an exhibition of his burglar as he had anticipated.

The man had regained consciousness, and all aunt Dorcas saw of the intruder was a dark form which ran past her into the kitchen, and from there leaped through the open window.

Joe could not have stopped the burglar if he wished, so sudden and unexpected had been the fellow's movements; but he was deeply chagrined that his enemy should thus have escaped so readily.

"He's gone, an' I ought'er be kicked for standin' here chinnin' with you, as if he'd wait till I got ready to tie him up!"

"We should be thankful to him for going without making any more of a disturbance. I'm relieved to know he wasn't seriously hurt, and--How wicked I am to stand here talking about anything, when your wounds should be attended to! It's a mercy you haven't bled to death long before this."

"There's no danger of anything of that kind, aunt Dorcas, and if you'll go right back to bed, I'll tend to myself in great shape. There's no need of your fussin' 'round."

"You must believe me a perfect wretch if you think I could leave you in such a condition. But, Joseph, I would like to go back and dress myself properly."

"There's no reason why you shouldn't leave me till mornin' jest as well as not, so go ahead, aunt Dorcas, an' do whatever you please."



"A DARK FORM LEAPED THROUGH THE OPEN WINDOW."

"Sit down here by the table, where you will have something on which to rest your head if you grow faint, and I'll be back in a moment."

Aunt Dorcas closed the kitchen door, lest a draft of air should come upon the boy she believed so grievously wounded, and went to her own room, Joe saying to himself, meanwhile:

"I'd been willin' for him to have pounded me into shoestrings, if it would save me from havin' to tell a woman as good as she is that I ran away from New York to keep out of jail."

CHAPTER XIII.

A CONFESSION.

It seemed to Joe as if aunt Dorcas had but just left the room when she returned, ready for the work of binding up his wounds.

"Do you feel any worse, Joseph?" she asked, laying her hand gently on his shoulder.

"Not a bit of it," Master Potter replied, stoutly.

"Do you think you can bear up until I have built a fire and heated some water?"

"Now, look here, aunt Dorcas, I ain't hurt any to speak of, even though there is a good deal of blood on my face, an' as for bearin' up, why, it wouldn't do me a bit of harm if there wasn't anything done to my face. I'll build a fire, if it's warm water you're after," and, before the little woman could prevent him, he had set about the task.

While waiting for the fire to burn, aunt Dorcas collected such articles as she believed would be needed, and Joe found it difficult to prevent a smile from appearing on his bruised face, as he watched the preparations.

Several rolls of clean, white cloth, in sufficient quantity to have bandaged the heads of twenty boys, arnica, antiseptic washes, adhesive plaster, a sponge, cooling lotions, and, as Joe afterwards told Plums, "a whole apothecary's shop full of stuff," was placed on the table in a methodical fashion.

"I guess while this water's bein' heated I'll wash some of the blood off my face, an' then you'll see that there ain't any need of worryin' much 'bout me," Joe said, with a laugh, as he turned towards the sink, and aunt Dorcas cried, excitedly:

"Don't do it, Joseph! Don't you dare to do it; it might be as much as your life is worth to put cold water on that bruised flesh! It won't be many minutes before we shall have plenty of the proper temperature."

"Of course I'll do jest as you say, aunt Dorcas; but I've been hurt worse'n this a good many times, an' never had any one to touch me up the same's you seem bound on doin'."

"If you have been foolhardy in the past, it is no reason why you should run unnecessary risks now," the little woman said, severely, and Joe made no further attempt to dissuade her from her purpose.

When the water was sufficiently warm, aunt Dorcas set about her self-appointed task, passing the moist sponge over Joe's face with an exceedingly light touch, as if afraid of causing him pain, and he said, with a stifled laugh:

"You needn't be afraid of hurtin' me, aunt Dorcas. I can stand a good deal more'n that without yippin'. I'd been willin' to got it twice as bad, if we could have held on to that duffer."

"You shouldn't harbour revengeful thoughts, Joseph. I am truly glad he made his escape."

"If you treat burglars in that way, this place will be overrun with them before next winter."

"Of course I don't like the idea of having strange men prowling around the house in the night; but there is nothing here for them to steal, and I am certain they couldn't be wicked enough to hurt a poor old woman like me. Instead of harbouring revengeful thoughts, we should endeavour to do good to those who would injure us, remembering the words spoken on the Mount, 'That ye resist not evil; but whosoever shall smite thee on the right cheek, turn to him the other also.'"

"If a feller went 'round doin' anything like that, I reckon he'd soon be in worse shape than I am. Do you mean, aunt Dorcas, that I ought to have stood still an' let that burglar have fun with me?"

"I can't think it was intended we should take the words literally; but they certainly were meant that we should be forgiving,—that we should love our enemies so heartily as to lead them from their evil ways. The man who beat you so cruelly will never be brought into a better life by harsh words. Now, I am going to put some arnica on these bruises; it will hurt, but you must try to bear the pain manfully."

"Don't be afraid of me, aunt Dorcas. You couldn't do anything that would make me yip."

The little woman treated Joe's wounds with such simple remedies as she had near at hand, and then proceeded to bandage his head, until but little more than his eyes and mouth could be seen, striving, meanwhile, to show him how much better the world would be for his having lived in it, if he would govern himself strictly by the Golden Rule.

During all the while she was putting the many bandages in place, Joe was saying to himself that now was come the time when he should make that confession he had decided upon, and, although aunt Dorcas had said so much concerning the blessedness of forgiving those who have done us an injury, he did not believe she would so far carry her precepts into practice as to be willing to shelter one who appeared to be as great a criminal as himself.

"I believe, Joseph, I have done all that is possible to-night," the little woman finally said, as she fastened in place the last bandage. "You are not to get up in the morning until after I have made certain you are in no danger of a fever. Now, go to your room, and if you think George may disturb you, I'll put him in the spare chamber."

"Wait a minute, aunt Dorcas; I want to tell you something," and Joe laid his hand on the little woman's arm to prevent her from rising. "You never knew why Plums an' I left New York to come out here where there isn't a chance to earn a living."

"I understood from something you said, Joseph, that there was a reason for your leaving home suddenly; but I can't believe, my boy, you have done anything wrong."

"An' I haven't, aunt Dorcas; as true as I live, I haven't, though everybody, even Plums, thinks I've been cuttin' a terrible swath! Of course, when that advertisement come out, I had to run away, else they'd carried me to jail--"

"To jail?" aunt Dorcas repeated, in horror. "What advertisement do you mean, Joseph?"

"The one that was in the paper 'bout payin' anybody who'd tell where I was."

"But who wanted to know where you were?"

"The lawyers, of course,--the fellers that advertised."

"Why did they want to find you?" aunt Dorcas asked, in perplexity.

"That's what knocks me silly, 'cause I don't know a thing about it, any more'n you do."

"Did you say the advertisement knocked you silly, Joseph?" and the little woman now looked thoroughly bewildered.

"Course it did, an' it would have paralysed 'most anybody that didn't know what they'd been about."

"Joseph, I'm afraid I don't understand you. It is a printed advertisement you are telling me about, isn't it?"

"Of course. I saw the first one in the *Herald*, an'--"

"I thought you said some one had dealt you a blow. Tell me what there was in the advertisement."

Joe repeated the words almost verbatim, and then told aunt Dorcas all the details of the flight, up to the moment they arrived at her home.

Regarding the threats made by the amateur detective he remained silent, because of the promise to Dan.

"There must be some terrible mistake about it all, Joseph. If you haven't committed a crime, and I feel certain you couldn't have done such a thing, then it is some other boy these lawyers are hunting for."

"There's no such good luck as that, aunt Dorcas. I don't believe there's another feller in town named Joseph Potter, who's been sellin' newspapers an' then went into the fruit business. You see, that's me to a dot, an' now Plums an' Dan are in the scrape because they helped me away. Just as likely as not Dan will come here to-morrow to ask you to take him in, too, an' I've made up my mind that the princess an' I have got to leave. We're goin' away about noon, aunt Dorcas, an' some time I'll be back to pay you for bein' so good to us."

The little woman looked at Joe for an instant, as if not understanding what he had said, and repeated:

"Going away?"

"Yes, aunt Dorcas, we've got to. Even if you was willin' we should stay, after what I've told you, I wouldn't agree to hang 'round, livin' on you, while there are two other fellers doin' the same thing."

Aunt Dorcas gazed at Joe steadily during several seconds, and then said, in a decided tone:

"I don't understand what you have tried to tell me; but it is certain, Joseph Potter, that you sha'n't leave my house while you are wounded so seriously."

"I ain't wounded, aunt Dorcas, an' I'm as well able to go this minute as I was when I came."

"It doesn't make any difference whether you are or not. I sha'n't allow you to step your foot off of these premises until I know more about this affair. It is all a mistake from beginning to end; there can be no question of that, and I'll get at the bottom of it before we are very much older. Now go straight to bed, and mind what I told you about getting up in the morning."

Aunt Dorcas pulled the bandages apart sufficiently to admit of her kissing Joe on the lips, and then, putting the lamp in his hand, she led him to the stairway.

"You're an awful good woman, aunt Dorcas, an' some day I'll be able to do more than tell you so."

"Good night, my boy. Put this matter entirely out of your mind and go to sleep."

When Joe gained the chamber once more, it was as if a great weight had been lifted from his heart.

The confession which caused him so much anxiety had been made, and, instead of reproaching him for having come to her home, aunt Dorcas was the same kindly, Christianlike woman as when he first saw her.

Master Plummer, who had slept peacefully during all the adventures of the night, was disturbed by the light of the lamp, as it shone full in his face, and opening his eyes, he said, petulantly:

"What are you doin'--" He ceased speaking suddenly, as he saw his friend's bandaged face, and cried, in something very like alarm, "Wha--wha--what's happened to you?"

"There was a burglar in the house, an' I tackled him."

This was sufficient to bring Master Plummer to a sitting posture at once, and he demanded to be told all the particulars.

Joe began to comply with his friend's request, but was interrupted by the voice of aunt Dorcas from the room below.

"George! Don't you allow Joseph to say a single word to-night. He must be kept perfectly quiet, or no one can say what may be the result of his terrible wounds. Go to sleep immediately, both of you, and to-morrow morning I'll do the talking, if Joseph isn't strong enough."

"Go on, an' tell me all about it," Plums whispered. "She won't hear if we talk low."

"I'll do jest exactly as aunt Dorcas told me, even if she said I was to stand on my head for half an hour. A feller who wouldn't mind what she tells him ain't fit to live," and Joe got into bed, refusing to so much as speak when Plums plied him with questions.

Although he had made light of his wounds when talking to aunt Dorcas, they gave him no slight amount of pain, and this, together with his anxiety of mind, would seem to have been sufficient to keep his eyes open until morning; yet within a very short time he was sleeping as peacefully as if attorneys and burglars had never been known in this world.

Not until aunt Dorcas tapped gently on the door next morning did either of the boys awaken, and then Joe would have leaped out of bed immediately after answering her summons, but for the words:

"You're not to get up, Joseph, until I am positive you are out of danger."

Joe laughed aloud, in the gladness of his heart; such solicitude for his welfare was something he had never known before, and it seemed very sweet to him.

"Let me get up, aunt Dorcas, an' if I don't show you I'm all right, I'll come straight back to bed. There's no need of my layin' here, 'cause I'm sound as a nut."

The little woman hesitated, but finally gave the desired permission, and when Joe was in the kitchen once more, she insisted on removing the bandages to examine the wounds before even so much as allowing Master Plummer to partake of the breakfast already prepared.

To Joe and Plums, who were accustomed to such injuries, there appeared to be no reason why the bandages should be replaced, but aunt Dorcas, who could be as firm as she usually was gentle, when occasion required, insisted upon obedience, and once more Joe's face was enveloped in white cloth, until he presented a most comical appearance.

Then aunt Dorcas brought the princess down-stairs, and the little maid, not recognising her young guardian, positively refused to speak to him, but nestled close by the little woman's side until Joe, by dint of much coaxing and bribing, persuaded her to accept him as a new, if not an old, acquaintance.

When the meal was brought to an end, and before the breakfast dishes were cleared away, aunt Dorcas referred to the

confession of the previous night, by saying:

"I've been thinking over what you told me, Joseph, and verily believe I should have awakened you before daylight this morning to ask a few questions, if you had not been in such a serious condition. You have no objection to my speaking about the matter before George?"

"Of course not, aunt Dorcas. He knows the whole thing as well as I do, except he believes I must have done something pretty tough."

"You should never think evil of any person, George, no matter how much appearances are against him."

"Well, if Joe didn't do anything, what are these lawyers offerin' to give a whole hundred dollars to catch one of us for?"

"That is what I hope to find out. There is something in connection with the matter which you boys have failed to explain, that will make it all very simple. Have either of you a copy of that advertisement?"

"No, aunt Dorcas, I wasn't achin' to lug such a thing as that 'round with me."

"Does it still appear in the papers?"

"It did yesterday mornin', 'cause Dan showed it to me, an' his name and Plums's were 'longside of mine."

"Then George must go to Weehawken and buy one of those papers."

Master Plummer looked up in dismay. A six-mile walk was to him such exercise as amounted almost to torture, and he said, petulantly:

"What good will it do for you to read it in the paper, when we can tell you every word?"

"Indeed, I don't know; but there must be something which you have failed to remember."

"Truly, there isn't, aunt Dorcas. I said over the words jest as they was printed, 'cause I'd be sure to remember a thing like that," Joe replied.

"I am set, when I make up my mind, as all old maids are," the little woman said, grimly, "and it seems to me absolutely necessary I should see that advertisement. Now, if George thinks he cannot walk to Weehawken, I must go myself."

"Indeed you mustn't, aunt Dorcas," and Joe spoke in a tone of authority, such as he had never before used. "There's nothin' to prevent my walkin' a dozen miles, if anything is to be gained by it, an' I'll start this very minute."

To such a proposition as this, aunt Dorcas positively refused to listen. She was certain Joe's wounds were of such serious nature that violent exercise might be fatal to him, and Master Plummer began to fear he would be forced to take that long walk when there was no real necessity for so doing, until a happy thought came to him, and he cried, animatedly:

"There's no need for anybody to go to Weehawken, 'cause Dan Fernald must have that paper he showed to Joe, in his pocket now."

"Where is he?" aunt Dorcas asked, quickly.

"Loafin' 'round here somewhere," Plums replied. "He counted on comin' here this afternoon to ask if you'd let him stop a spell, so's the lawyers couldn't catch him. He would have come last night, but Joe hired him to keep away."

Aunt Dorcas looked at Master Potter, inquiringly, and the latter said:

"I promised Dan I wouldn't speak a word to you about what he was goin' to do; but you'll know it all when he comes."

"I didn't promise, so there's nothing to keep me from tellin'," Master Plummer cried, and, before his friend could prevent him, he had added, "Joe thought it was playin' too steep on you for Dan to come, when you had him, an' me, an' the princess, so he gave him seventy-five cents to keep away till three o'clock this afternoon. He counted on goin' off with the kid before then."

Aunt Dorcas did not appear to fully understand this explanation; but her impatience to see the advertisement was so great that she evidently could not wait to ask further concerning the matter.

"Can you find Dan Fernald now?" and she turned to Plums.

"Well, I guess it wouldn't take very long, 'cause he's somewhere close 'round."

"Go out this minute, George, and hunt for him."

"He'll count on stoppin', once he gets in here," Plums said, warningly.

"If the poor boy hasn't any home, and is hidin' here in the country for the same reason you are, I will give him a shelter so long as may be necessary."

"But you see, aunt Dorcas, you can't afford to jam this house full of boys what have got into a scrape," Joe cried. "I'm willin' to go away, so's to give Dan the chance; but I won't hang 'round here when there's a whole crowd."

"You will remain exactly where you are, Joseph Potter, until this matter is settled, so don't let me hear anything more of that kind. George, go directly and find your friend."

The boys did not dare oppose aunt Dorcas when she spoke in such a tone, and although Plums was not inclined to do even so much as go in search of Dan, when he might be resting quietly in the house, he obeyed.



CHAPTER XIV.

A RAY OF LIGHT.

The amateur detective was a boy who had but little faith in the honesty of his fellows, perhaps because he himself could not be trusted implicitly, and even though Joe Potter had solemnly promised he would say nothing in his disfavour, Dan entertained grave suspicions that the little woman was being prejudiced against him.

Therefore it was he had been loitering near the cottage since early morning, in the hope of gaining speech with Plums, and, when that young gentleman finally appeared, Master Fernald came out from his hiding-place amid a clump of bushes.

"What's up, now?" he cried, suspiciously.

"You're to come right in, an' see aunt Dorcas," Plums replied, with no little show of excitement.

"What's wrong? Has Joe been tellin' her not to take me in?"

"Look here, Dan, I may not like his threatenin' to leave 'cause you was comin', an' perhaps I said a good many hard things against him, when I talked with you yesterday; but I won't let anybody accuse him of lyin'. When Joe promised not to tell aunt Dorcas anything 'bout you, he meant to keep his word, an' he'll do it. I told her he'd paid you seventy-five cents to stay away till this afternoon."

"What did you do that for? Are you turnin' sneak, Plums? 'Cause if you are, I'll break your jaw!"

"Perhaps you could do it; but I ain't so certain. Anyway, I told the story, 'cause Joe gave the advertisement business dead away last night, when he got thumped."

"Did he have a row?"

"He tackled a burglar, an' got the best of him, that's what Joe Potter did. A feller has got nerve what'll jump on to a man in the dark, an' don't you make any mistake."

"Was there a real burglar in the house?" Dan asked, incredulously.

"Course there was, an' Joe knocked him silly. The feller come in through the kitchen window, an'--"

"I'd made up my mind that 'most everybody knew I was out here on your case," the amateur detective said, as if speaking to himself, and Plums asked, in surprise:

"What's that got to do with it?"

"Nothin'; only it shows that some folks don't know it, else the burglar never'd dared to show his nose 'round here."

"'Cause he'd be afraid of you?"

"He wouldn't run the risk of my gettin' on his trail," Master Fernald replied, with dignity, and Plums could not repress a smile, for he had already begun to question his friend's detective ability.

Dan pretended not to see this evidence of incredulity, for it did not suit his purpose to have hard words with Plums now, when he was, as he believed, about to become his roommate.

"See here, you've got to come right up to the house, 'cause aunt Dorcas wants to see that paper," Master Plummer cried, as if but just reminded of his mission.

"What for?"

"She wants to read the advertisement."

"Oh, she does, eh? Well, if the old woman is willin' to promise that I can come here to live, I'll let her take the paper; that's the only way she'll get it."

Plums looked at his friend, as if believing he had not heard him aright.

"I mean what I say. I've got the chance now to have things my way, in spite of all Joe Potter may do. Go up an' tell her so; if she agrees, whistle, an' I'll be there before she can wink."

"Come with me, an' tell her yourself; I won't carry a message like that to aunt Dorcas," Plums replied, indignantly.

"All right; then she can go without the paper. It don't make any difference to me."

"She won't go without it, 'cause one of us will walk over to Weehawken, an' perhaps that would be cheaper for her than to feed you."

The amateur detective began to understand that he was not exactly in a position to drive a very hard bargain, although confident the possession of the paper would give him the home he desired. Therefore, instead of attempting to force Plums into acting the part of messenger, he said, in a tone of condescension:

"If you're so perky 'bout it, I s'pose I can go with you, though I'd rather have the thing settled before I flash up."

Without replying, Plums turned, and began to retrace his steps, regretting, now, that he had spoken harshly to Joe concerning this fellow who was displaying such a mean spirit.

Master Fernald followed, with the air of one who is master of the situation, rehearsing in his mind what he should say when the little woman asked for the paper.

The matter was not arranged exactly as he intended it should be.

When they arrived at the cottage, Plums opened the door for him to enter, and Dan stepped inside with a jaunty air, unsuspecting of his companion's purpose.

Aunt Dorcas greeted the newcomer kindly; but, before Joe could speak, Plums, standing with his back against the door, to prevent the alleged detective from making his escape, cried, in a loud tone:

"Dan's got the paper, but says he won't give it up unless aunt Dorcas agrees that he shall live here till we get out of the scrape."

"Did you say that, Dan Fernald?" Joe asked, mildly. And the amateur detective replied, with a great show of firmness:

"That's what I told Plums; but I didn't mean to spring it on the old woman quite so sudden."

"Do you really mean it?"

"Course I do; I ain't such a fool as to let a chance like this go by me. I've got her where she can't help herself, now, an' we'll see who'll--"

Dan did not conclude the threat, for, regardless of aunt Dorcas's presence, Joe leaped from the table, and seized the pretended detective by the throat, forcing him back against the wall.

With a cry of fear, aunt Dorcas sprang to her feet, and would have gone to Dan's relief, but that Plums, moving more quickly than he had ever been known to move before, stepped directly in front of her, as he said, imploringly:

"Now, don't mix into this row, 'cause it wouldn't be fair. I knew pretty well what Joe would do, after I'd told him how Dan was countin' on gettin' pay for his paper, an' if he hadn't gone for the duffer, I'd had to do it myself."

"But I can't have any quarrelling in this house. Why, George, I'd rather never see a paper in my life than to have a right-down fight here!"

"There won't be any fight, aunt Dorcas," Plums said, with a smile, "'cause Joe will chew him all up before he can wink."

Brief as this conversation had been, before it came to an end there was no longer any employment for a peacemaker.

Joe had shaken the amateur detective until he was glad to give up the worthless newspaper, and, before aunt Dorcas could step past Plums, Master Fernald was literally thrown out of the kitchen door.

"I'll have every perliceman in New York City here before you're an hour older!" he screamed, shaking his fist in impotent wrath when he was at a safe distance.

"Go ahead, an' do what you can, an' when it's all over I'll finish servin' you out for talkin' as you did to aunt Dorcas!" Joe replied, after which he closed the door and resumed his seat at the table, as if nothing unusual had occurred.

"Now you can see the advertisement," Plums said, as he handed the paper to the little woman; but she hesitated about taking it.

"It seems as if we had robbed that poor boy," she said, in distress. "I do wish, Joseph, that you hadn't been so hasty."

"Now don't fret over the sneak, aunt Dorcas, 'cause he ain't worth it. Robbed him of nothin'! What was the paper good for to him? Yet he counted on makin' you do as he said for the sake of gettin' it."

"Last night I wanted him to come here, an' thought Joe was kind er hard when he wouldn't 'gree to it; but I'll take all that back now. Dan Fernald's the meanest kind of a sneak," and Master Plummer, realising he was indulging in too much exercise by thus allowing himself to be angry, sank into a chair, as if exhausted.

It is doubtful if aunt Dorcas would have taken the paper procured by such a questionable method, but for anxiety to read the advertisement which had made of Joe an exile. As a matter of fact, she did not take it until after considerable urging from both the boys, and, even then, only when Joe held it so near that it would have been necessary to close her eyes in order to prevent herself from seeing the printed lines.



JOE AND DAN DISAGREE.

The princess, who had been frightened into silence by Joe's attack on Dan, crept into aunt Dorcas's lap, and, sitting directly opposite, the two boys watched the little woman's face intently as she read the fateful lines.

It seemed to them as if she had kept her eyes fixed upon that particular portion of the paper fully fifteen minutes before a look of relief came over her face, and she asked, suddenly:

"Did you tell me the princess's parents were dead?"

"Oh, no; I said she'd lost 'em," Joe replied.

"I understood you found her in the street."

"An' that's true. I was up by the Grand Central Depot, lookin' for a job to carry baggage, when she came along, an' I waited there till pretty nigh dark without seem' anybody that belonged to her. We went to Plums's shanty, an' stayed all night. I was countin' on findin' her folks in the mornin', when Dan Fernald come up an' showed this advertisement. Then, of course, we had to skip, an' you know the rest, except that I'm goin' back as quick as ever I can, to hunt 'em up."

"Did any one near the station know you had found a little girl?" aunt Dorcas asked, now looking really cheerful.

"Nobody that I knew, except Plums," Joe replied; and added, an instant later, "Yes, there was. I'd forgot 'bout that feller who works in the fruit store pretty near the depot. He saw me when I was luggin' her down to Plums's shanty, an' almost knocked us over."

Aunt Dorcas looked straight up at the ceiling for as many as two minutes, and then said, abruptly, as if having decided upon some course of action:

"George, I want you to go right over to Mr. McArthur's, and tell him that I must be carried to the ferry at once. Be sure you say 'at once' very emphatically, because I want him to understand that my business admits of no delay, otherwise he will be putting me off with all manner of excuses. Now go immediately; don't sit there looking at me," and aunt Dorcas spoke so sharply that both the boys were amazed.

The little woman, putting the princess down from her lap, began to clear away the breakfast dishes, but stopped before the work was well begun, as she said:

"Why do I spend my time on such trifling matters, when it is so necessary I get into the city at once? Haven't you gone yet, George?"

"Say, aunt Dorcas, how do you s'pose I know where Mr. McArthur lives?"

"You should know; he is our next-door neighbour; the first house on the right, just above here. Now don't loiter, George, for I am in a great hurry."

Master Plummer, looking thoroughly bewildered, went out of the house almost rapidly, and aunt Dorcas said to Joe:

"Of course I am depending upon you to take care of the princess, and when she goes to sleep this noon, perhaps you can put these soiled dishes into the sink. I haven't the time now, because I must change my clothes."

"Are you goin' into the city, to try to help us out of the scrape?"

"Of course I am, and it can be done. I knew there was some mistake about it all when you told me the story; but I haven't time to talk with you now, Joseph. You will find food enough in the pantry, in case I am not back by dinner-time, and see to it that the princess doesn't go hungry. I am depending upon your keeping things in proper order while I'm away."

Before the astonished boy could ask any further questions, aunt Dorcas had actually run up the stairs, and the princess immediately raised a wail of sorrow at being separated from her particular friend, thereby forcing Joe to devote all his attention to her for the time being.

Before aunt Dorcas had completed her preparations for the journey, Joe succeeded in inducing the little maid to walk out-of-doors with him, and they were but a short distance from the house, down the lane, when Plums returned with Mr. McArthur.

The worthy farmer, alarmed by a peremptory message from a neighbour who had never before been known to give an order save in the form of the mildest request, had harnessed his horse with all possible despatch, and was looking seriously disturbed in mind when he drove up to where Joe was standing.

"I reckon by your looks you're the boy what tackled the burglar last night? Well, you showed clean grit, an' no mistake. Can you tell me what the matter is with aunt Dorcas? This 'ere friend of yours seems to be all mixed up; don't appear to know much of anything."

"She wants to go to the city, sir, an' to get there quick."

"There must be some powerful reason behind it all for Dorcas Milford to send any sich message as this boy brought. I

allow he mistook her meanin', so to speak, eh?"

"I didn't mistook anything," Plums cried, indignantly. "She said to tell you she must be carried to the ferry at once, very emphatically, an' she didn't want you to be puttin' her off with any excuses."

"Is that so, sonny?" the farmer asked of Joe.

"I don't think she said it exactly that way, an' Plums wasn't told you shouldn't make any excuses; but aunt Dorcas wants to go in a hurry, I know that much."

"Anybody dead, eh?"

"No, sir."

"The burglar didn't get away with anything, eh?"

"No, sir."

Before the farmer could ask any more questions, aunt Dorcas herself appeared on the scene.

"I'm glad you came quickly, Mr. McArthur, because I'm in a great hurry," she said, nervously. "Don't stop to drive up to the house, but turn around right here."

The farmer looked at her for a moment, and then, mildly urging the patient steed on, he drove in a circle as wide as the lane would permit, saying, meanwhile:

"It seems to me, Dorcas Milford, I'd send some word by telegraph, rather than get into sich a pucker. I never knowed you to be so kinder flighty as you're appearin' now."

"I shall be a good deal worse, Mr. McArthur, if you don't start very soon," aunt Dorcas replied, in a matter-of-fact tone, which alarmed her neighbour more than a threat from some other person would have done.

"Take good care of the princess; don't get crumbs on the floor, an' be sure to eat all you need," aunt Dorcas cried, as the vehicle was whirled almost rapidly around the corner of the lane into the highway. And Plums shouted:

"When'll you be back?"

"I can't say; be good boys, an' I'll come as soon as ever it's possible."

Then the little woman had disappeared from view, and Master Plummer, turning to his friend, asked, seriously:

"Do you s'pose there's anything gone wrong with aunt Dorcas's head? It seems to me she don't act as if she was jest straight."

"Now don't be foolish, Plums. If everybody in this world was as straight as she is, us boys would have a snap."

"But she seems to think she can fix all this, else why did she rush off so?"

"If anybody can straighten things out, she's the one, though I don't see how it's goin' to be done. Let's go into the house, an' do the work. I b'lieve I can wash the dishes without breakin' any of 'em."

"What's the use to rush 'round like this? I'm all tired out goin' over to McArthur's, an' there's no knowin' what'll happen if I can't get a chance to rest."

"Now, don't be so foolish, Plums. You haven't done enough to hurt a kitten, since we come here, an' all I'll ask of you is to take care of the princess while I'm fixin' up."

With this understanding, Master Plummer agreed to his friend's proposal, and during the next half hour Joe laboured faithfully at the housework, while Plums amused the princess, when it was possible for him to do so without too great an exertion.

Then it was that the child, who had been looking out of the window for a moment, clapped her tiny hands, and screamed, as she pointed towards the orchard, thereby causing Master Plummer to ascertain the cause of the sudden outburst.

"There goes Dan Fernald!" he exclaimed.

"Where?"

"Sneakin' up through the orchard. It looks like he was goin' to the barn."

"He's on some of his detective speers, I s'pose. That feller can make an awful fool of hisself without tryin' very hard," and Joe would have gone back to his work but that Plums prevented him, by saying:

"He ain't sneakin' 'round there for any good. It would be different if he thought we was in the garden. I wouldn't be 'fraid to bet he was where he could see aunt Dorcas, when she went away, an' is countin' on makin' it hot for us."



""COME ON QUICK, PLUMS! DAN'S SET THE BARN A-FIRE!""

"It would be a sore job for him if he did. Look out for the princess, an' I'll snoop 'round to see what he's doin'!"

Joe went through the shed door, which led out of the garden, but could see no one. If the amateur detective had not gone inside the barn, he must be loitering at the further end, where he was screened from view of any one on either side the building.

"If I go 'round there, he'll think it's because I'm 'fraid he'll make trouble for us, an' that's what would please him," Joe said to himself.

Then, passing through the shed, he looked out of the door on the opposite side.

No one could be seen from this point, and he returned to the garden just as Dan came out from around the corner of the barn, running at full speed towards a grove, situated a mile or more from the main road.

"What have you been doin' 'round here?" Joe shouted, angrily, and the amateur detective halted long enough to say:

"You think you're mighty smart, Joe Potter, but you'll find there are some folks that can give you points. What I've done to you this time ain't a marker 'longside of what it'll be when I try my hand again."

Then Master Fernald resumed his flight, much to Joe's surprise, and halted not until he was within the friendly shelter of the trees.

"Now, I wonder what he meant by all that talk? It seems like he was more of a fool this mornin' than I ever knew him to be before."

At that moment Joe saw, or fancied he saw, a tiny curl of blue vapour rising from the corner of the barn, and, as he stood gazing in that direction, uncertain whether his eyes might not have deceived him, another puff of smoke, and yet another, arose slowly in the air, telling unmistakably of what Master Fernald had done.

Joe darted into the house, and seized the water-pail, as he cried, excitedly:

"Come on quick, Plums! Dan's set the barn a-fire! Get anything that you can carry water in, and hump yourself lively!"

"But what'll I do with the princess?" Master Plummer asked, helplessly.

"She'll have to take care of herself," Joe cried, as he ran at full speed towards the smoke, which was now rising in small clouds, giving token of flames which might soon reduce aunt Dorcas's little home to ashes.



CHAPTER XV.

AN UNEXPECTED ARRIVAL.

It was really the princess who saved aunt Dorcas's home from destruction. Had she not seen Dan Fernald, as he made his way through the orchard, the barn would most likely have been in a blaze before Joe or Plums were aware of the fact.

Thanks to her warning, Joe saw the smoke before the fire gathered headway, and when he arrived on the scene, the flames had but just fastened upon the side of the barn.

Plums, aroused to something like activity by the knowledge of danger, followed Joe with remarkable promptness, and the amount of water thus brought by both was sufficient to extinguish what, a few moments later, would have been a conflagration.

Not until he had pulled the charred sticks from beneath the end of the barn, and assured himself every spark had been drowned out, did Joe speak, and then it was to relieve his mind by making threats against the would-be incendiary.

"It's all well enough for a woman like aunt Dorcas to tell about doin' good to them what tries to hurt you, for she couldn't so much as put up her hands. If you keep on forgivin' duffers like Dan Fernald, you're bound to be in such scrapes as this all the time. What he needed was a sound thumpin', when he begun talkin' so rough to aunt Dorcas; then he wouldn't dared to try a game of this kind. When I get hold of him again, I'll make up for lost time."

"I'll bet he's somewhere 'round here, watchin' out, an' when he sees this game didn't work, he'll try somethin' else."

"Not much he won't. I know pretty near where he is, an' I'm goin' to make him--"

At this moment the voice of the princess could be heard in vehement protest against thus being left alone, and Joe was forced to defer his punishment of the amateur detective until a more convenient season.

"Stay here, Plums, an' watch for Dan, while I go and get the princess. He went among them trees over there, so's to have a reserved seat while the house was burnin'; but he's got to come out some time."

"Don't stay away too long, for I ain't certain as I'd dare to tackle him alone,--you see I'm too fat to be much of a fighter."

A certain quaver in Plums's voice told that he was afraid to be alone even while Dan was a long distance away, and Joe thought it extremely comical that any one should fear the amateur detective.

The princess did not object to taking a walk, fortunately for Master Plummer's peace of mind, and, in a short time, the three were patrolling the grounds, Joe carrying the little maid whenever she insisted upon such service.

At noonday, a certain amount of food was brought out on the lawn in front of the house, and, even while the boys ate, they continued their self-imposed duty of guarding the premises.

Then the princess wanted to sleep, and Joe sat by her side, while Plums kept watch from the windows, or walked rapidly around the buildings.

So far as Dan was concerned, they might as well have amused themselves according to their own fancies, for he never showed himself after having sought refuge in the grove.

When the excitement consequent upon the attempt to destroy aunt Dorcas's home had subsided in a measure, the boys began to speculate upon the reasons for the little woman's hurried departure, but could arrive at no satisfactory conclusion as to what it might be she hoped to accomplish.

"Of course she could do a pile of beggin' off for a feller, 'cause anybody would have to listen to her; but when the lawyers are willin' to pay a hundred dollars for either one of us three, I don't believe she can do very much by talkin'," Joe said, reflectively, as he summed up the situation according to his belief. "I expect she'll be terribly disappointed when we see her again, 'cause she counts on straightenin' things out in a jiffy."

"Do you s'pose Dan Fernald will hang 'round here till he gets a chance to do her some mischief?"

"As soon as aunt Dorcas gets back I'm goin' to skirmish through them trees, an', if he's there, it won't take more'n three minutes to make him sick of this part of the country."

The boys were yet discussing what should be done to Dan to prevent him from attempting to work more mischief,

when a covered carriage, drawn by two horses, whose harness was resplendent with silver, and driven by a coachman in livery, turned from the highway into the lane leading to the cottage.

"Hi, Joe!" Plums cried, excitedly. "See the swells what are comin' to visit aunt Dorcas!"

"They want to ask the way somewhere, an' seein's we couldn't even tell 'em where the post-office is, I guess we'd better keep kind er shady. Now the princess is awake! We'll have to show ourselves, 'cause she's bound to make a noise," Joe added, as the little maid clambered upon his knee.

"I'm goin'--Say, aunt Dorcas herself is in that funny rig!"

"What are you givin' me?" and Joe leaned forward eagerly, in order to have a better view.

"It's her, dead sure! There! Look at that! What do you think, now?"

It was, indeed, as Master Plummer had said.

Aunt Dorcas was getting out of the carriage, assisted by a gentleman who spoke to the driver in such a manner as one would expect from the owner of the equipage, and immediately behind the little woman could be seen a younger lady.

"I wonder if aunt Dorcas thinks them swells would help two chumps like us out of our scrape!" Joe exclaimed. "If she does, her head ain't--"

"Papa! Papa!" the princess screamed in delight, as she pounded on the window with her tiny fists, and instantly the gentleman left aunt Dorcas to alight from the vehicle as best she could, while he ran at full speed up the sharp ascent to the house.

"I'll be blowed, if aunt Dorcas hasn't found the princess's folks!" Joe cried, as an expression of bewilderment came over his face. "That dude is comin' in, an' we'd best leave."

Followed by Plums, Joe ran out of the kitchen door, just as the gentleman came through the main entrance of the cottage, and the boys heard a wild scream of delight from the princess.

Master Potter threw himself, face downward, on the grass near the garden, and Plums seated himself by his comrade's side, asking again and again how it was aunt Dorcas had so readily found the princess's parents.

"When we first come here, I didn't think she 'mounted to very much, 'cause she was so little an' kind er dried up. Then, when she struck out so heavy prayin', I begun to think there might be more to her than I'd counted on. But now,--why, Joe, little as she is, aunt Dorcas has done more'n all the cops in town put together. When we told her the princess had lost her folks, what does she do but go right out and hunt 'em up, an' don't look as though she'd turned a hair doin' it."

Joe made no reply.

"Didn't she hump herself, when we showed her that advertisement? She was jest like a terrier after a rat, an' bossed me 'round till, as true's you live, I run more'n half the way over to Mr. McArthur's. Then how she jumped on him when he begun to ask questions! If I only had somebody like aunt Dorcas to look out for me, I wouldn't have to work so hard."

Joe remained silent; but Plums was so intent on singing aunt Dorcas's praises, that he failed to pay any especial attention to the fact that his comrade had not spoken since they knew the princess's parents had arrived.

"Joseph! George!"

"Here we are, aunt Dorcas," Plums replied.

"Come into the house this very minute, both of you."

"Come on, Joe; I s'pose we've got to go. The dude wants to thank us for lookin' after the princess."

"You can go; I sha'n't," Joe said, with difficulty, as if he were choking, and Plums gazed at him in surprise.

"Joseph! George! Where are you?"

"Out here by the garden, aunt Dorcas. Joe won't come in."

"Go on by yourself, an' leave me alone," Master Potter said, angrily, still keeping his face hidden from view.

"It can't do any hurt to have one look at the dudes, an' seein's how there's nothin' else goin' on, I guess I'll take the show in."

Then Master Plummer sauntered leisurely towards the cottage, and Joe, believing himself alone, began to sob as if his heart were breaking.

He failed to hear aunt Dorcas as she came swiftly out through the shed door and kneeled by his side. Not until she spoke did he think there was a witness to his grief.



"JOE, BELIEVING HIMSELF ALONE, BEGAN TO SOB AS IF HIS HEART WERE BREAKING."

"Josey, my poor boy, are you grieving because Essie's parents have found her at last?"

Joe tried to speak, but could not, and the little woman continued:

"You should rejoice because the sufferings of that poor father and mother are at an end. Try to imagine their distress when the dear child was missing, and they could not know whether she was alive or dead. Think of them, as they pictured her alone in the streets, wandering around until exhausted, or falling into the hands of wicked people who would abuse her. Fancy what their sufferings must have been as compared with yours, when you know that she will receive even better treatment than we could give her. It is wicked, Josey, my boy, to grieve so sorely, for a mother's heart has been lightened of all the terrible load which has been upon it for so many days."

Then aunt Dorcas patted the small portion of cheek which was exposed to view between the bandages, and in many a loving way soothed the sorrowing boy, until he suddenly sat bolt upright, wiping both eyes with the sleeve of his coat, as he said, stoutly:

"I'm a bloomin' idjut, aunt Dorcas, that's what I am, an' if you'd turn to an' kick me, I'd be served nearer right than by havin' you pity me."

"You're very far removed from an idiot, Joseph, and I am glad to know your heart is still so tender that you can feel badly at the loss of a dear little child like Essie,--Esther is her name. Now, Josey dear, don't you want to know why those lawyers tried to find you?"

"Have you been to see them, too?" Joe cried, in surprise.

"Yes, indeed, dear. In the paper you took from Dan Fernald was another advertisement directly below the one referring to you, and it was concerning a little child who had been lost in the vicinity of the Grand Central Station. The same names were signed to it, and on seeing that, I believed I understood why so much money would be paid for information concerning you."

"I s'pose it's all straight enough, aunt Dorcas; but I can't seem to make out what you mean."

"Nothing can be plainer, my child. Little Essie was left in charge of a nurse at the station, and when the foolish woman missed the baby, instead of making immediate inquiries, she spent her time fainting. Not until nearly eight o'clock that evening did the poor mother learn of her terrible loss, and then detectives were sent out at once. The boy at the fruit store, on being questioned, as was every one else in that vicinity, described the baby he saw in your arms, and told the officers your name. You had disappeared, and the only thing left was to offer a reward for information as to your whereabouts."

"Then they didn't think I'd done anything crooked?"

"If by that you mean 'wrong,' they didn't. It was the only clew they had to the child; but on the following day it was learned you had been seen with George, and then his name appeared in the advertisement. After that, some of the newsboys from around City Hall Square brought word that Dan Fernald was with you, and a reward was also offered for knowledge of his whereabouts. You see, Josey dear, if Mr. Raymond--that is the name of Essie's father--could find either of you three boys, he was reasonably certain of getting news regarding his baby."

"Then I ran away from nothing, did I?"

"Yes, Josey dear, you did what many older persons than you have done, and what God's Book tells us the wicked do,-- fled when no man was pursuing."

"Well, I *have* been a chump!"

"Do you mean that you've been foolish?"

"I s'pose that's what you'd call it. I'm a reg'lar jay from Jayville, an' yesterday mornin' I let that bloomin' imitation detective scare me!"

"Those wiser than you might have misconstrued that advertisement, Joseph; but this shall teach you that there is nothing to fear when your conscience is clear. Meet trouble half-way, and it dwindles into mere vexation. Now, dear, I want you to come into the house with me and meet Mr. and Mrs. Raymond. They know how kind you have been to Essie, and wish to thank you."

"Well, they can't thank me for takin' care of the princess, an' I only wish she'd never had a father and a mother, for then I could have kept her all the time."

"Won't you come to please me, dear?" and aunt Dorcas laid her hand on the boy's arm affectionately.

"When you put it that way, I'll have to go," and Joe rose slowly to his feet.

"Of course you want to see Essie before she leaves?"

"Are they goin' to take her right away?"

"Certainly, Joseph. Do you fancy that poor mother could go away without her?"

Joe made no reply, and, linking her arm in his, aunt Dorcas led him in through the shed, but before they had reached the cottage Plums came towards them at an unusually rapid rate of speed, crying, excitedly:

"The dudes have gone, aunt Dorcas. They've gone, and that very same swell carriage is comin' here to-morrow mornin' to take me an' Joe an' you into the city to see the princess."

"Gone?" aunt Dorcas exclaimed, in surprise.

"Yes; I told 'em Joe was kind er grumpy 'cause princess was goin' away, an' the boss said perhaps it would be better if they took a sneak. He left a letter in the front room for you,--wrote it on a card he got out of his pocket."

It was plain to be seen from the expression on aunt Dorcas's face that she was disappointed; but she repressed her own feelings to say to Joe:

"Perhaps it is the best way, dear, for it would have caused you still more sorrow to say good-bye to Essie. Now you will have time to grow accustomed to the loss before you see her again."

Plums was in such a state of delirious excitement, owing to the fact that he was to reenter New York like a "reg'lar swell," that it seemed impossible for him to behave in a proper fashion.

He danced to and fro, as if active movement was his greatest delight, and insisted on bringing to aunt Dorcas the card which Mr. Raymond had left, even while she was making her way as rapidly as possible to the front room.

The message to the little woman read as follows:

MY DEAR MISS MILFORD: I understand that the lad who has been so kind to Essie does not wish to see her just at present; therefore, perhaps it is better we go at once, and without ceremony. Will you yet further oblige me by coming to my house to-morrow? The carriage shall be here about ten o'clock.
Very sincerely yours,

EDWARD RAYMOND.

"There is no reason why we shouldn't go, dear?" aunt Dorcas asked Joe, after reading the message aloud.

"There's Dan Fernald cuttin' across the orchard, down towards the road! Now's our time to catch him!" Plums shouted, before Joe could reply to aunt Dorcas's kindly words, and in another instant the two boys were in hot pursuit.

Aunt Dorcas, believing they were trying to catch the amateur detective in order to punish him for what had been said during the morning, cried shrilly for them to come back; but her words were unheeded, because unheard.

Master Fernald was not in condition for a race, owing to his having travelled to and fro a goodly portion of the day in search of revenge, and the chase was soon ended.

In attempting to climb over the orchard fence into the road, he tripped, fell, and, before it was possible to rise again, Joe was on his back.

"I'll have the law on you if you dare to strike me!" Dan cried, in accents of terror, and Joe replied, disdainfully:

"Don't be afraid, you bloomin' duffer. I ain't goin' to hurt you now, 'cause I feel too good. I'm only countin' on showin' what kind of a detective you are, an' tellin' what'll happen if you hang 'round here an hour longer."

"I'm goin' to New York an' have the perlice on your trail before dark to-night," Dan cried, speaking indistinctly because of Joe's grasp upon his throat.

"I'm willin' you should do that jest as soon's you get ready. It won't bother me a little bit, 'cause aunt Dorcas told the story this mornin', an' the man what put the advertisement in the papers has been out here. Now, you listen to me, Dan Fernald, and perhaps after this you'll give over your funny detective business. All them lawyers wanted of me was to find out where the princess was, an' if, instead of runnin' away, I'd flashed myself up on Pine Street, there wouldn't have been any trouble. I ought'er black both your eyes for tryin' to set fire to aunt Dorcas's barn; but somehow I can't do it, 'cause she don't like to have fellers fight. Now you can get into New York an' fetch your perlice."

Joe released his hold of Master Fernald; but the latter was so astonished by the information given, that he made no effort to rise.

"Is all that true, or are you foolin' me?" he asked, after a time.

"Say, the best thing you can do is to come up an' talk with aunt Dorcas. It would do you a heap of good, Dan, an', come to think of it, you've *got* to go."

Master Fernald was not as eager to visit the cottage now as he had been, for he understood that Joe was speaking the truth, and the prospect of meeting the little woman, after all he had said and attempted to do, was not pleasing.

"Don't let up on him," Plums cried, vindictively. "He's to blame for this whole racket, an' ought'er be served out a good deal worse'n aunt Dorcas will serve him."

Dan struggled manfully, but all to no purpose. His late friends were determined he should visit the woman he had intended to wrong, and half dragged, half carried him up the lane, until they were met by aunt Dorcas herself, who sternly asked why they were ill-treating a boy smaller than themselves.

"It's Dan Fernald, aunt Dorcas," Plums said, as if in surprise that she should have interfered. "It's the same feller what wasn't goin' to show you the paper till you'd 'greed to board him the balance of the summer, an' in less than a half an

hour after you went away he set the barn afire. We thought it would do him a heap of good to talk with you a spell."

"Let him alone, children. If he doesn't wish to speak with me you must not try to force him. Suppose you two go into the garden a little while, and leave us alone?"

This did not please Plums, for he had anticipated hearing the little woman read Master Fernald a lecture; but he could do no less than act upon the suggestion, and as the two went slowly towards the barn, Master Plummer said, regretfully:

"It's too bad we couldn't hear what she had to say, after I told her about his settin' the barn afire."

"Look here, Plums, you'd been disappointed if she'd let you listen. She ain't the kind of a woman that would rave, an' scold, an' tear 'round; but when she gets through with Dan Fernald, he'll feel a mighty sight worse than if she'd knocked his two eyes into one."



CHAPTER XVI.

THE REWARD.

The conversation did not lag during the two hours or more the boys remained near about the garden, waiting for aunt Dorcas to summon them after the interview with the amateur detective should have come to an end.

Now that there was no longer any mystery concerning the advertisement, it seemed strange they had not understood why the attorneys wished to see Joe.

"We must be awful chumps, to let Dan Fernald frighten us as he did," Joe said, thoughtfully, after they had discussed the matter in all its different phases. "Why we didn't see that it was the princess they was after, beats me! Perhaps it might have come 'round to it if I'd been alone; but that imitation detective seemed to have it down so fine, that I didn't stop to think of anything but what he said."

"Anyhow, he did us a good turn, 'cause if we hadn't skipped we'd never found out there was a woman like aunt Dorcas."

"That's a fact, Plums, an', come to look at it that way, I ain't so certain but we ought'er let up on the duffer. Say, it'll be mighty tough to go back an' live in that shanty of your'n after bein' out here, won't it?"

"Do you s'pose we've got to leave this place?" and Master Plummer looked alarmed.

"Course we have. You don't count on spongin' a livin' out of a poor little woman like aunt Dorcas, I hope?"

"I wouldn't reg'larly do her up for my board; but I was thinkin' perhaps she'd have work enough so's we could pay our way. You come pretty near squarin' things when you tackled the burglar."

"I didn't do so much as a flea-bite. If aunt Dorcas had been alone an' heard the man sneakin' 'round, she'd been prayin' with him in less'n five minutes, an' he'd gone away a good deal more sore than he did."

"I guess that's straight enough," Plums replied, with a sigh, for as it was thus proven that the little woman did not stand in need of their services, his heart grew sad.

"She can take care of herself, you bet, an' come up bright an' smilin' every time. We've got to go back to-morrow, Plums, an' hustle for five-cent stews."

"I don't want any more of it, after knowin' how aunt Dorcas can cook. Are you goin' into the paper business ag'in?"

"I guess I'll have to, after I pick up enough cash to start in with. I'll tackle the *depot*, for that job was pannin' out mighty well till I found the princess," Joe replied, and then he relapsed into silence, for the thought that the child was no longer dependent upon him brought more sorrow to his heart than had come to Plums because of being forced to go to work again.

Then came the summons for which the boys had been waiting, and when they entered the house, expecting to find aunt Dorcas alone, a disagreeable surprise awaited them.

The amateur detective was in the kitchen regaling himself with a quarter section of custard pie, while the little woman fluttered to and fro between the table and the pantry, as if bent on tempting his appetite to the utmost.

"Dan will stay here till morning," she said, cheerily, as the boys entered, "and then we'll take him to the ferry in Mr. Raymond's carriage."

"Are you goin' to keep him, after he set the barn afire?" Joe asked, in surprise, as he shook his fist at the amateur detective, while aunt Dorcas's back was turned.

"He didn't really intend to do me an injury, and feels sorry because of harbouring such revengeful thoughts."

At that instant, aunt Dorcas saw Master Plummer making threatening gestures, which were replied to vigorously by Dan, and she added, quickly:

"I want you boys to be firm friends from this day. All three have made a mistake; but there will be no evil result from it unless through your own wilfulness. Joe, try, for my sake, to be good, and treat Dan as if there had been no hard feelings."

Master Potter would have been better pleased if aunt Dorcas had asked of him something which could only be

performed after great suffering and painful endurance; but with a slight show of hesitation he approached the amateur detective in what he intended should appear like a friendly manner, and said, stiffly:

"I'll do what aunt Dorcas says, though it comes mighty hard after what you threatened yesterday, Dan. We're friends now; but I'll wipe the floor up with you, if you don't walk pretty near straight."

The little woman was not particularly well pleased at this evidence of friendliness; but she professed to be satisfied, and the three boys glared at each other like so many pugnacious cats until the evening devotions were begun.

Then aunt Dorcas read, with great fervour, the first chapter of the Sermon on the Mount, and afterwards prayed so earnestly for those "within her gates," that Joe resolved then and there to treat Dan as he had done before the princess was found,—at least, during such time as the amateur detective behaved himself in what he considered a proper manner.

"Joseph and George are to sleep in the spare-room to-night, and Daniel will occupy the chamber over the kitchen," aunt Dorcas announced, when the devotions were brought to a close.

"Did you take off the best sheets?" Master Potter asked.

"Of course not, Joseph."

"Why don't you do it? Plums an' me would be snug enough if there wasn't any clothes at all on the bed."

"We will leave it as it is, dear. Perhaps I was wrong in not letting you occupy it before."

"How could that be?" Joe asked, in astonishment.

"I have allowed myself to be proud of the chamber, and the Book particularly warns us against pride. It is better that I accustom myself to seeing it used."

When Joe and Plums were in the spare-room that night, neither daring to stretch out at full length lest he should soil the sheets more than was absolutely necessary, Master Potter whispered confidentially to his friend:

"Aunt Dorcas is a mighty good woman, Plums; but, 'cordin' to my way of thinkin', she's makin' a pile of trouble for herself."

"How?"

"Some day a reg'lar duffer like Dan Fernald will come along, an' then she'll get taken in mighty bad."

"Seems almost as if we ought'er stay here an' take care of her, don't it?"

"There's no sense thinkin' anything like that, Plums. This is our last night in a first-class bed, an' from to-morrow mornin' we've got to hustle jest the same as if we'd never had it so rich."

Then Joe fell asleep, to dream of the princess, and until aunt Dorcas awakened him, next morning, it was as if nothing had occurred to depose him from the position of guardian.

There was work enough for all three of the guests in the Milford cottage after breakfast had been served.

The little woman was preparing for her visit to the city as if she expected to be absent from home several days, instead of only a few hours, and the boys were called upon to assist in the household duties, although it is quite probable they were more of a hindrance than a help.

Dan was doing his best at washing the kitchen floor, Joe was trimming the lamps, and Plums piling up wood in the shed, when the Raymond carriage rumbled up the lane, causing the utmost confusion and dismay among aunt Dorcas's assistants.

Because of having been kept thus steadily employed, the time had passed wonderfully quick, and, until each in turn had looked at the clock, it was impossible to realise that the coachman had not arrived long in advance of the hour set.

Even the little woman herself was unprepared for so early a coming of the carriage, and during the ensuing ten minutes the utmost confusion reigned.

Then aunt Dorcas and her family were ready for the ride, and Plums said, with an air of content as he leaned against the wonderful cushions of the front seat:

"We're a set of sporty dudes now, an' I only hope that feller won't drive very fast, 'cause we shouldn't have any too long to stay in this rig, even if he walked the horses every step of the way. Say, this is great, ain't it?"

Dan made no remark during the ride; but it was evident he enjoyed himself quite as well as did any other member of the party, and when the carriage was on the New York side of the river, Master Fernald looked with undisguised envy at his companions, as he said to aunt Dorcas:

"I s'pose I've got to get out now, eh?"

"Yes, Daniel, for we are going directly to Mr. Raymond's home, and could not take you there. Come to see me some time, and remember what you have promised about being a good boy."

"I'll keep as straight as I can," Master Fernald replied, and then he glanced at the boys, as if doubtful whether he ought to bid them good-bye.

Perhaps Joe would have said no word in parting but for the gentle pressure of aunt Dorcas's hand on his. He understood from it what the little woman would have him do, and leaning forward, said, in a kindly tone:

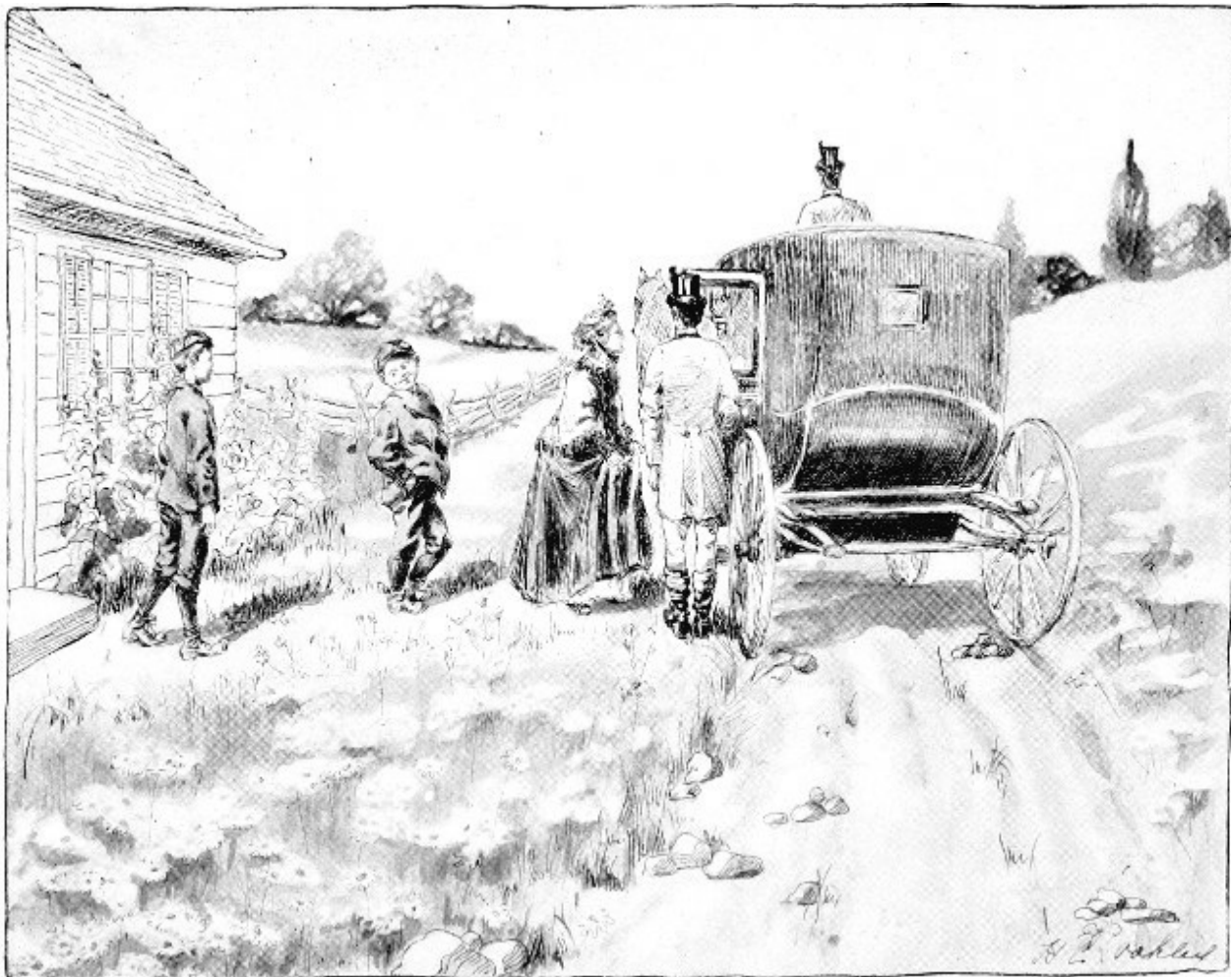
"We'll see you later, Dan. Plums an' I won't be swellin' much longer, but will be at work by this time to-morrow."

Then Master Plummer did his part by adding:

"We'll let up on the detective business, eh, Dan, an' settle down to reg'lar work as soon as this swellin' is over."

The coachman gave rein to the horses, and Dan Fernald was soon left far in the rear.

On the afternoon of this same day, when the rush for evening papers had subsided and the merchants of Newspaper Row were resting from their labours, as they listened to Dan Fernald's story of his adventures, Plums suddenly appeared, looking remarkably well pleased with himself and the world in general.



"THEN AUNT DORCAS AND HER FAMILY WERE READY FOR THE RIDE."

"Hello! We thought you was settin' round up-town with the rest of the dudes. Dan says you come down from the country in a swell turnout," Jerry Hayes cried, with something very like envy in his tones.

"Dan couldn't laid it on any too thick, for we've been humpin' ourselves in great style," Master Plummer replied, with an air of satisfaction.

"Did you really go into the dude's house?"

"Yes, an' what's more, we eat dinner there! Say, boys, McGowan's restaurant ain't in it alongside of what we struck up at the princess's house. There was more stuff on the table than this crowd could have got away with,--an' talk 'bout silver dishes! I never had any such time before, an' I thought aunt Dorcas run a pretty fine place!"

"Where's Joe Potter?"

"Up there, actin' like he owned the town."

"Do you mean that he's stoppin' with the dude all this time?" Jerry asked, incredulously.

"Yes, an' that ain't the worst of it. He's likely to hang 'round the place quite a spell. Say, there was a thousand dollars reward to whoever found the princess, an' her father says Joe was to have it!"

"What? A thousand dollars? Go off, Plums; you're dreamin'."

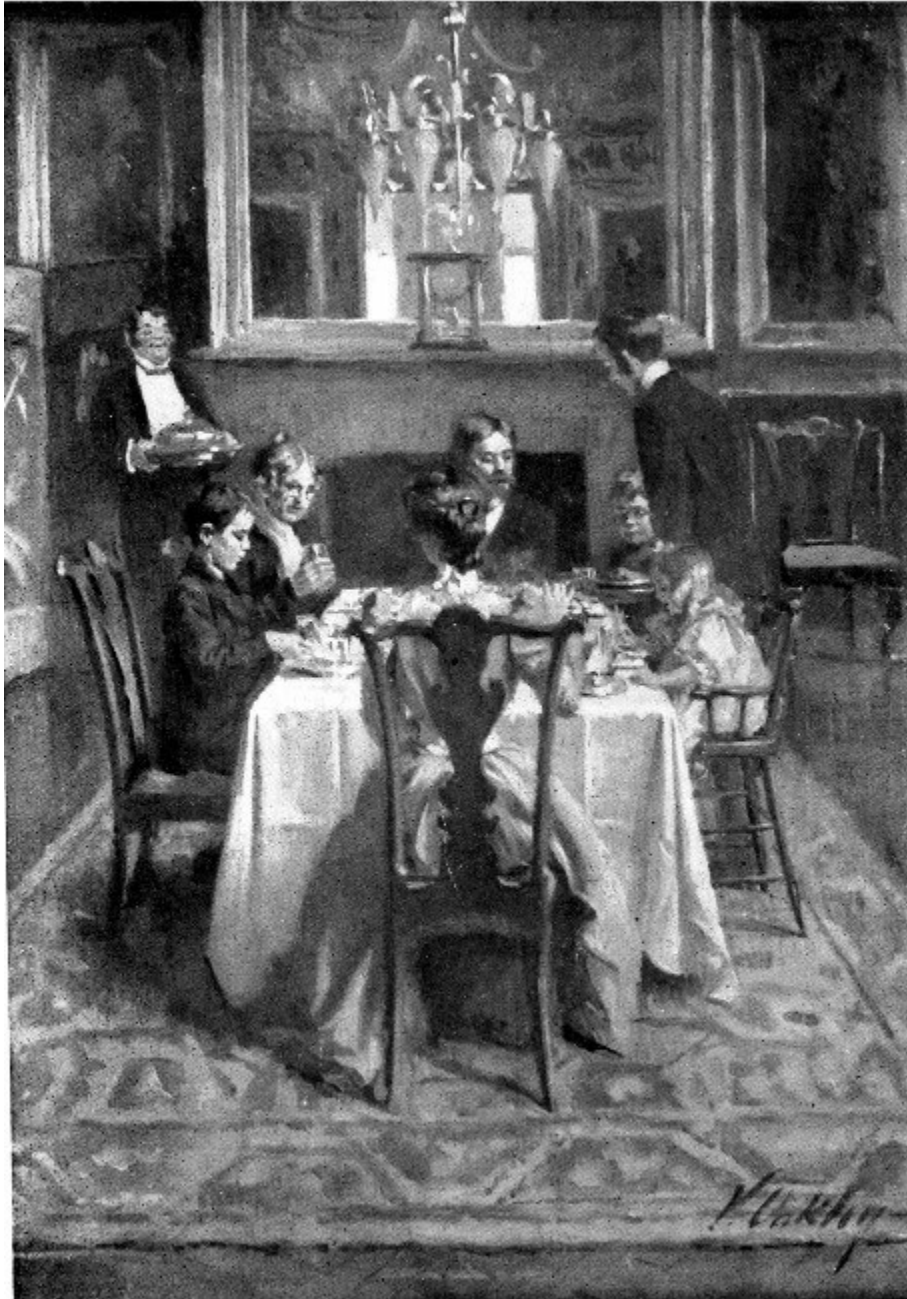
"You'll find out whether I am or not, when you see Joe. Say, I s'pose you think he'll come 'round sellin' papers again, don't you? Well, he won't. He's goin' to work down on Wall Street, for the princess's father; an' him an' me are to live with aunt Dorcas from now out. He'll come into town every mornin', an' I'll hang 'round the place livin' high, with nothin' to do but tend to things."

"What kind of a stiff are you puttin' up on us, Plums?" Tim Morgan asked, sternly.

"It's all straight as a string. When we got up to the princess's house, she jest went wild at seein' Joe, an', if you'll believe it, she set on his knee more'n half the time I stayed there. Her father made us tell all we'd done from the minute Joe found the kid, an' then he said a thousand dollars was promised to the feller what would find her. Of course we didn't s'pose he'd pay the money after givin' us a ride in his team, an' settin' up the dinner; but he stuck to it like a little man. Aunt Dorcas is to take care of the wealth, an' seein's how she told him where we fellers was, he's to give her what the advertisement promised, an' that's a hundred dollars apiece for the three of us. When all this was fixed, the princess's father offered Joe a job, an' he's to have six dollars a week, with a raise every year if he minds his eye. They're out buyin' clothes now, an' I slipped down to see you fellers, 'cause we're goin' back to aunt Dorcas's house this evenin'."

Master Plummer's friends were not disposed to believe what he told them, until the story had been repeated several times, and all the details had been given.

Then it appeared as if there could be no doubt, and each boy vied with the other in his attentions to Plums, who was now a very desirable acquaintance, since it might possibly be in his power to invite them to that cottage of aunt Dorcas's, concerning which Dan Fernald had given such glowing accounts.



"MCGOWAN'S RESTAURANT AIN'T IN IT ALONGSIDE OF WHAT WE STRUCK UP AT THE PRINCESS'S HOUSE."

Plums had promised to meet the little woman and Joe at the Weehawken ferry-slip at seven o'clock, and since at that hour there was no business to be done on Newspaper Row, his friends decided to accompany him to the rendezvous.

To the delight of all the boys, aunt Dorcas and Joe arrived in Mr. Raymond's carriage, and instantly they appeared, the assembled throng set up such a shout of welcome as caused the little woman to grip Master Potter's hand nervously, as she cried:

"Mercy on us, Joseph, what *is* the matter?"

Joe had caught a glimpse of Plums's following before the outcry was heard, and replied, with a laugh:

"It's only a crowd of the fellers come to see us off. Most likely Plums has been tellin' 'em about the good luck that has come to me, an' they want to give us a send-off."

"Do try to stop them from making such a noise, Joseph. What will the neighbours think of us?"

"They'll believe you're a howlin' swell, aunt Dorcas, an' everybody will be wantin' to look at you."

"Let us get out as quick as ever we can, or the policeman will accuse us of making a disturbance."

It was necessary aunt Dorcas should remain where she was until the driver had opened the carriage door. By that time Plums's friends had gathered around the vehicle, gazing with open-mouthed astonishment at Joe, who was clad in a new suit of clothes, and looked quite like a little gentleman.

Aunt Dorcas was actually trembling as she descended from the carriage, Joe assisting her in the same manner he had seen Mr. Raymond, and the cheers which greeted her did not tend to make the little woman any more comfortable in mind.

The princess's father would have sent his carriage the entire distance but for the fact that aunt Dorcas preferred to arrive at her home in such a conveyance as could be hired in Weehawken.

"It is more suitable," she had said. "While I enjoyed every inch of the ride this morning, I could not help feeling as if we were wearing altogether too fine feathers for working people."

Plums's friends insisted on crossing the ferry with him, and during the passage aunt Dorcas was presented to each in turn, a proceeding which entirely allayed her fears lest they would create an "unseemly disturbance."

"I know I should come to like every one of them," she whispered to Joe, "and before we go ashore you must invite them out to the cottage for a whole day."

"They'd scare the neighbours, aunt Dorcas," Joe said, with a laugh, and the little woman replied, quite sharply:

"Mr. McArthur is the only one who would hear the noise, and if I have not complained because his dogs howled around the cottage night after night these twenty years, I guess he can stand the strain one day."

Joe repeated aunt Dorcas's invitation while the boat was entering the slip, and when the little woman went on shore, the cheers which came from twenty pairs of stout lungs drowned all other sounds.

"Walk quickly, boys," she said, forced to speak very loud, because of the tumult. "Your friends mean well, I have no doubt; but they are making a perfect spectacle of us."

It was not possible for the little woman to walk so rapidly but that she heard distinctly, when at some distance from the ferry-slip, Jerry Hayes's shrill voice, as he cried:

"Now, fellers, give her three more, an' a tiger for the princess an' Joe Potter!"

