

FICTION

Edward Sylvester Ellis

The Telegraph Messenger Boy

A PUBLIC DOMAIN BOOK

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FICTION



BEN SWUNG HIS HAT AND SHOUTED, AND AT LAST CAUGHT THE NOTICE OF THE PEOPLE ON THE BANK.--P. 51.

THE TELEGRAPH MESSENGER BOY

OR

THE STRAIGHT ROAD TO SUCCESS

BY
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AUTHOR OF "DOWN THE MISSISSIPPI," "LIFE OF KIT
CARSON," "LOST IN THE WILDS," "RED
PLUME," ETC.



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The Telegraph Messenger Boy

CHAPTER I

ON A LOG

I made the acquaintance of Ben Mayberry under peculiar circumstances. I had charge of the Western Union's telegraph office in Damietta, where my duties were of the most exacting nature. I was kept hard at work through the winter months, and more of it crowded on me during the spring than I could manage with comfort.

I strolled to the river bank one summer afternoon, and was sauntering lazily along when I noticed a young urchin, who was floating down-stream on a log, which had probably drifted thither from the lumber regions above. The boy was standing upright, with a grin of delight on his face, and he probably found more real enjoyment in floating down-stream in this style than any excursionist could obtain in a long voyage on a palace steamer.

He had on an old straw hat, through the crown of which his brown hair protruded in several directions; his pantaloons were held up by a single suspender, skewered through them in front by a tenpenny nail--an arrangement which caused the garments to hang in a lopsided fashion to his shoulders. He was barefooted, and his trousers were rolled up to his knees. He wore no coat nor vest, and his shirt was of the coarsest muslin, but it was quite clean.

This boy was Ben Mayberry, then ten years old, and he was a remarkable fellow in more than one respect. His round face was not only the picture of absolutely perfect health, but it showed unusual intelligence and brightness. His figure was beautiful in its boyish symmetry, and no one could look upon the lad without admiring his grace, of which he was entirely unconscious.

In addition to this, Ben Mayberry was known to possess two accomplishments, as they may be called, to an extraordinary degree--he was very swift of foot and could throw with astonishing accuracy. Both of these attainments are held in high esteem by all boys.

I had met Ben at intervals during the year past, but could hardly claim to be acquainted with him. I usually bought my morning paper of him during the cold weather, and I knew that his father was killed by a blasting accident some years before. Ben was the only child of his widowed mother, who managed to eke out a subsistence somehow with the aid of the little fellow, who was ever ready and cheerful with his work.

While I stood looking at Ben, drifting slowly down-stream, and reflected that the water was fully two fathoms deep at that point, three other boys stopped on the bank below me to view him. They were strangers to me, but I observed they were unusually well dressed. They had that effeminate, exquisite appearance which satisfied me they were visitors from Boston, sauntering along the river in order to learn whether there was anything in our town worthy of their attention. They were apparently of nearly the same age, and each was certainly one or two years older than Ben Mayberry.

"Hello," exclaimed one, as the three came to an abrupt halt, "look at that country boy out on that log over there; he thinks he's smart."

"He's trying to show off, Rutherford," said another.

"I say, boys, let's stone him," suggested the third, in a voice so guarded that I was barely able to catch the words.

The proposition was received with favor, but one of them looked furtively around and noticed me. His manner showed that he was in fear of my stopping their cruel sport.

"Who cares for him?" said one of the party, in a blustering voice that it was meant I should hear; "he's nobody. I'll tell him my father is one of the richest men in Boston and is going to be governor some day."

"And I'll let him know that my father has taken me and our folks all over Yurup. Pooh! he daresn't say anything."

Soothed by this conclusion, the three began throwing stones at Ben.

Ben was close at hand, and the first boy who flung a missile poised and aimed with such deliberation that I was sure Ben would be hit; but the stone missed him by fully ten feet. It was not until two more had been thrown that Ben awoke to the fact that he was serving as a target for the city youth.

"What are you fellers doing?" he demanded, looking angrily toward them. "Who you trying to hit?"

They laughed, and the tallest answered, as he flung another missile with great energy but poor aim:

"We're going to knock you off that log, Country! What are you going to do about it?"

"I'll show you mighty soon," answered the sturdy lad, who straightway pushed the long pole in his hand against the bottom of the river, so as to drive the log in toward the shore where his persecutors stood pelting him.

There was something so plucky in all this that several others stopped to watch the result. I secretly resolved that if Ben

got the worst of it (as seemed inevitable against three boys), I would interfere at the critical moment.

"He's coming ashore to whip us!" exclaimed the tallest lad, almost dropping to the ground with laughter. "I hope he will; I've been taking sparring lessons of Professor Sullivan for a year, and I would like the fun of knocking him out of time. I can do it in three rounds, and I want you boys to stand back and leave him to me. I'll paralyze him!"

The others were reluctant, each claiming the happiness of demolishing the countryman; but the tallest, who was called Rutherford, at last secured their pledge that they would keep their hands off and allow him to have all the fun to himself.

"I'll try the cross-counter on him, the upper cut, and then I'll land a left-hander on his jug'lar that'll knock him stiff. Oh, how I ache to get him within reach!"

CHAPTER II

THE COLLISION

Meanwhile Ben Mayberry was vigorously working the log in toward shore. It moved slowly, but the current was sluggish, the space brief, and he was certain to land in a few minutes.

One of the stones struck Ben on the shoulder. It must have angered him, for instead of trying to dodge the rest, he used his pushing-pole with more energy than before and paid no heed to the missiles, several of which were stopped by his body.

It was plain that the valorous little fellow meant to attack the three city lads, who were pestering him not only with stones, but with taunts that were far more exasperating.

"Wonder who blacked his shoes?"

"Ain't that hat a beauty? He can comb his hair without taking it off."

"That one suspender must have cost him a good deal."

"By gracious, he's going to chew us up," laughed the tallest, as the log approached land; "stand back, boys, you promised him to me, and I don't want either of you to say you helped me to knock him out in the third round."

The next minute the log was so close that the nimble-footed Ben leaped ashore and strode straight for the valiant Rutherford, who immediately threw himself in "position." His attitude was certainly artistic, with his left foot thrown forward, his right fist clinched and held across his breast, and his left extended ready to be shot forward into the first opening that his enemy presented.

But it is one thing to assume the proper pugilistic attitude; it is altogether another to act the part of a trained pugilist.

"Come on, Country!" called out the exultant Rutherford; "but I hope you've bid your friends farewell."

The other boys stood back and watched the singular contest. I carefully approached so as to be ready to protect Ben when it should become necessary.

The brave fellow never hesitated, but the instant he landed lightly on the shore he went straight for Rutherford, who, it was plain, was slightly surprised and disconcerted by his unscientific conduct. But the city youth kept his guard well up, and the moment Ben was within reach he struck a violent blow intended for the face.

But Ben dodged it easily, dropping his head and running with cat-like agility directly under the guard of his antagonist, who, before he could understand precisely what it meant, found himself clasped around the waist and thrown on his back with such violence that a loud grunt was forced from him, and his handsome new hat rolled rapidly down into the water.

And I am free to confess that I was delighted when I saw Ben give him several of his "best licks," which made the tall boy roar for mercy.

"Take him off, boys! he's killing me! Quick! I can't live much longer."

The others were terrified at the hurricane-like style in which the boy had turned the tables on the scientific Rutherford, but they could not stand by and see their companion massacred without raising a finger to help him.

"Pull him off!" yelled the victim, twisting his body and banging his legs in the soft earth in his vain effort to free himself from Ben, who was pegging away at him. "Pull him off! Put me on top, and I'll settle him!"

One of the boys ran forward and reached out his hand, intending to catch Ben by the shoulder and fling him to the ground; but, to my intense amazement and equally intense delight, Ben caught his arm, jerked him forward across the body of Rutherford, and belabored both of them. It was one of the neatest feats I ever saw performed, and, under the circumstances, I would have pronounced it impossible had it not been done before my own eyes.

Both the hats of the Boston youths were floating down the river, and they were so close to the water's edge that they were covered with mud. The vigor of the assault on the two was increased rather than diminished, and we spectators were cruel enough to laugh heartily over the exhibition, accompanied as it was by the frenzied yells of the two lads who were receiving the wrathful attentions of Ben Mayberry.

The third boy could not stand it. He must have thought they had come in collision with a gorilla or some sort of wild animal, for he started up the river bank, shouting "Murder!" at the top of his voice. Ben, having got through with the two under him, sprang off and allowed them to rise, standing ready to renew the fight should they show any desire to

do so.



BEN CAUGHT HIS ARM, JERKED HIM ACROSS THE BODY OF RUTHERFORD, AND BELABORED BOTH OF THEM.--P. 12.

But they were too thoroughly vanquished. Their plight was laughable, and yet pitiable. They were coated with mud from head to foot, and their pretty hats, with their polka-dot bands, were gone too far down the river to be recovered.

They seemed dazed for a minute or so, but as soon as they realized they were on their feet they started off after their flying companion, never pausing to look behind them, but running as though a Bengal tiger was at their heels.

"Ben," said I, walking forward as soon as I could assume a serious expression of countenance, "do you not know it is very wrong to fight?"

"That's what I was tryin' to teach them city chaps. I guess they'll think so after this."

"You certainly did your best to convince them it isn't wise to attack you; but, Ben, what have you been doing lately?"

"My last job was whipping them," replied the urchin, with a roguish twinkle of his blue eyes; "but that was fun, and if you mean work, I hain't had anything but selling papers since last summer, but sometimes I run errands."

"Do you go to school?"

"Yes, sir."

"Would you like a job?"

"Indeed I would, sir, for mother finds it hard work to get along, and sometimes there isn't anything to eat in the house. Once, when I was a little fellow, when I saw mother crying, and there was no bread, I slipped out at night and stole a

loaf, but mother would not touch it when I brought it home, and made me take it back. She told me I must starve before I did wrong, and so I will. I have been trying to get a job all summer, but everybody says I am too young and small. I take all the exercise I can, so as to make me grow, and that's one reason why I pitched into them city chaps and laid 'em out."

"Well, Ben, you know where the office of the Western Union is; come around there to-morrow morning, at eight o'clock, and I will give you something to do."

"Oh, I'm very thankful to you, sir, and this will make my mother the happiest woman in Damietta."

I saw tears in the bright eyes, as Ben ran home to carry the good news to his mother.

CHAPTER III

THE OFFICE BOY

When I approached the office the next morning, little Ben Mayberry was standing outside, smiling and expectant.

My heart was touched when I saw what pains his mother had taken to put her boy in presentable shape. He had on a pair of coarse shoes, carefully blacked, and a new, cheap hat replaced the dilapidated one of the day before. He wore a short coat and a vest, which must have served him as his Sunday suit for a long time, as they were much too small for him.

But there was a cleanly, neat look about him which attracted me at once. His face was as rosy as an apple, and his large, white teeth were as sound as new silver dollars. His dark hair, which was inclined to be curly, was cut short, and the ill-fitting clothes could not conceal the symmetry of his growing figure.

"Well, Ben," said I cheerily, as I shook his hand, "I am glad to see you are here on time. You are young, you know, but are old enough to make a start. As I expect you to reach the top of the ladder, I mean that you shall begin at the bottom round."

I am not sure he understood this figurative language, but I made it clear to him the next minute.

"You are to be here every morning before seven o'clock, to sweep out the office and make it ready for business. You must see that all the spittoons are cleaned, that the ink wells at the desk are provided with ink, that the pens are good enough for use (I never yet have seen a public office where the writing facilities were not wretched), abundance of blanks on hand, and that everything is tidied up. In summer, you must wash off the ice and place it in the cooler, and in winter, see that the fires are going and the office comfortable at the time we go there for business. Can you do it, Ben?"

"Yes, sir, and glad to have the chance."

"This will give you some opportunity to attend the public school, which, of course, you will take advantage of. Then, when you can, you will begin to study telegraphy. I will see that you have every chance, and, at the same time, I will give you a lift now and then in your studies. This is the first step, Ben; in this country anything is possible to the boy who has brains, pluck, and application. Everything now depends on yourself; with the help of Heaven you will succeed; if you fail, it will be your own fault. To-day you start on your career, which will lead to success and happiness or to failure and misery."

Ben listened respectfully to what I said, and seemed impressed by my words. I took him inside the office, explained to him more particularly his duties, gave him a key with which to enter in the morning, and told him to be on hand at six o'clock on the morrow, until which time he was excused. His wages were to be two dollars a week, to begin from the day on which I engaged him. Ben raised his hat, bade me good-day, and went home, and I am sure there was no happier boy in Damietta than he.

It goes without saying that he attended to his duties faithfully from the very first. He went to the public school when he could gain the chance. I learned that he was a favorite there, on account of his manliness and excellent scholarship. In conjunction with the principal we arranged to give him private instruction at night, so that during the day he could devote his energies to learning telegraphy, in which he displayed great aptitude.

As I was manager of the office, it was in my power to advance Ben as rapidly as circumstances warranted. He was given to understand from the first that he would be assisted to the extent to which he proved himself deserving, and no further. I did not intend to spoil him by undue favors, nor did I allow him to see how much I really thought of him. One of the surest means of ruining a boy is by partiality and too rapid advancement; but I gave him an encouraging word now and then, and took pains to let his mother know that he was meeting my high expectations, and that he was fully worthy of the hopes she entertained of him.

I shall never forget the glow which came into the pinched face when I addressed her thus, nor the devout expression which overspread her countenance at my liberal praise of her child.

"Ben has always been obedient to his father and mother. I have never known him to swear or tell an untruth, and he never took anything that was not his own--that is," the poor lady hastened to add when she recalled the painful circumstance, "he never forgot himself but once."

"He told me about it; few could blame him for that misstep; I cannot think the distressing necessity will ever arise again. Should Heaven spare his life he will become your staff, upon which you can soon lean your whole weight."

She gave a faint sigh of happiness.

"My boy Ben has never brought a pang to his mother's heart."

Ah, my young friend, can your mother say that? When that dear head is laid low, when those loving eyes shall be closed forever, and the sweet voice is hushed in the tomb, will you be able to say through your blinding tears:

"I never brought a pang to her heart!"

CHAPTER IV

A MESSAGE IN THE NIGHT

At the end of a month Ben Mayberry was made a messenger boy of the office under my charge. This cannot be called a very momentous promotion, inasmuch as many of our telegraphists begin there; but it doubled Ben's wages at once, and led to his appearance in the attractive blue uniform which the boys of the Western Union wear. In his case it seemed to add two inches to his stature at once.

Ben was our best messenger from the first. He was acquainted with the city of Damietta from one end to the other, and his superior fleetness of foot enabled him to outstrip the others, while his cheerful, intelligent manner added to his popularity with our customers.

As he was so young, I determined to keep him messenger for a longer time than was really necessary, affording him all the opportunity he could ask in which to learn telegraphy. He picked it up rapidly, and I was surprised when I found him reading messages over the wires by sound. As everyone knows, it takes a skillful operator, or rather one of experience, to do this, a proof that Ben was applying himself to learning the business with all the power at his command.

In more than one instance, those who knew the high estimation in which the boy was held exerted themselves to put annoyances and obstructions in his way. All manner of pretexts were made for detaining him, and he showed no little originality and ingenuity in outwitting his very attentive friends.

He continued to apply himself evenings, when not on duty at the office, and his progress was excellent in every respect. The kind principal showed great interest in him, and at the age of twelve Ben Mayberry possessed what may be called a good elementary English education.

Before, however, these two years had passed he could receive and send messages in a very acceptable manner. His wages had been advanced, and he now had his mother in comfortable quarters, dressed tastefully himself, and was developing into a handsome youth, whose brilliant work had already attracted the notice of the general superintendent.

Ben had been an operator a little less than a year when he met with a most extraordinary experience, which to-day is a theme of never-ending wonder to those who were living in Damietta at the time.

One evening a rough-bearded man entered the office, and stepping to the counter, said to me:

"My name is Burkhill--G. R. Burkhill--and I am staying at the hotel in Moorestown. I am expecting a very important dispatch to-night, but I cannot wait for it. If it reaches this office before ten o'clock, I wish to have it delivered to the hotel."

Moorestown lay directly across the river, and was reached by the long, covered bridge which spanned the stream. It was beyond our "jurisdiction," that is, outside the circle of free delivery, which Mr. Burkhill understood, as he remarked that he would pay well for the trouble.

I assured him that I would see that the telegram reached him that night, if received before ten o'clock. Thanking me, he said good-evening, passed out, mounted his horse, and galloped away in the wintry darkness.

It was in the month of February, but the weather was mild for that season, and there had been a plentiful fall of rain. Ben was on duty until ten, and he was in the very act of rising from his seat when he called out:

"Helloa! here comes the message for Mr. Burkhill."

It was quite brief and Ben wrote it out rapidly, took a hasty impression, thrust it into the damp yellow envelope, and whistled for a messenger boy. There was only one present, and he was a pale, delicate lad, who had gone on duty that day after a week's illness.

"Helloa, Tim; do you want to earn a half dollar extra?" asked Ben, as the boy stood expectantly before him.

"I would like to, if it isn't too hard for me."

Ben looked sharply at him and saw that the boy was in too weak a state to undertake the task. There was no other messenger within call, and Mr. Burkhill was doubtless impatient for the message whose delivery I had guaranteed.

"It won't do for you to cross the river to-night," said Ben decisively; "the air is damp and raw, and I think it is going to rain again. I'll do it for you, and whatever extra I collect from Mr. Burkhill you shall have, Tim; now go home and go to bed."

And waving me a good-night, Ben hurried out of the door and vanished down the street.

"It's just like him," I muttered, as I prepared to go home; for except on special occasions we closed our office at ten, or shortly after. "That isn't the first kindness he has done that boy, and everyone in the office is bound by gratitude to him."

As I stepped out on the street I observed that the fine mist was turning into rain, and another of those dismal nights, which are often experienced in the Middle States during the latter part of winter, was upon the city.

I did not feel sleepy after reaching home. My wife and two children had retired and were sound asleep. There was no one astir but myself, and drawing my chair to the fire, I began reading the evening paper.

Fully an hour had passed in this manner and I was in the act of rising from my chair, with the purpose of going to bed, when a sharp ring of the bell startled me as though I had heard burglars in the house. I felt instinctively that something serious had happened as I hurried to the door.

"Did Ben Mayberry take a telegraphic message across the river to-night?" asked the man, whom I recognized as a policeman.

"He started to do so," I answered tremblingly. "What's wrong?"

"It's the last message he'll ever deliver; he has probably been killed!"

CHAPTER V

IN STORM AND DARKNESS

"Yes, it's the last message he'll ever deliver," repeated the policeman; "Ben Mayberry has probably been killed!"

These were the terrible words spoken by the man who had rung my bell in the middle of the night, and startled me almost out of my senses. I swallowed the lump in my throat, and with a voice tremulous with emotion, said:

"No, no! it cannot be. Who would kill him?"

"I don't mean he was murdered," the officer hastened to add, seeing my mistake. "He was on the middle span of the bridge when it was carried away by the flood, and that's the last of him!"

I drew a great sigh of relief. There was something unspeakably dreadful in the thought of noble Ben Mayberry being killed by anyone, and it lifted a vast burden from my shoulders to be told that no such awful fate had overtaken him.

But instantly came the staggering terror that the boy had gone down in the wreck and ruin, and at that moment was floating among the great masses of ice and debris that were sweeping swiftly down the river toward the sea.

"How was it?" I asked, after the officer had refused my invitation to enter.

"The river began rising very fast at dark, but the bridge has stood so many freshets we were hopeful of this. The water was at the top of the abutments at nine o'clock and was still creeping up. Jack Sprall, who is off duty to-night, was down by the bridge watching things. A little after ten o'clock, Ben Mayberry came along and said he had a message which he had promised to deliver to a gentleman at the hotel in Moorestown. Jack told him the bridge was unsafe, but Ben said he knew how to swim, and started across, whistling and jolly as usual. Jack said at the same time he heard the sound of wheels, which showed that a wagon or carriage had driven on from the other side, which never ought to have been allowed when things were looking so shaky. Ben had just about time to reach the middle of the bridge when the crash came, and the big span was wiped out, as though it was a chalk mark on a blackboard."

"How do you know of a surety that Ben Mayberry did not save himself?"

"He is very active and strong, I know, which made Jack hope he had pulled through. In spite of the danger of the rest of the bridge going, Jack crept out over it to the abutment, and shouted to Ben.

"It seemed that a couple of men had done the same from Moorestown, and they stood on the other abutment, with the middle of the river sweeping between and threatening to take away the rest of the tottering bridge every minute.

"When Jack called, they answered, though it was too dark to see each other, and they asked Jack whom he was looking for. He told them that Ben Mayberry had gone on the bridge a few minutes before from this side, and he was afraid he had been swept away. They said there could be no doubt of it, as he had not reached the span on which they were standing. They then asked Jack whether he had seen anything of a horse and carriage, which drove on the bridge from the Moorestown side, and which they had come out to see about. Of course Jack could only make the same answer, and when they explained, it was learned that the carriage contained a lady and small child--so three lives have been lost from people not doing their duty in keeping folks out of danger."

"Does the mother of Ben know anything about this?" I asked, with a shudder at the thought of her terrible grief.

"Yes; I went up to her house and told her first, as I thought it my duty to do."

"Poor woman! she must have been overcome."

"She was at first, and then when she asked me to tell her all about it, and I had done so, she said very quietly that she didn't believe her boy was drowned."

"Nor do I believe it!" I exclaimed, with a sudden thrill of hope. "Ben Mayberry is one of the best swimmers I ever saw; he went down with the lumber of the central span, and even if he could not swim, he had a good chance to float himself on some of the timbers or blocks of ice which are buoyant enough to support a dozen men."

"All that is very true," replied the policeman, who seemed to have thought of everything; "and I don't deny that there is just the barest possibility in the world that you're right. But you mustn't forget that the roof of the bridge was over him, and has shut out the chance of his helping himself. Don't you believe that, if he was alive, he would have answered the calls that Jack made to him? Jack has a voice like a fog-horn, and Ben would have heard him if he was able to hear anything."

This view of the case staggered me, and I hardly knew what to say, except to suggest that possibly Ben had answered

the call, and was unheard in the rushing waters; but the officer shook his head, and I confess I shared his doubts.

"Just as the splintering timbers went down, Jack did hear the shout of Ben; he heard, too, the scream of a woman, and that awful cry which a horse sometimes makes when in the very extremity of peril, but that was all."

I could not sleep after such horrifying tidings, when the policeman had gone; I went into the house and donned my overshoes and rubber coat. Fortunately my family had not been awakened by the ringing of the bell, and I did not disturb them; but, carefully closing and locking the door after me, I went out in the storm and darkness, oppressed by a grief which I had not known for years, for Ben Mayberry was as dear to me as my own son, and my heart bled for the stricken mother who, when she most needed a staff to lean upon during her declining years, found it cruelly snatched from her.

CHAPTER VI

"TELL MOTHER I AM ALL RIGHT"

There is a fascination in the presence of danger which we all feel. The news of the dreadful disaster spread with astonishing rapidity, and when I reached the river-side it seemed as if all Damietta were there.

The lamps twinkled in the hands of innumerable men moving hither and thither in that restless manner which showed how deep their feelings were. People were talking in guarded voices, as if the shadow of an awful danger impended over them, and the wildest rumors, as is the case at such times, were afloat. It was said that six, eight, and a dozen persons had gone down with the bridge and were irrecoverably lost. Other structures above us were carried away (though no one stopped to explain how the tidings had reached ahead of the flood itself), and it was asserted that not a span would be left on the stream at daybreak.

The flickering lanterns gave a glimpse of the scene which rendered it more impressive than if viewed under the glare of midday. Some daring ones ventured out to the first abutment despite the danger, and we saw the glare of their lanterns on the rushing, muddy water and the immense blocks of ice. Some of the latter would impinge against the stone abutment with a prodigious grinding crash, spin around several times, and then mount up from the water, crowded by others behind, as though it was about to climb over the massive stone. Then it would tumble back with a splash and swiftly sweep out of sight in the darkness.

Again, trees, with their bushy tops tossing above the surface, glided by as if caught in a rushing mill-race, and a grotesque character was given to the whole scene by the sudden crowing of some cocks, which must have been frightened by the twinkling lights so near them.

Few in Damietta went to bed that night. There was a continual walking to and fro, as people are seen to do when some great calamity is about to break upon them. Several mounted horses and rode down the river-bank for miles, in the weak hope of picking up tidings of the lost ones. No one could be found who knew the lady and child in the carriage which came upon the bridge from the other side. There were innumerable guesses as to their identity, but they were guesses and nothing more. No doubt was entertained that when communication could be opened with Moorestown on the morrow, we would learn who they were.

I stayed at the river-side for an hour, weighed down by the greatest grief of my life. I was anxious to do something, but there was absolutely nothing for me to do. Ben was gone, and his friends could not begin an intelligent search for him before the morrow.

I turned on my heel to go home, when a shout went up that the span on the other side of the center was going. There could be no doubt that the splintering crash and the grinding swirl of waters and ice were caused by the destruction of that span which dissolved into nothingness almost in a moment.

This started the cry that the timbers nearest us were breaking up.

Those who were on it made a rush for shore, which was not reached a minute too soon. The entire span suddenly lifted up and was "snuffed out" so promptly that the wonder was how it had withstood the flood so long.

This occurrence struck me as decisive of the fate of my young friend Ben Mayberry. It gave me an appreciation of the tremendous irresistibility of the freshet, which must have ended the lives of the hapless party almost on the instant. The bravest swimmer would be absolutely helpless in the grasp of such a terrific current, and in a night of pitchy darkness would be unable to make the first intelligent effort to save himself.

At last I went home through the drizzling rain, as miserable a mortal as one could imagine. When I reached the house I was glad to find that my family were still asleep. It would be time enough for them to learn of my affliction and the public disaster on the coming morrow.

The pattering of the rain on the roof accorded with my feeling of desolation, and I lay awake until almost daylight, listening, wretched, dismal, and utterly despairing.

I slept unusually late, and I was glad, when I went down to my breakfast, to learn that some kind neighbor had told my family all I knew, and indeed, a little more. The river rose steadily until daylight, by which time it was two feet above the abutments, and not a vestige of the bridge remained.

But the water had reached its highest point, for, after remaining stationary an hour, it had begun to fall, and was now a couple of inches lower than "high-water mark."

There were two things which I dreaded--the sight of the furious river, and to meet the sad, white face of Ben

Mayberry's mother. I felt that I could give her no word of comfort, for I needed it almost as much as did she. She must have abandoned all hope by this time, and her loss was enough to crush life itself from her.

When walking along the street I found that everyone was talking about the unexampled flood. It had overflowed the lower part of the city, and people were making their way through the streets in boats. Scores of families were made homeless, and the sights were curious enough to draw multitudes thither.

I kept away from every point where I could catch so much as a glimpse of the freshet.

"You have robbed me of the brightest and best boy I ever knew," I muttered, in bitterness of spirit; "he was one whom I loved as if he were a son."

The shadow of death seemed to rest on the office when I reached it. The loss of Ben Mayberry was a personal affliction to everyone there. Only the most necessary words were spoken, and the sighing, which could be heard at all times, came from the heart.

I went to my desk in a mechanical way, and had just placed my hand on the instrument, when I was thrilled by a call which I would have recognized among a thousand. Others heard and identified it also, and held their breath. The next instant this message reached me:

"DEAR MR. MELVILLE--Tell mother I am all right, but in need of dry clothing.

"BEN MAYBERRY."

CHAPTER VII

A THRILLING VOYAGE

On the night that Ben Mayberry started across the bridge to deliver the cipher message to Mr. Burkhill in Moorestown, he had reached the center span before he felt he was in personal danger. The few lamps which twinkled at long distances from each other were barely enough for him to see where he was going, and they did little more than make the darkness visible.

By the faint light he observed a carriage and single horse approaching. The animal lifted his feet high, walked slowly, and snuffed the air as he turned his head from side to side, like an intelligent creature which feels he is approaching danger. The rattling of the narrow planks under his hoofs and the carriage wheels could be heard above the roar and sweep of the angry river beneath.

Suddenly the bridge trembled under a blow received from a gigantic piece of ice, which went grinding and splashing with such violence that its course could be followed by the bulging upward of the planks between Ben and the horse.

"My gracious! this won't do," exclaimed the boy, more alarmed for the vehicle and its occupants than for himself.

He ran forward to grasp the bridle of the horse with the purpose of turning him back, when he saw that he had stopped of his own accord, and was snorting with terror. Ben reached up to seize the bit, when he was made dizzy by the abrupt lifting of the planking underneath, and was thrown violently forward on his face.

The brave boy knew what it meant, and kept his senses about him. It was utterly dark, and he was in the icy water with a terrified horse struggling fiercely, and in danger of beating out the boy's brains with his hoofs, while the shriek of the agonized mother rose above the horrid din:

"Save my child--save my child!"

Fortunately for Ben Mayberry the bridge broke up in a very unusual manner. Instead of the roof coming down upon him, it seemed to fall apart, as did the narrow planking. Thus his movements were not interfered with by the structure, and realizing what a desperate struggle for life was before him, he drew off his cumbersome overcoat with great deftness, and then swam as only a strong swimmer can do in the very extremity of peril.

He heard nothing more of the horse, which had doubtless perished after a struggle as brief as it was fierce; but, unable to see anything at all, Ben struck out toward the point whence came the cry of the mother, and which was close at hand.

He had scarcely made three strokes when he came in violent collision with a huge block of ice in his path. Without attempting to go around it, he grasped the edge, and, by a determined effort, drew himself upon it. Fragments of the bridge were all around, and he felt some of the timber upon the support.

While crawling carefully toward the other side, he shouted:

"Hello! where are you? Answer, and I'll help you."

A faint cry made itself heard amid the rushing waters and the impenetrable darkness. It was just ahead, and the next instant Ben had reached the other side of the ice raft, where, steadying himself with one hand, he groped about with the other, uttering encouraging words as he did so.

Suddenly he caught hold of a delicate arm, and with another cheery shout, he began drawing with all his strength.

It was a hard task, under the circumstances, but he quickly succeeded, and was not a little amazed to find that instead of a lady he had helped out a small girl.

But it was the cry of a mother that had reached his ears, and he did his utmost (which unfortunately was little) to help her. He called again and again, but there was no answer. He asked of the child the whereabouts of her parents, but the little one was almost senseless with bewilderment, cold, and terror, and could give no intelligible answer.

"She must be drowned," was the sorrowful conclusion of Ben, who was forced to cease his efforts; and I may as well add at this point, that he was right; the mother's body being carried out to sea, where it was never found.

For the time, Ben and the little girl were safe, but it will be seen that their condition was pitiable. It was a wintry night, the water was of an arctic temperature, and their clothing was saturated. The icy floor on which they were supported would have added to their terrible discomfort, had he not been able to gather together several of the planks within reach, with which he made a partition between them and the freezing surface.

Ben shouted at the top of his voice, but he was so far below the place where the bridge had stood that no one heard him, and he finally gave it up, knowing that even if he made himself known to friends, they would be powerless to help him so long as the darkness lasted.

The child, so far as he could judge, was no more than nine or ten years old, but she was richly clad, as he learned from the abundance of furs, silks, and velvet. She had luxuriant hair, which streamed about her shoulders, and he was sure she must be very beautiful.

She was alive, but faint and suffering. She did not wish to talk and Ben did not urge her, although he was curious to know her identity.

"I will learn all in the morning," he said to himself; "that is, if we are spared until then."

He was too excited and terrified to fall asleep, even had his discomfort not been too great to permit it, and he found he needed his wits about him.

Now and then the cake of ice which supported them was crowded by others, until it seemed on the point of being overturned, in which event another terrible struggle would be necessary to save himself and the little girl.

Then again, there seemed to be eddies and whirlpools in the current, which threatened to dislodge them or to break up the miniature iceberg into fragments, as the bridge itself was destroyed.

CHAPTER VIII

THE CIPHER TELEGRAM

The almost interminable night came to an end at last and the dull gray of morning appeared in the east.

Ben Mayberry chafed the arms of the little stranger, and even slapped her vigorously to prevent her succumbing to the cold. He was forced to rise to his feet himself at intervals and swing his arms and kick out his legs, to fight off the chilliness which seemed to penetrate to his very bones.

As soon as the boy could make use of his eyes he found himself drifting through the open country, where the river was fully double the width at Damietta. This gave the masses of ice much more "elbow room," and decreased the danger of capsizing.

Houses and villages were seen at intervals, and multitudes of people were along the bank gathering driftwood and "loot," and watching the unparalleled flood of waters.

Ben swung his hat and shouted, and at last caught the notice of the people on the bank. Two sturdy watermen sprang into a boat and began fighting their way out to the helpless ones. It was a hard task, but they succeeded, and Ben and little Dolly Willard (as she had given her name) were safely taken off. A crowd waited to welcome them and they received every possible attention. Both were taken to the nearest farmhouse, where a kind-hearted mother took Dolly in charge, for the little one needed it sadly enough.

They were within half a mile of a village which was connected with Damietta by telegraph, and before Ben would do anything more than swallow a cup of hot coffee, and change his clothing, he was driven to the office, where he sent the message which was the first word we received in Damietta to tell us that he was alive.

I lost no time in hurrying to the humble dwelling of Mrs. Mayberry, where I made known the joyful tidings. I shall never forget the holy light which illumined the thin face as she clasped her hands in thankfulness and said:

"I had not given up all hope, but I was very near doing so."

Ben was driven into Damietta late that afternoon, where a royal welcome awaited him. He was cheered, shaken by the hand, and congratulated over and over again, and for a time it looked as though he would be pulled asunder. When he finally tore himself loose and rushed into our office, the operators and messenger boys were equally demonstrative, but he did not mind them.

I stood at my desk with a swelling heart, waiting for him. Suddenly he turned and caught my hand.

"He that is born to be hanged will never be drowned----"

He was laughing when he spoke the jest, but his voice trembled, and all at once he broke down. Quickly withdrawing both hands, he put them over his face and cried like a heartbroken child. He had stood it like a hero to this point, but now, with the crowd outside peering into the windows, he sobbed with uncontrollable emotion, while my own heart was too full to speak.

As soon as he could master himself he said:

"I must not wait any longer; mother expects me."

He was out of the door in a twinkling, and in a few minutes the mother and son were in each other's arms.

The reader may think that the most remarkable part of Ben Mayberry's adventure on the night of the flood has already been told, but it proved to be the beginning of a train of incidents of such an extraordinary nature that I hasten to make them known. There was a direct connection between his experience on that terrible night in February and the wonderful mystery in which he became involved, and which exercised such a marked influence on his after-life.

Fortunately, little Dolly Willard suffered no serious consequences from her frightful shock and exposure. She received such excellent care that she speedily recovered, and as soon as we could re-establish communication with Moorestown and engage her in conversation, we learned something of her history.

She lived in New York City and had come to Moorestown on a visit with her mother and Uncle George. He was the G. R. Burkhill who failed to receive the cipher dispatch which Ben Mayberry undertook to deliver to him on that eventful night.

Dolly said her father was dead, or had been gone from home a very long time. Uncle George claimed and took her to the city, first sending a cipher dispatch to a party in the metropolis, and directing me, in case of an answer, to hold it until

he called or sent for it.

Two days later an answer arrived in the same mystic characters as before. As it has much to do with the incidents which follow, I give this remarkable telegram in full:

"NEW YORK, February 28th,----

"GEORGE R. BURKHILL, Moorestown:

"Nvtu vzhs ujmm ezkk tbn gzb adssdg dizodf rntsg zpvs azmj xjmm jddo.

"TOM."

Cipher telegrams are sent every day in the week, and we did not concern ourselves with this particular one, which would have received no further thought, but for an odd circumstance.

On the day Mr. Burkhill sent his message to New York, he was followed into our office by a man who was shabbily dressed, and who impressed me as what is commonly called a "beat." He spoiled several blanks without sending a message and then abruptly tore them up, put the pieces in his pocket, and walked out after Mr. Burkhill.

He was in the office several times the succeeding two days, made some inquiries, and sent off a couple of messages. Just after Ben Mayberry had received the cipher telegram given above, I happened to look across my desk and observed that the fellow had taken every letter, marking it down, as he easily interpreted it by sound.

It was only by accident that I made this discovery, for the man acted precisely as if he were preparing a message to send away.

CHAPTER IX

THE TRANSLATION

Mr. G. R. Burkhill overwhelmed Ben Mayberry with thanks for the heroic manner in which he saved his niece and strove to save his sister. He offered the boy a handsome reward, but I am glad to say Ben refused to accept it. He promised to write the boy concerning the little one, but he must have forgotten his promise, as a long time passed without anything being heard from him.

When I discovered that the seedy lounge about our office had carefully taken down the cipher telegram addressed to Burkhill, I was indignant, for it was well known that one of the most important duties which the telegraph companies insist upon is the inviolability of the messages intrusted to their wires. Nothing less than a preemptory order from the court is sufficient to produce the telegrams placed in our care.

I was on the point of leaving my desk and compelling the impudent stranger to surrender the cipher he had surreptitiously secured, but I restrained myself and allowed him to go without suspecting my knowledge of his act.

"Ben," said I, addressing my young friend, whom I trusted beyond any of the older operators, "did you notice that fellow who just went out?"

"Yes, sir; I have seen him before. He followed me home last night, and after I went in the house, he walked up and down the pavement for more than half an hour. He was very careful, but I saw him through the blinds."

"Has he ever said anything to you?"

"Nothing, except in the office."

"He took down every letter of that cipher telegram you just received for Mr. Burkhill."

The boy was surprised and sat a minute in deep thought.

"Mr. Melville," he said, "if you have no objection, I shall study out that cipher."

"That I think is impossible; it has been prepared with care, and it will take a greater expert than you to unravel it."

Ben smiled in his pleasing way as he answered:

"I am fond of unraveling puzzles, and I believe I can take this apart."

"I will be surprised if you succeed; but if you do, keep it a secret from everyone but myself."

"You may depend on that."

The odd times which Ben could secure through the day were spent in studying the mysterious letters; but when he placed it in his pocket at night and started for home, he had not caught the first glimmer of its meaning.

But he was hopeful and said he would never give it up until he made it as clear as noonday, and I knew that if it was within the range of accomplishment, he would keep his word. I have told enough to show my readers he was unusually intelligent and quick-witted, but I am free to confess that I had scarcely a hope of his success.

"I've got it!"

That was the whispered exclamation with which Ben Mayberry greeted me the next morning when he entered the office.

"No! You're jesting," I answered, convinced, at the same time, that he was in earnest.

"I'll soon show you," was his exultant response.

"How was it you struck the key?"

"That is hard to tell, more than you can explain how it is, after you have puzzled your brain for a long time over an arithmetical problem, it suddenly becomes clear to you."

He sat down by my desk.

"I figured and studied, and tried those letters every way I could think of until midnight, and was on the point of going to bed, when the whole thing flashed upon me. You know, Mr. Melville, that in trying to unravel a cipher, the first thing necessary is to find the key-word, for it must be there somewhere; and if you look sharp enough it will reveal itself. One single letter gave it to me."

"How was that?"

"If you will look at the telegram," said Ben, spreading it out before me, "you will notice that in one instance only is a single letter seen standing by itself. That is the letter 'b,' which I concluded must stand for the article 'a,' for I know of no other, unless it is 'l.' Now, the letter 'b' is the second one in the alphabet, and stands next in order to 'a.' If this system is followed throughout the cipher, we have only to take, instead of the letters as written, the next in order as they occur in the alphabet. But when I tried it on the following word, it failed entirely. Luckily I tested the second in the same manner, and I was surprised to find it made a perfect word, viz.: 'chance.' The third came to naught, but the fourth developed into 'your.' That proved that every other word of the message was constructed in this manner, and it did not take me long to bring them out into good English. This was a big help, I can tell you, and it was not long before I discovered that in the alternate words the system reversed; that is, instead of taking the letter immediately succeeding, the writer had used that which immediately precedes it in the alphabet. Applying this key to the telegram, it read thus:

"Must wait till fall; Sam has a better chance south. Your bank will keep."

"Now," added Ben, who was warranted in feeling jubilant over his success, "that is a very ordinary cipher--one which hundreds would make out without trouble. Had the writer run his letters all together--that is, without any break between the words--I would have been stumped. Besides, he uses no blind words, as he ought to have done; and it looks very much as if he calls everything by its right name, something which I should think no person anxious to keep such a secret would do. If he means 'bank,' he might as well have called it by another name altogether."

"I think ordinarily he would have been safe in writing his cipher as he has done; but, be that as it may, I am confident you have made a most important discovery."

CHAPTER X

FARMER JONES

The conclusion which I formed respecting the cipher telegram, so cleverly translated by Ben Mayberry, was that it concerned an intended robbery of one of the banks in Damietta, and that the crime, for the reason hinted in the dispatch, was postponed until the succeeding autumn.

Under such circumstances it will be seen that it was my duty to communicate with the general manager of the company, which I proceeded to do without delay. In reply, he instructed me to place myself in communication with the mayor of the city, whose province it was to make provision against what certainly looked like a contemplated crime.

This instruction was carried out, and the mayor promptly took every means at his command to checkmate any movement of the suspected party. He arranged to shadow him by one of the best detectives in the country, while I agreed to notify him of the contents of any more suspicious telegrams passing over the wires.

It need hardly be said that the friends of Ben Mayberry and myself took care that his exploit on the memorable winter night should not pass by unnoticed. The single daily paper published in Damietta gave a thrilling account of the carrying away of the bridge, and the terrible struggle of the boy in the raging river--an account which was so magnified that we laughed, and Ben was angry and disgusted. One of the best traits of the boy was his modesty, and it was manifest to everyone that this continued laudation was distasteful to him in the highest degree.

The cap-sheaf came when one of the metropolitan weeklies published an illustration of the scene, in which Ben was pictured as saving not only the mother and daughter, but the horse as well, by drawing them by main force upon an enormous block of ice! There was not the slightest resemblance to the actual occurrence, and the picture of our young hero looked as much like me as it did like Ben, who would have cried with vexation had not the whole thing been such a caricature that he was compelled to laugh instead.

But the general manager received a truthful account from me, together with the statement that Ben Mayberry alone deserved the credit for deciphering the telegram which foreshadowed an intended crime. Corporations, as a rule, are not given to lavish rewards, but the letter which the manager sent to Ben was more highly prized than if it had been a gold watch studded with diamonds, or a deed for the best house in Damietta. His heart throbbed when he read the warm words of praise from the highest officer in the company, who told him to continue faithfully in the path on which he had started, and his reward was certain. That letter Ben to-day counts among his most precious prizes, and nothing would induce him to part with it.

The best thing about this whole business was the fact that Ben never lost his head through the profusion of compliments from those in authority. He realized that the straight road to success lay not through accidental occurrences, which may have befriended him, but it was only by hard, painstaking, and long-continued application that substantial and enduring success is attained.

Ben was always punctual at the office, and never tried to avoid work which he might have contended, and with good reason, did not belong to him. His obliging disposition was shown by his volunteering to deliver the message which nearly cost him his life. The duty of the telegraphist is very confining, and so exacting that the most rugged health often gives way under it, and persons take to other business before completely broken up. But this debility is often the fault of the operators themselves, who sit bent over their desks, smoking villainous cigarettes or strong tobacco, who ride in street cars when they should gladly seize the chance to walk briskly, and who, I am sorry to say, drink intoxicating liquors, which appear to tempt sedentary persons with peculiar power.

Ben Mayberry had none of these baneful habits. He lived a long distance from the office, and although the street cars passed within a block of his home, I never knew him to ride on one, no matter how severe the weather might be.

Besides this, he belonged to a baseball club, and, in good weather, when we were not pushed, managed to get away several times a week during which he gained enough vitality and renewed vigor to last him for days.

One particularly busy afternoon, just as Ben had finished sending off a lengthy dispatch, someone rapped sharply on the counter behind him, and turning, he saw an honest-looking farmer, who had been writing and groaning for fully twenty minutes before he was ready to send his telegram.

"Can you send that to Makeville, young man?"

"Yes, sir," answered Ben, springing to his feet, and taking the smeared and blotted paper from his hand.

"Jist let me know how much it is; I s'pose it ain't more than twenty or thirty cents. There ain't much use in sending it,

but Sally Jane, that's my daughter, was anxious for me to send her a telegraphic dispatch, 'cause she never got one, and she'll feel proud to see how the neighbors will stare."

Ben had started to count the words, but he paused, and repressing a smile over the simplicity of the man, said:

"It is very expensive to send messages by telegraph, and it will cost you several dollars to send this----"

"Thunderation!" broke in the indignant old man, growing red in the face. "I won't patronize any sich frauds."

He started to go out, when Ben checked him pleasantly.

"It will be too bad to disappoint your daughter, and we can arrange to send her a message with very little expense. There are many words here which can be left out without affecting the sense. Please run your pen through these, and let me look at it again."

CHAPTER XI

THE VALUE OF COURTESY

The following is the message as first written out by the old farmer:

"SALLY JANE JONES, Makeville,--I take my pen in hand to inform you that I arrived safely in Damietta this morning. I have seen Jim, your brother. His baby is dead in love with me, and they all join in sending their love to you. I expect to eat my supper with Cousin Maria and sleep in their house by the river. I will be home to-morrow afternoon. Meet me at the station with the roan mare, if she ain't too tired to draw the buggy.

"Your affectionate father,
"JOSIAH A. JONES."

When Ben Mayberry had explained how much could be saved by crossing out the superfluous words in this message, while its main points would be left, the farmer's anger turned to pleasure. He took his pen, nodded several times, and turned smilingly to the desk, where he stood for fully a quarter of an hour, groaning, writing, and crossing out words. He labored as hard as before, and finally held the paper off at arm's length and contemplated it admiringly through his silver spectacles.

"Yes; that'll do," he said, nodding his head several times in a pleased way; "that reads just the same--little abrupt, maybe, but they'll git the hang of it, and it'll please Sally Jane, who is a good darter. Here, young man, jist figger onto that, will you, and let me know how much the expense is."

Ben took the paper, and under the labored manipulation of the old farmer, he found it was changed in this amazing fashion:

"I take my hand--Damietta. Jim, your brother--the baby is dead--I expect to eat Cousin Maria, and sleep in the river to-morrow afternoon--with the roan--if she ain't too buggy. Your affectionate father,

"JOSIAH A. JONES."

It was hard for Ben to suppress his laughter, but the farmer was looking straight at him, and the boy would not hurt his feelings. He surveyed the message a minute, and then said:

"Perhaps I can help you a little on this."

"You can try if you want to," grunted the old man; "but I don't think you can improve much on that."

Under the skillful magic of the boy's pencil the telegram was speedily boiled into this shape:

"Met Jim--all well--meet me with roan to-morrow afternoon.

J. A. JONES."

"There are ten words," explained Ben, "and that will cost you twenty-five cents. Besides, it tells all that is necessary, and will please your daughter just as much as if it were five times as long."

Mr. Jones took it up again, held it up at arm's length and then brought it closer to him, while he thoughtfully rubbed his chin with the other hand.

"I s'pose that's right," he finally said, "but don't you think you orter tell her I have arrived in Damietta?"

"She must know you have arrived here, or you couldn't send the telegram to her."

"Umph! That's so; but hadn't I orter explain to her that the Jim I met was her brother?"

"Is there any Jim you expect to see except your son?"

"No, that's so. I swan to gracious! But I thought it wasn't more'n perlite ter tell her that Cousin Maria's baby is dead in love with me."

"I am sure that every baby which sees you will fall in love with you, and your daughter must be aware of that."

At this rather pointed compliment the farmer's face glowed like a cider apple, and his smile seemed almost to reach to his ears.

"I swan; but you're a peart chap. What wages do you git?"

"Forty-five dollars a month."

"Well, you ain't it, you jist bet; but I was goin' to say that I orter speak of the roan mare, don't you think?"

"Have you more than one horse that is of a roan color?"

"No, sir."

"Then when you speak of the roan, they must know that you can only mean the roan mare."

The old gentleman fairly beamed with pleasure, and reaching solemnly down in his pockets, he fished out another silver quarter, which he handed to Ben, saying:

"I like you; take it to please me."

"I thank you; I have been paid," replied Ben, pushing the coin back from him.

"Confound it! Take this, then; won't you?"

As he spoke he banged down a large, red apple on the counter, and looked almost savagely at Ben, as if daring him to refuse it.

The boy did not decline, but picking it up, said:

"Thank you; I am very fond of apples. I will take this home and share it with my mother."

"The next time I come to town I'll bring you a peck," and with this hearty response the farmer stumped out of the door.

I had been much amused over this scene, especially when Ben showed me the astonishing message the farmer had prepared to send his daughter.

Ben laughed, too, after the old gentleman was beyond hearing.

"It's a pleasure to do a slight favor like that. I think I feel better over it than Mr. Jones does himself."

"I think not," said I; "for it so happens that instead of that gentleman being Farmer Jones, he is Mr. Musgrave, the district superintendent, who took a fancy to find out whether his operators are as kind and obliging as they should be, I am quite sure you lost nothing that time by your courtesy and accommodating spirit."

CHAPTER XII

A CALL

I have spoken of Ben Mayberry's fondness for athletic sports, and the great benefit he gained from the exercise thus obtained. When business permitted, I visited the ball grounds, where his skill made him the favorite of the enthusiastic crowd which always assembled there. He played shortstop, and his activity in picking up hot grounders and his wonderful accuracy in throwing to first base were the chief attractions which brought many to the place. He was equally successful at the bat, and, when only fourteen years old, repeatedly lifted the ball over the left-field fence--a feat which was only accomplished very rarely by the heaviest batsmen of the visiting nines.

There were many, including myself, who particularly admired Ben's throwing. How any living person can acquire such skill is beyond my comprehension. Ben was the superior of all his companions when a small urchin, and his wonderful accuracy improved as he grew older.

To please a number of spectators, Ben used to place himself on third base, and then "bore in" the ball to first. In its arrowy passage it seemed scarcely to rise more than two or three feet above the horizontal, and shot through the air with such unerring aim that I really believe he could have struck a breast-pin on a player's front nine times out of ten. I never saw him make a wild throw, and some of his double plays were executed with such brilliancy that a veteran player took his hand one day as he ran from the field, and said:

"Ben, you'll be on a professional nine in a couple of years. Harry Wright and the different managers are always on the lookout for talent, and they'll scoop you in."

"I think not," said the modest Ben, panting slightly from a terrific run. "I am a little lucky, that's all; but though I'm very fond of playing ball I never will take it up as a means of living."

"There's where your head ain't level, sonny. Why, you'll get more money for one summer's play than you will make in two or three years nursing a telegraph machine. Besides that, think of the fun you will have."

"That's all very good, and I can understand why baseball is so tempting to so many young men. But it lasts a short time, and then the player finds himself without any regular business. His fingers are banged out of shape; he has exercised so violently that more than likely his health is injured, and he is compelled to work like a common laborer to get a living. Ten years from now there will hardly be one of the present professionals in the business, I'm sure."

"I guess you ain't far from the fact, but for all that, if I had the chance that you have, I would be mighty glad to take in all the baseball sport I could."

But Ben was sensible in this respect, and steadily refused to look upon himself as training for the professional ball field. In looking back to that time, I am rejoiced that such is the fact. There are many of my readers who recall the popular players of years ago--McBride, Wright, Fisler, Sensitive, McMullen, Start, Brainard, Gould, Leonard, Dean, Spalding, Sweeney, Radcliffe, McDonald, Addy, Pierce, and a score of others. Among them all I recall none still in the field. Some are dead, and the rest are so "used up" that they would make a sorry exhibition if placed on the ball field to-day.

Ben Mayberry was a swift and skillful skater, and in running there was not a boy in Damietta who could equal him. It was by giving heed to these forms of healthful exercise, and by avoiding liquor and tobacco, that he preserved his rosy cheeks, his clear eye, his vigorous brain, and his bounding health.

"Why, how do you do, Ben?"

The lad looked up from his desk in the office, one clear, autumn day, as he heard these words, and I did the same. There stood one of the loveliest little girls I ever looked upon. She seemed to be ten or eleven years of age, was richly dressed, with an exuberant mass of yellow hair falling over her shoulders. Her large, lustrous eyes were of a deep blue, her complexion as rich and pink as the lining of a sea shell, and her features as winsome as any that Phidias himself ever carved from Parian marble.

Ben rose in a hesitating way and walked toward her, uncertain, though he suspected her identity.

"Is this--no, it cannot be----"

"Yes; I am Dolly Willard, that you saved from drowning with my poor mamma last winter. I wrote you a letter soon after I got home, but you felt too important to notice it, I suppose."

And the laughing girl reached her hand over the counter, while Ben shook it warmly, and said:

"You wrote to me? Surely there was some mistake, for I never got the letter; I would have only been too glad to answer it. Maybe you forgot to drop it in the office."

"I gave it to Uncle George, and told him to be careful and put it in the mail, and he said he did so when he came home, so it was not my fault. But I am visiting at my cousin's in Commerce Street, at Mr. Grandin's----"

"I know the place."

"They are going to have a grand party there to-night, and I've come down to ask you to be sure and be there."

"I am delighted to receive your invitation, but----"

"You can go," said I, as Ben looked appealingly toward me.

"Thank you, sir. Yes, Miss Dolly, I count upon great pleasure in being present."

"If you don't come, I'll never speak to you again," called the pretty little miss as she passed out of the door.

"I am sorry and troubled about one thing," said Ben to me, when we stood together. "This Uncle George of Dolly's is the G. R. Burkill who received that cipher dispatch. I am satisfied he is a villain, and there's trouble close at hand."

CHAPTER XIII

AT THE GRANDIN MANSION

Ben Mayberry was born in Damietta, and his parents, as I have shown, were extremely poor. He had been a barefooted urchin, who was ready to fight or engage in any reckless undertaking. As he grew older and became more thoughtful, he assumed better clothing, grew more studious, and, helped by his fine ability and prepossessing looks, became popular.

In addition, his remarkable skill in athletic sports made him well liked among the rougher element, who would have been glad had he consented to "train with their crowd."

In spite of all this, Ben failed to secure the social recognition to which he was entitled. Many who would greet him most cordially on the street never thought of inviting him to their homes. Damietta had been a city long enough to develop social caste, which lay in such distinct strata that there seemed no possibility of their ever mingling together.

I was glad, therefore, when Dolly Willard called at the office and personally invited Ben to attend the party at Mr. Grandin's, which was one of the most aristocratic families in Damietta. They were originally from the South, but had lived in the city a long time.

My young friend was somewhat dubious about going, as he had never before been invited to cross the threshold; but there was no refusing the warm invitation of Dolly, who had walked all the way to the office on purpose to secure his presence at the gathering that evening.

Ben Mayberry was proud of Dolly; that is, proud that it had fallen to his lot to befriend such a splendid girl, but there were several things that made him thoughtful.

In the first place, my reader will recall that the cipher telegram which was of such a compromising character was addressed to her uncle. Ben had hunted out from the files in the office the first disguised message, and it clearly referred to a contemplated robbery of one of the banks in Damietta. This G. R. Burkhill was a criminal who was playing a desperate game, in which he was likely to lose.

It was unfortunate that he was connected by relationship with Dolly Willard, who was the cousin of the Grandins; but it was certainly impossible that either Dolly, the Grandins, or Mrs. Willard herself, knew the character of the man. Such was the view Ben took of the matter, adding to himself:

"I hope he will keep away, and that nothing more of the intended robbery will be heard. It is now the fall of the year, and they seemed to agree that it was the time when the crime was to be attempted."

It was one of the grandest children's parties ever given in Damietta. Little Dolly Willard had mourned her mother's loss as deeply as could any child, but those of her years soon rally from affliction, and she was among the happiest of the three-score boys and girls who gathered in the roomy parlors of the Grandin mansion that beautiful night in October.

The wages which Ben Mayberry received enabled him to dress with excellent taste, and, poor as he was, there was none of the sons of the wealthiest merchants in Damietta who was more faultlessly attired that evening. True, some of them sported handsome gold watches, and one or two displayed diamonds, of which Ben had none, but otherwise a spectator would have placed the young telegraphist on the same social footing with the aristocratic youths around him.

Among the numerous misses present were many dressed with great elegance, and possessing much personal beauty; but Dolly Willard, by common consent, surpassed them all in personal loveliness, while the rich and severe simplicity of her attire showed either the exquisite taste of herself or of someone who had the care of her.

Among such an assemblage of misses and youths there are as many heart-burnings as among their elder brothers and sisters. Dolly was decidedly the belle of the evening. Some of the other girls were so envious over her superior attractions that they openly sneered at her, but the aspiring youth were dazzled by the sprightly girl, who attracted them as though she were a magnet and they had a big supply of steel about their persons.

When Ben Mayberry entered the parlor a little late, Dolly was standing among a group of lads who were smiling and bowing, and making desperate attempts to be funny with a view of drawing her attention especially to them. It was natural that she should be somewhat coquettish, but the instant she caught sight of Ben Mayberry she almost ran to him.

"I was afraid you wouldn't come," she exclaimed, taking both his hands in hers; "and if you hadn't, I never, never, never would have spoken to you again."

Ben unquestionably was a handsome lad. His bright eyes, his white, even teeth, his slightly Roman nose, his well-shaped head, his clear, bright eye, and his rosy cheeks flushed with excitement, rendered him an attractive figure among the bright faces and well-dressed figures. His superb physical poise lent a grace to all his movements, while he was self-possessed at the most trying times.

He made a laughing reply to Dolly, who at once seated herself beside him and began chatting in her liveliest style, which was very lively indeed. To those who approached, she introduced him as the young man who had saved her life the preceding winter, until Ben begged her to make no further reference to it. Many of the other girls gathered around, and showed their admiration of Ben in a most marked manner. These were mostly from Boston or New York, who had heard of the young hero, but had never looked upon him before.

Dolly was talking away with lightning speed to Ben, who managed to edge in a word now and then, when a dapper young man of sixteen years spruced forward.

"They are going to form for the lancers, Miss Dolly; I believe I have your promise for my partner."

"I thank you, Rutherford, but I have changed my mind, and will dance with Master Ben."

This was a daring and almost unwarranted act on the part of the little empress, for Ben had not yet spoken to her on the matter. But he was quick to seize the advantage, and, instantly rising to his feet, offered his arm to Dolly, and started toward the dancing-room, as though the whole thing had been prearranged before the other party presented himself.

This act brought him face to face with the disappointed young man, whose countenance flushed with anger.

"Rutherford, this is he who saved my life last winter, Master Ben Mayberry; my friend, Rutherford Richmond."

The two saluted each other somewhat distantly; and with feelings which it would be hard to describe, Ben recognized the tall, rather callow youth as the Rutherford who stoned him several years before, when he was floating down the river on a log, and to whom Ben in turn had given a most thorough castigation.

CHAPTER XIV

THE CONSPIRACY

Rutherford Richmond recognized Ben Mayberry at the same instant that the latter identified him. But neither gave any evidence of the fact that could be understood by other parties.

Ben took his position with Dolly by his side, and they were without doubt the handsomest couple on the floor that evening. Their mutual interest was so marked that everyone present noticed it, and it caused comment without end.

"Yes, I believe he sweeps out the office for a telegraph company. He manages to save up enough money in the course of a year to buy a decent suit of clothes."

Ben Mayberry was sitting down at the end of one of the dances, when he overheard these words, which he knew referred to him. Dolly had excused herself for a few minutes, and he was alone, sniffing at a fragrant bouquet which he was protecting from all damage for her benefit.

He knew, further, that the remark was intended for his ears, but he affected not to know it, while he furtively glanced behind him. There stood Master Rutherford Richmond, with three or four lads. They were all jealous of Ben, and were discussing his merits for his own especial benefit.

"I understand he gets fifty cents a week for his work," observed another, making sure his voice was elevated enough to be heard half across the room, "which is a big sum for him."

"I don't understand why Miss Jennie" (referring to Jennie Grandin, who gave the party) "allows such cattle here," struck in a third, in the same off-hand manner.

Rutherford Richmond took upon himself to give the reason.

"It was all on account of Dolly. You know she is kind-hearted, and I understand this booby went to her and begged that she would give him a chance to see how a party of high-toned people looked. She couldn't very well refuse, and now she is trotting him around for the rest of us to laugh at."

Ben Mayberry's cheeks burned, for none of these words escaped him. He would have given a good deal to have been outside alone for a few minutes with Master Rutherford Richmond. But he could not call him to account under the circumstances, and he still sniffed at the bouquet in his hand, and affected to be very much interested in the action of a couple of misses on the opposite side of the room.

"If Miss Jennie permits anything of this kind again," volunteered Rutherford, "it will cause trouble. A good many will want to know, before they allow their children to come, whether they are liable to meet the telegraph office boy and the great ball player here; if there's danger they will stay at home."

"I think the scum of society should be kept in its place," observed another, scarcely less bitter than young Richmond in his jealousy of the lad who claimed so much of the attention of the little belle of the evening.

This kind of talk was going on when, to Ben's great relief, Dolly came tripping to him. He added gall to the cup of the envious youths by rising, giving her his arm, and then glancing triumphantly back at them, as he escorted her to the dining room.

They knew the meaning of the glance, and they were fierce enough to assault him had they dared to do so.

The party came to an end before midnight. Ben Mayberry had saluted his friends, and was in the hall preparatory to going home, when someone slyly pulled his arm. Turning, he saw that it was Ned Deering, a little fellow whose father was the leading physician in Damietta. Ned was a great admirer of Ben, and he now seized the occasion to say:

"Look out, Ben, when you get down by the bridge over the creek; they're going for you."

"Whom do you mean?"

"That Rutherford Richmond and another fellow mean to hide in Carter's Alley, and when you come along will pounce down on you. They wanted me to go with 'em, but I begged off without letting 'em know I meant to tell you."

"Where are they?" asked Ben, glancing furtively about him.

"They slipped out ahead, and are hurrying down there. You had better take another way home. They are awful mad, and will knock the stuffing out of you."

Ben Mayberry smiled over the earnest words and manner of the boy, and thanked him for his information.

"Don't let 'em know I told you," added the timid fellow, as Ben moved out the door; "for if they find out that it was me that was the cause of your going the other way home, why, they'd punch my head for me. That Richmond, they say, is a reg'lar fighter--has science, and can lay out anybody of his size."

"They will never know you said anything to me, Ned, for I shall take the usual way, and will be slow, so as to give them plenty of time to get there ahead of me."

The little fellow looked wonderingly at Ben as he walked away, unable to comprehend how anyone should step into a yawning chasm after being warned of his peril.

CHAPTER XV

AN AFFRAY AT NIGHT

Ben Mayberry was so desirous that Rutherford Richmond and his brother conspirator should be given all the time they needed to complete their scheme for waylaying and assaulting him, that he lingered on the road longer than was really necessary.

Finally he turned down the street, which crossed by the creek that ran through the center of Damietta. It was a clear moonlight night, and, except in the shadow, objects could be seen distinctly for a considerable distance. He advanced with great care, and with all his wits at command, for he was confident the warning given him by Ned Deering was well founded.

When within a block of the bridge he saw someone peep out of Carter's Alley and instantly draw back his head, as though fearful of being observed. A moment later, a second person did the same. Rutherford Richmond and his confederate were on hand.

They did not look like the two boys as seen in the glare of Mr. Grandin's parlors, for they had disguised themselves, so far as possible, with a view of preventing their recognition by the boy whom they meant to assault. They knew they were liable to get themselves into trouble by such an outrageous violation of law, and they meant to take all the precautions necessary.

Each had donned a long flapping overcoat, which must have belonged to some of the older members of the families, as it dangled about his heels. They also wore slouch hats like a couple of brigands, which they pulled down over their eyes, so as to hide their features. They had no weapons, for it was calculated that by springing upon Ben unawares they would easily bear him to the pavement, when both would give him a beating which he would remember for a lifetime.

Ben was whistling softly to himself, and he was glad that at the late hour no one else was seen in the immediate neighborhood, for all he asked was a clear field and no favor.

As he walked by the open end of Carter's Alley, he dimly discerned two figures, which seemed plastered against the wall in the dense shadow, where they were invisible to all passers-by, unless their suspicion was directed to the spot.

Ben gave no evidence that he noticed them, and moved along in his deliberate fashion, changing his whistling to a low humming of no particular tune; but he used his keen eyesight and hearing for all they were worth.

He had gone no more than a dozen feet beyond, when he heard a rapid but cautious footstep behind him. It increased in swiftness, and was instantly followed by a second. The two boys were approaching him stealthily from the rear.

Still Ben walked quietly forward, humming to himself, and with no apparent thought of what was coming. Suddenly, when Richmond was in the very act of making a leap upon his shoulders, Ben turned like a flash, and planted a stunning blow directly in the face of the exultant coward, who was knocked on his back as if kicked by a vigorous mule.

His companion was at the elbow of Richmond when struck in this emphatic fashion, and for the instant was bewildered by the unexpected catastrophe. Before he could recover he imagined the comet which was expected at that season had caught him directly between the eyes, and he went backward over Richmond, with his two legs pointing upward, like a pair of dividers, toward the stars.

Ben's blood was up, and he waited for the two to rise, intending to "lay them out" more emphatically than before. The lad whose name he did not know lay still, but Rutherford recovered with remarkable quickness, and began struggling to his feet, without paying heed to his hat, which had rolled into the gutter.

"That ain't fair to strike a fellow that way, when he ain't expecting it," growled the assassin. "Why didn't you stand still like a man and not hit below the belt?"

"All right; I give you notice then, friend Rutherford, that I am going for you again, and this time above the belt."

Richmond, finding he must fight, threw up his hands and did his best to guard against the blows whose force he knew so well. He did possess some knowledge of sparring, but so did Ben, who was much the stronger and more active of the two. He advanced straight upon Richmond, made several feints, and then landed a blow straight from the shoulder, at the same time parrying the cross-counter which the lad came near getting in on the face.

It so happened that, at that moment, the other young scamp was in the act of rising, and had got upon his hands and knees. As Richmond was sent spinning backward he came in collision with him, and turned a complete somersault, the

air seeming to be full of legs, long hair, hats, and flapping overcoats.

"Murder! help! help! police! police!"

These startling cries were shouted at the top of their voices by the discomfited poltroons, and were heard a long distance on the still night. Suddenly the rattle of running feet sounded on the planks of the bridge, and Ben caught sight of a policeman running toward the spot.

"What does this mean?" he demanded, when he came face to face with Ben, whom he motioned to stop.

"Those two fellows attacked me when I was passing Carter's Alley, and I--well, I defended myself as best I could."

"Oh, Ben, that is you; I didn't know you at first," said the policeman. "This is rather serious business; I'll run 'em in."

Advancing to where the boys were once more climbing to their feet, he grasped each by the collar.

"I'll take you along with me, young gents; this is serious business for you."

They begged piteously to be let off, declaring that it was only a joke, but the officer was inexorable, and marched them to the station house, where they spent the rest of the night, Ben Mayberry having been notified to be on hand at nine o'clock the next morning, when the police justice would make an investigation.

CHAPTER XVI

THE THIRD TELEGRAM

When the father of Rutherford Richmond's friend, at whose house the young Bostonian was visiting, learned the facts, he was indignant beyond description. He declared that Ben Mayberry had served the young scapegraces right, except he ought to have punished both more severely, which was rather severe, as was shown by the blackened eyes and bruised faces.

Ben declined to push the matter on the morrow, as the boys had been punished, and he had proved he was able to take care of himself, as against them, at any time. But the gentleman insisted that he would not permit the matter to drop, unless his son and Rutherford agreed to go to the telegraph office and beg the pardon of the boy whom he learned they had insulted under Mr. Grandin's roof. Rutherford and his friend consented, and they humiliated themselves to that extent. The succeeding day Rutherford went home to Boston, and did not reappear in Damietta until long afterward, when he hoped the disgraceful episode was forgotten.

On the following week Dolly Willard returned to New York, and Ben, for the first time in his life, began to feel as though his native city had lost a good deal of the sunshine to which it was entitled.

"She will visit Damietta again," he said to himself, with just the faintest sigh, "and she promised to write me; I hope she won't forget her promise."

And, indeed, the sprightly little miss did not lose sight of her pledge. It may be suspected that she took as much pleasure in expressing on paper her warm friendship for Ben, as he did in reading the pure, honest sentiments, and in answering her missives, which he did with great promptness.

It was just one week after the memorable night of the party, while I was sitting at my desk, that the following cipher dispatch came over the wires, addressed to G. R. Burkhill, Moorestown:

"Fwfszujoh hr pl nm ujn f Sqtqdez w bu bnqmdq. TOM."

I passed the message to Ben, whose eyes sparkled as he took it in hand. It required but a few minutes for him to translate it by the method which has already been made known, and the following rather startling words came to light:

"Everything is O. K. On time Thursday at corner."

This unquestionably referred to the same unlawful project outlined in the former dispatches. Mr. Burkhill had not been in the office for months. As yet, of the three telegrams sent him, he had not received one. The first was lost in the river, the second had been on file more than half a year, and we now had the third.

But the latter did not lie uncalled for even for an hour. Remembering the instruction received from the manager, I took a copy of the message, with the translation written out by Ben, to the office of the mayor, where I laid the facts before him. This was on Wednesday, and the contemplated robbery was fixed for the following night. By his direction I sent a dispatch at once to the address of the detective in New York, who, it had been arranged, was to look after the matter.

The reply to this message was the rather surprising information that Detective Maxx had been in Damietta several days, and knew of the contemplated robbery. He was shadowing the suspected party, and if he deemed it necessary, he would call on the mayor for assistance.

While I was absent from the office, who should walk in but Mr. G. R. Burkhill. He greeted Ben with much effusion, shaking him warmly by the hand, inquiring how he got along, and telling him that his niece sent her special regards to him.

"I have been on a trip to New Orleans," he added, "or I would have been down in Damietta sooner, for I like the place."

"The summer isn't generally considered a good time to go so far south," ventured Ben.

"That is true, as relates to Northerners, but I was born in the Crescent City, and have no fear of Yellow Jack; fact is, I have had the confounded disease myself. By the way, have you a message for me?"

"We have two, in fact I may say three, for the copy of the first one that went down the river with me has never been handed you, and one came a day or two after you left."

"I know what they are, so you needn't mind about them. I will take the last, if you please."

"It arrived within the last half hour," explained Ben, as he handed the damp sheet to him.

The boy watched his countenance while Burkhill was reading it. It took several minutes for him to study out its

meaning, but he did so without the aid of pencil or paper. A strange glitter came into his gray eyes as the meaning broke upon him, and he muttered something to himself which the lad did not quite catch.

Then he turned to the desk, and was engaged only a minute or two when he handed a return message to Ben, paying for it as the man had done who forwarded the other to him. It was this:

"Uibu rthsr fybdumz Vhkk cf qdzex.

"G. R. BURKHILL."

Applying his rule (which compelled him to go to the end of the alphabet, when, for instance, the letter "a" demanded to be represented by a preceding letter), Ben Mayberry very readily translated the cipher as follows:

"That suits exactly. Will be ready.

"G. R. BURKHILL."

CHAPTER XVII

DECIDEDLY MIXED

During the summer succeeding the carrying away of the bridge which connected Damietta with Moorestown, it was built in a more substantial manner than before. It was an easy matter, therefore, to cross from one place to another, and carriages and pedestrians went back and forth between the two States at almost every hour of the day. Damietta was a large city, while Moorestown was only a small town; but the latter was pleasantly located and had a large and excellent hotel, where quite a number of guests spent the most sultry months of summer.

In Damietta were three banks, and the cipher telegrams which I have laid before the reader, beyond a doubt referred to one of them, but it was impossible to fix with certainty upon the right one. As a matter of prudence, therefore, it was determined to keep the three under surveillance. The Mechanics' Bank, as it was called before it adopted the national system, stood on the corner, and the general impression prevailed that this was the institution referred to, as it will be remembered that the word "corner" occurred in one of the telegrams.

A few minutes' reflection convinced me that it was utterly out of the question for the intended robbery to succeed. Such desperate projects depend mainly on their secrecy for success. The watchmen in all the banks were instructed to be unusually vigilant, the policemen were apprised of what was suspected, a number of officers were to lounge upon the streets near at hand in citizens' clothes, and Aristides Maxx, one of the most skillful detectives in the metropolis, was engaged upon the case.

The general belief was that the burglars, discovering what thorough preparations were on foot, would not make the attempt. That sort of gentry are not the ones to walk into any trap with their eyes open.

Respecting Detective Maxx, there was much wonderment, and the mayor was vexed that he did not show up. Some doubted his presence in Damietta, but the superior officer of the city felt that courtesy demanded that Maxx should report to him before trying to follow up any trail of his own. If he was with us, he was so effectually disguised that no one suspected his identity.

"I wonder whether that seedy, tramp-like fellow who stole the cipher dispatch, can be Detective Maxx?" said Ben to me on Wednesday night before he started for home.

"It is not impossible," I answered, "for detectives are forced to assume all manner of disguises. He may have chosen to stroll about the city in that make-up."

"But if it is the detective, why did he go to all the trouble of copying off the telegram by sound when he could have got it from us with the translation merely by making himself known?"

"I admit that, if he is a detective, he acts, in my judgment, in a very unprofessional way. He was so persistent in his attentions that he must have known he was sure to draw unpleasant, if not dangerous suspicion, to himself."

"Do you know," said Ben, with a meaning smile, "that I half believe this stranger and Burkhill are partners? They have been here at the same time, they show interest in the same thing, and like enough are working out the same scheme of robbery."

This had never occurred to me, and I was struck with its reasonableness, when I came to think it over. The ill-favored individual signed the name "John Browning" to the dispatch which he sent some months before, as a pretext for visiting our office so much--but that was clearly an alias.

"Well," said I, "it is all conjecture any way. With the ample warning the authorities have received, I do not believe there is the slightest prospect of a robbery being committed. I intend to retire to-morrow night at my usual hour with little fear of my slumbers being disturbed."

A few minutes after, we bade each other good-night, and wended our way quietly homeward.

My experience was singular, after parting with my young friend--not meaning to imply that anything unusual occurred to me; but the mental processes to which I was subjected that evening, in the light of subsequent events, were very peculiar, to say the least.

I am convinced that the inciting cause was the remark made by Ben Mayberry to the effect that he believed the seedy individual was a confederate of Burkhill, and that the two were perfecting a scheme for robbing one of the banks--most likely the Mechanics'.

"Ben is right," I said to myself. "His bright mind has enabled him to grasp the truth by intuition, as a woman sometimes

does when a man has been laboring for hours to reach the same point."

But before I could satisfy myself that the boy was right, a still stronger conviction came to me that he was wrong. The men were not pals--as they are called among the criminal classes--and they were not arranging some plan of robbery.

While I was clear on this point, I was totally unable to form any theory to take the place of the one I had demolished.

Who was the pretended John Browning, and what was the dark scheme that was being hatched "in our midst," as the expression goes?

These were the questions which presented themselves to me, and which I could not answer in a manner thoroughly satisfactory to myself.

"They are all wrong--everybody is wrong!" I exclaimed to myself; "whatever it is that is in the wind, no one but the parties themselves knows its nature."

This was the conclusion which fastened itself in my mind more firmly the longer I thought.

"Eternal vigilance is the price of liberty, and it is the only thing which will protect us in this case--helloa!"

So rapt was I in my meditation that I had walked three squares beyond my house before I awoke to the fact. It was something which I had never done before in all my life.

CHAPTER XVIII

BETWEEN TWO FIRES

In the meantime, Ben Mayberry underwent an experience more peculiar than mine.

I cannot speak of the mental problems with which he wrestled, but, as he explained to me afterward, he had settled down to the belief that the Mechanics' Bank was the one against which the burglars were perfecting their plans. He was hopeful that the only outcome of the conspiracy would be the capture of the criminals, though he felt more than one pang when he reflected that the principal one was a relative of Dolly Willard, who was the personification of innocence and goodness to him.

Ben had acquired the excellent habit of always being wide awake, excepting, of course, when he lay down for real slumber. Thus it was that he had gone but a little distance on his way home when he became aware that someone was following him.

I doubt whether there is a more uncomfortable feeling than that caused by such a discovery. The certainty that some unknown person, with no motive but a sinister one, is dodging at your heels, as the mountain wolf slinks along behind the belated traveler, awaiting the moment when he can spring upon him unawares, is enough to cause the bravest man to shiver with dread.

The night was very dark. The day had been cloudy, and there was no moon; but Ben was in a large city, with an efficient police system (that is, equal to the average), there were street lamps, the hour was not unusually late, and there were other persons beside himself abroad. And yet, in the heart of the metropolis, at the same hour, crimes have been perpetrated whose mystery has never been unraveled to this day.

Ben Mayberry may have felt somewhat uneasy, but there was not so much fear as there was curiosity to know what earthly reason any living man could have for following him in that stealthy fashion.

Surely no one could suspect him of being burdened with wealth. The only article of any account about his person was a silver watch, which had cost him sixteen dollars. He never carried a pistol, for he saw no necessity for doing so. If he should find himself beset by enemies who were too strong to be resisted, he could run as rapidly as any person in the city, and a short run in Damietta was enough to take him to a place of safety inaccessible to his assailants.

When he turned into the narrow street which led across the bridge where he had his affray with Rutherford Richmond and his companion, he reflected that it was perhaps the most dangerous spot in the neighborhood. There was a single lamp just before stepping on the bridge, where one might run against another before seeing him.

He hesitated a minute as he made the turn. It was easy enough to reach his home by a different route, which was somewhat longer, but which was well lighted all the way, and there could be little risk in taking it.

"I'll stick to the usual way," muttered Ben, striding resolutely forward; "I don't believe anything like murder is contemplated."

At that moment he would have felt much more comfortable had he possessed a pistol, or some kind of weapon, but he did not hesitate, now that he had "put his hand to the plow."

A minute later he stepped on the bridge, where the gas lamp shone upon him, and, with his usual deliberate tread, passed off in the gloom of the other side. The instant he believed himself beyond sight of his pursuer, he quickened his gait but continually looked back in the hope of gaining a view of the man, for the boy was naturally eager to learn who it was that was playing such a sinister trick on him.

Just beyond, on the limit of his field of vision, Ben saw a shadowy figure cross quickly, to the other side of the street. The stranger did this before coming within the glare of the lamp, which would have revealed him too plainly to those who might be curious to secure a glimpse of his features.

An instant later his footfall was heard on the bridge, and he was walking rapidly toward Ben, crossing again to the same side of the street, as soon as over the stream. The boy stepped lightly but briskly forward until he reached Carter's Alley, into which he entered a couple of yards, and then came to a sudden halt.

At the moment of doing so, his foot struck something hard. He knew what it was, and, stooping down, picked up a large stone, which he held tightly grasped in his hand. Such a weapon was very formidable in the grip of a vigorous boy, who could throw with the skill and accuracy of Ben Mayberry.

The lad had scarcely halted when he caught the tip, tip of his pursuer, who was evidently determined to overtake him

before he reached the lighted regions beyond. Ben was astonished just then, to note that a second person was just approaching from the opposite direction in the same guarded fashion.

"It must be there are two of them," was the sensible conclusion of the boy; "they have agreed to meet here, where I wouldn't have much show against them."

It followed that the party of the second part was waiting for the coming of young Mayberry, doubtless with the understanding that his partner in crime should follow him to a certain point near at hand, when the two would close in on him.

Ben had never suspected any such conspiracy as this, and, had he gone a little further, he would have walked directly into the arms of the second ruffian, while peering behind him at the shadowy villain who "still pursued him."

But the lad had stopped short and disconcerted the plans of the conspirators by so doing. The one who was lying in wait was quick to miss the boy whom he had seen cross the bridge, and, suspecting something was wrong, he hastened stealthily toward the creek to learn the explanation.

CHAPTER XIX

BAFFLED!

It so happened that the two men stopped directly at the mouth of the alley, within a few feet of Ben Mayberry, who could hear their guarded words, though he could not catch the first glimpse of their figures.

A whistled signal or two first made them certain of each other's identity, and then the one who had crossed the bridge gave utterance to an oath, expressive of his anger, as he demanded:

"Where has he gone?"

"How should I know?" growled the other. "I waited where you told me to wait, and finding he didn't come, I moved down to meet him, but he don't show up."

"Sh! Not so loud. He can't be far off."

"I don't know how that is, but he's given us the slip. There's an alley right here, and he has turned into that."

"I don't hear him."

"Of course not. Because he's standing still and listening to us."

"Flash your bull's-eye into the alley."

When Ben Mayberry heard this order he trembled, as well he might, for he was so close to the scoundrels that the first rays of the lantern would reveal him to them. Indeed he dare not move, lest the noise, slight as it was, would bring them down on him.

He grasped the ragged stone in his hand and braced himself for the explosion that he was sure was at hand.

But fortunately, and most unexpectedly, the crisis passed. The other villain growled in return:

"What do you mean by talking about a bull's-eye? I doused the glim long ago."

"Why did you do that?"

"The cops are watching us too close. I had hard work to dodge one of 'em to-night. Do you s'pose I meant to have him find any of the tools on me? Not much."

The other emitted another sulphurous expression, and added the sensible remark:

"Then there's no use of our hanging around here. He's smelt a mice and dodged off, and we won't get another such a chance to neck him."

These words sounded very strange to Ben Mayberry. Well might he ask himself what earthly purpose these scamps could have in wishing to waylay him in such a dark place, where he was not likely to secure help. The latter part of their conversation proved they contemplated violence.

"There's one thing certain," Ben said to himself, "if I manage to get out undiscovered, I will see that I am prepared for such gentlemen hereafter."

The couple suddenly stopped talking, for the sound of approaching footsteps were heard. The two moved into the alley, and a minute after a heavy man came ponderously along with a rolling tread. He was puffing at a cigar, whose end glowed so brightly that the tip of his nose and his mustache were seen by the three standing so near him. Ben believed the wretches intended to assault and rob the citizen, and doubtless they were none too good to do so. In case the attempt was made, Ben meant to hurl the stone in his hand at the spot where he was sure they were, and then yell for the police.

Policy alone prevented the commission of the crime.

"We could have managed it easily," whispered one, as the portly citizen stepped on the bridge and came in sight under the lamp-light, "but I guess it was as well we didn't."

"No; it wouldn't have paid as matters stand. We might have made a good haul, but the excitement to-morrow would have been such that we wouldn't have had a show to-morrow night."

The heart of the listening Bob gave a quick throb, for this was another proof of the intended crime on Thursday evening.

"Well," added one, "that telegraph fellow was too smart for us this time, and has given us the slip. We may as well go

home, for there's nothing more to do."

Thereupon they began walking toward the creek, with the deliberate tread of law-abiding citizens, who, if encountered anywhere on the street at any hour, would not have been suspected of being "crooked."

Ben Mayberry had good cause for feeling indignant toward these ruffians, who clearly intended personal violence toward him, and who were, in all probability, desperadoes from the metropolis, brought into Damietta for the most unlawful purposes.

When they had gone a short distance, Ben stepped out of the alley upon the main street, and stood looking toward the bridge. This was slightly elevated, so that in approaching from either side, one had to walk up-hill. The illumination from the lamp, of which I have made mention, gave a full view of the structure itself and all who might be upon it. Ben saw his pursuer, in the first place, when he stepped on the planks, but the light was at his back, and he shrouded his face so skillfully that not a glimpse was obtained of his features.

In a few minutes the conspirators slowly advanced out of the gloom and began walking up the slight ascent toward the bridge, becoming more distinct each second. When they reached the middle of the structure, they were in plain sight, but their backs were toward Ben, who, however, had them where he wanted them.

"I think I can plug one of them," muttered the shortstop of the Damietta club, as he carefully drew back his arm and fixed his eye on the fellows. "At least, here goes."

Gathering all his strength and skill, he hurled the stone at the one who, he believed, had been lying in wait for him. The whizzing missile shot through the air like a cannon-ball, and landed precisely where the thrower intended, directly between the shoulders of the unsuspecting villain, who was thrown forward several paces by the force of the shock, and who must have been as much jarred as though an avalanche had fallen on him.

CHAPTER XX

WATCHING AND WAITING

What imaginings were driven into the head of the ruffian by the well-directed missile it would be impossible to say, but it is safe to conclude he was startled.

His hat fell off, and, without stopping to pick it up, he broke into a frantic run, closely followed by his companion, neither of them making the least outcry, but doubtless doing a great deal of thinking.

Ben Mayberry laughed until his sides ached, for the tables had been turned most completely on his enemies; but he became serious again when he wended his way homeward, for there was much in the incidents of the day to mystify and trouble him.

His mother had retired when he reached his house, but there was a "light in the window" for him. The fond parent had such faith in her son that she did not feel alarmed when he was belated in coming home.

Ben made a confidante of her in many things, but the truth was he was outgrowing her. She was a good, devout lady, but neither mentally nor physically could she begin to compare with her boy.

Had he made known to her the contemplated robbery, or his own narrow escape from assault, she would have become nervous and alarmed.

Ben did not tell her about the affray with Rutherford Richmond and his companion, for it would only have distressed her without accomplishing any good.

He saw that his terrible adventure the preceding winter, on the wrecked bridge, had shocked her more than many supposed, and more than she suspected herself. The consequences became apparent months afterward, and caused Ben to do his utmost to keep everything of a disquieting nature from his beloved mother.

On the morrow Ben told me the whole particulars of his adventures on the way home, and asked me what I made of it.

"I give it up," I answered. "It's beyond my comprehension."

"Do I look like a wealthy youth?" he asked, with a laugh.

"It is not that; they have some other purpose."

"Do they imagine I carry the combination to some safe in the city, and do they mean to force it from me?"

"Nothing of that sort, as you very well know. It looks as if they really meditated doing you harm."

"There is no room for doubt; and it was a lucky thing, after all, that the night was so dark, and the city don't furnish many lamps in that part of the town. Do you think I ought to tell the mayor or some officer about this?"

"Could you identify either of the men if you should meet him on the street?"

"I could not, unless I was allowed to examine his back, where the stone landed."

"Then there's no use of telling anyone else, for no one could help you. You had better carry a pistol, and take a safer route home after this. One of these days, perhaps, the whole thing will be explained, but I own that it is altogether too much for any fellow to find out just now."

It was natural that I should feel nervous the entire day, for there was every reason to believe we were close upon exciting incidents, in which fate had ordered that Ben Mayberry and myself would have to make the initial movements.

Neither Burkhill, the tramp-like looking individual, nor any character to whom the least suspicion could attach, put in an appearance at the telegraph office during the day; this was another disappointment to Ben and myself.

The mayor also was disposed to be uncommunicative, for when I dropped in on him during the afternoon, he was short in his answers, barely intimating that everything was in a satisfactory shape. When asked whether Detective Maxx had revealed himself, he said:

"I have seen nothing of him, and do not care to see him. His help is not needed."

I am convinced that the action of the famous detective had a great deal to do with the ill-humor of the mayor, who was generally one of the most affable of men.

I was pretty well used up, and at eleven o'clock I closed the office and went home, separating as usual from Ben Mayberry, who, I was satisfied, intended to know whether anything was amiss before he lay down to slumber.

Although the impression was general that it was the Mechanics' Bank which was the objective point of the conspirators, yet the chief of police, as I have intimated, had stationed his men so as to be ready for instant use, should it prove to be any one of the moneyed institutions.

Ben Mayberry was so well satisfied that it was the Mechanics' that, after leaving me, he went in that direction, anxious to see a first-class burglary attempted and foiled.

The institution, it will be remembered, stood on the corner of one of the main streets, and a lamp was burning directly opposite. The cashier reported that two suspicious characters had called during the day and made some inquiries about drafts on New York, and the officers, who had spent much time in the neighborhood, were convinced that they had seen the same individuals stealthily viewing the bank from the outside.

When Ben reached the vicinity he saw no person, although he well knew that in almost every dark nook and hiding place, a guardian of the law was stationed, quietly awaiting the moment when the lawbreakers would dare show themselves. Ben knew, too, that more than one pair of eyes carefully scrutinized him as they did every pedestrian who passed.

He continued along until he reached a point where he could stand without being noticed by anyone. Then he stopped, and, wide awake as ever, resolved that he would see the thing out if he was forced to stand where he was until the rising of the sun on the morrow.

CHAPTER XXI

"LAY LOW!"

The clock in the tower of the City Hall solemnly boomed the hour of midnight. Damietta lay wrapped in slumber--that is, so far as the majority of her citizens were concerned. Her guardians of the peace, as a rule, were wide awake, and the dozens stationed within the vicinity of her three national banks were particularly so.

Ben Mayberry counted the strokes of the iron tongue, and reflected that Thursday was gone, and Friday had begun. As yet nothing had been seen or heard to indicate that anything unlawful was contemplated in this immediate neighborhood. More than once he was so well convinced that my view of the case was correct, that he was on the point of starting homeward, but he checked himself and stayed.

At such a time the minutes drag with exceeding slowness, and it seemed to Ben that fully a couple of hours had gone by, when the huge clock struck one. During the interval a number of pedestrians had passed, and a party of roystering youths rode by in a carriage, each one singing independently of the other, and in a loud, unsteady voice, but nothing yet had occurred on which to hang a suspicion.

The peculiar, ringing, wave-like tones, which are heard a few minutes after the striking of a large bell, were still lingering in the air and gradually dying out, when one of the policemen gave a guarded whistle, which was a signal for the others to "lay low," or in better English, to keep themselves unusually wide awake.

A minute after two men were heard approaching, and became dimly visible in the partial illumination of the street. It so happened that they walked directly by where Ben was standing. They did not notice him, though he plainly saw them. They were of large frame, and walked with a slight unsteadiness, as though under the influence of liquor.

"There's the bank," said one, in an undertone, as though he was imparting a momentous secret to the other.

"That's so; if we could only get in, knock the watchman on the head, and kick in the door of the safe, we would make a good haul."

"Suppose we try it, Jack----"

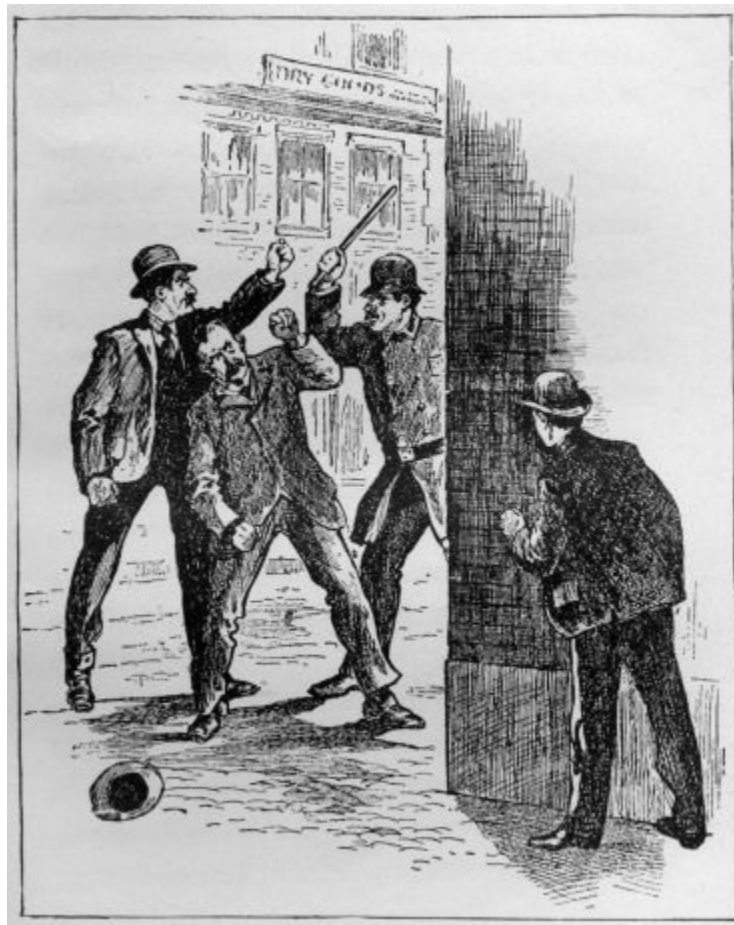
For more than two hours a burly watchman had been hidden close at hand, without Ben suspecting his presence. The last sentence was in the mouth of the speaker when this policeman sprang upon the amazed strangers, who were discussing the burglary of the bank.

He must have been surcharged with faithfulness, for, instead of waiting until an overt act was committed, as all had been instructed to do, he rushed upon the men in a burst of enthusiasm which knew no restraint and passed all bounds.

"Yes, you'll rob the bank, will you?" he shouted, swinging his club aloft and bringing it down on the heads of the others. "I'll show you--we've been watching you. We know you. You're a fine set of cracksmen. You think Damietta is a country town, but you'll learn different----"

These vigorous observations were punctuated with equally vigorous whacks of the club, which it seemed must crack the skulls of the men, and in all probability would have done so had they not risen to the exigencies of the case and turned upon the policeman with remarkable promptitude.

Both of them were powerful, and finding themselves assailed in this fashion, one knocked the officer half-way across the street, wrenched his club from his grasp, and began laying it over his head. The stricken guardian of the peace shouted for help, and tried desperately to draw his revolver. Finally he got it out, but before he could use it that also was taken from him, and it looked as though little would be left of him.



THE POLICEMAN BROUGHT HIS CLUB DOWN ON THE HEADS OF THE OTHERS.--P. 144.

But the other policemen came running up, and took a hand in the fracas. While some went for the one who was belaboring the representative of the law, others made for the second burglar. But he was more muscular, if possible, than his friend, and he laid about him with such vigor that three officers were prostrated before he could be secured. Calling to his friend, the two gave themselves up, demanding to know why peaceable citizens should be clubbed when quietly walking along the street.

"We had not uttered a disrespectful word," said the first, "but were joking together, when that brass-buttoned idiot pounced upon us. We simply defended ourselves, as every man has a right to do, and we don't propose to let the matter rest here."

"He lies!" shouted the officer who had fared so ill, as he came forward, his hat off, and his clothing covered with dust; "he was arranging to rob the bank; they are the burglars that we've been watching for days; I know 'em all right."

"We shall have to take you along," said the chief, who saw that matters were considerably mixed.

At this point Ben thought it was his duty to interfere.

"If you will permit me, I am satisfied that some mistake has been made. These gentlemen did nothing----"

"He's one of 'em," broke in the first officer, whose wrath could not be appeased; "he's been their dummy; he was on the lookout to give 'em warning; run him in, too."

Despite Ben Mayberry's protests, he was forced to go with the prisoners; but on the way to the lock-up he was recognized by several officers, including the chief, who ordered his release, Ben promising to appear in the morning at the hearing.

On the morrow several important facts came to light. The two individuals who had been so roughly used were honest countrymen, whose references to the robbery of the bank were purely in jest--such a project as burglary never entering their thoughts.

The policeman who assailed them made a humble apology, and they agreed to let the matter drop.

Another fact that was established was that the policemen of Damietta were very much like those of other cities.

The third truth was, that no burglary took place on Thursday night or Friday morning, and everything was as quiet as the surface of a summer mill-pond, with the single exception of the incident just narrated.

CHAPTER XXII

THE BATTLE OF LIFE

After all the elaborate preparations for the capture of the burglars, the whole business had fallen so flat that the officers of the law themselves laughed at the farcical termination. Nothing criminal was attempted, and Damietta never was more peaceful in all its history than it was during the many weeks and months which followed.

And yet, in spite of all this, there could be no question that such a burglarious scheme at one time was contemplated. The cipher telegrams, and the surveillance to which Ben Mayberry was subjected, together with the attempted assault upon him, made this too manifest to be disputed.

"They simply discovered the preparations made by the authorities," I said to Ben, "and they had prudence enough to withdraw."

"Do you believe they have given it up altogether?"

"I doubt it. They have simply deferred the execution until some safer time. We must continue to be on the lookout for telegrams in cipher. These gentry have evil designs upon Damietta, as will be proven before we are many years older."

When Ben Mayberry reached the age of fifteen, he attained an important epoch in his life. He had long been one of the most skillful operators in the district, being remarkably quick and accurate.

I have told enough to prove his courteous disposition toward all who entered our office. The pretended Mr. Jones, who acted the part of the ignorant farmer, was, as I have stated, a high official of the company, who took odd means to test the character and skill of our employees. The test in the case of young Mayberry proved most satisfactory in every respect.

At my request, I was transferred to one of the cities in the Eastern States, where the climate agreed better with me. I was given charge of an important office, an advance made in my wages, and everything was done to make the change agreeable. Such being the fact, it is no assumption on my part to say that my administration of the exacting duties in Damietta had been fully appreciated by my superior officers.

Ben Mayberry was made manager of the office in his native city at a salary of seventy-five dollars per month. This statement the reader may doubt, for I am quite certain that no telegraphist of his age was ever given such an important charge, nor is anyone so young paid such a liberal salary; but, did I feel at liberty to do so, I could locate Ben Mayberry so closely that all skeptics could ascertain the facts, in a brief time, precisely as I have given them.

We have many office managers, in different parts of the country, who lack several years of their majority; but, as a rule, their stations are not very important, and their pay is nothing like what Ben received. There were exceptional circumstances in his case. He was unusually bright, he was very attentive, he was courteous, cheerful, and never shirked work. He was popular with our patrons, and much of the increase in the business of the Damietta office was due to Ben alone. This became known to those above him, and they felt that an unusual promotion on his part would not only be a just recognition of his ability and devotion, but would do much to stimulate others to imitate the good example set by the boy.

In addition to all this, it cannot be denied that fortune favored Ben in a marked degree. The fact that he was swept down the river in the darkness and tempest, while trying to deliver a telegram for a messenger who was ill, and that he saved the life of a little girl, could not fail to operate strongly to his benefit. But he would have reached the end all the same, without these aids, just as you, my young friend, may attain the topmost round by climbing up, up, up, step after step, step after step.

There is no cup in this life without some drops of bitterness, and, despite the promotion of Ben, which he fully appreciated, he was cast down by another circumstance, which troubled him more than he would admit to his closest friends.

He had not seen sweet Dolly Willard since the grand children's party at Mr. Grandin's, more than two years previous. She had written him regularly every week for months, and he had been equally prompt in answering. Ben wrote a beautiful hand, and his missives to Dolly were long and affectionate. She would have visited her cousins in Damietta, had they not made a visit to Europe, which shut off the possibility of her doing so for some time to come.

Ben felt that under the circumstances it was hardly the thing for him to make a call upon Dolly in New York, though she invited him to do so.

But during the very week that Ben was given charge of the Damietta office, the mail failed to bring the usual letter from

Dolly. He waited impatiently for several days and then wrote to her. There was no response to this, and he felt resentful. He held out for a fortnight, and then was so worried that he was forced to write again. But this was equally fruitless of results, and he became angry.

"She is getting to be quite a large girl; her folks are wealthy, and she has begun to realize that I am nothing but a poor telegraphist. Her folks have told her she must look higher, and she has come to that same mind herself. Ah, well; let it be so!"

That was expressive of his feelings. Sometimes Ben felt like rebelling against his fate. He had applied himself hard for years; he possessed an excellent education; he held a prominent position in the greatest telegraph company of the country, with a prospect of further advancement before him, and yet, because he was poor, he was looked down upon by those who were his inferiors in everything except the single one of wealth.

"It is a great disappointment," he sometimes murmured, "but I am young; most folks would laugh that one of my age should take such a fancy to a little girl like Dolly, and they would say I am certain to get over it very soon. And just there is where they would all make a great mistake."

And Ben Mayberry was right on that point.

CHAPTER XXIII

FACE TO FACE

Ben Mayberry was sitting at his desk in the Damietta office, one beautiful day in Indian summer, attentive as ever to his duties, when a carriage drove up to the door containing a young gentleman and a lady. The former sprang lightly out and ran into the office, after the manner of one who was in a hurry to send an important telegram.

Suddenly, while Ben was looking at the youth he recognized him as Rutherford Richmond, with whom he had had several important meetings.

"Why, Rutherford, you have grown so much I didn't recognize you; I am glad to see you; how have you been?"

Ben reached his hand over the counter as he greeted the young man, but the latter affected not to hear him. Turning to the desk, he wrote out a message with great rapidity, wheeled about, and, without the slightest evidence of ever having seen Ben, handed him the paper and ordered the dispatch to be sent to New York.

This was the telegram:

"RICHARD WILLARD, No.-- Avenue, New York:

"Dolly and I reached here safe. Big party at Grandin's to-morrow; sure of grand time. Will take good care of Dolly.

"RUTHERFORD RICHMOND."

As the writer hurried out the door, Ben followed him with his eyes. There, in a handsome, single-seated carriage, sat a beautiful miss of thirteen or fourteen, elegantly dressed and looking straight toward him. It was Dolly Willard, more enchanting than ever, her eyes luminous with health and her cheeks as pink and rosy as the delicate tint of the coral.

Ben was too shocked to salute her, and probably it was as well he did not do so, for she simply stared with scarcely less directness than did her companion.

Only by the most supreme exertion was the youth enabled to choke down his rebellious emotions, so that none in the office noticed his excitement.

It was the same on the morrow, and, as if the fates had combined to crush him in absolute wretchedness, he encountered Rutherford and Dolly riding out as he was making his way homeward. He affected not to see them, but he could not avoid furtively watching Dolly, who certainly was the most winsome-looking young miss he had ever seen.

"To-night another party is given by the Grandins. Their girls are ladies, and they treated me well when I was there more than two years ago, but in this matter Dolly has had all to say--that is, she and Rutherford. Well, if she is that sort of girl, I don't want anything to do with her."

That night, in spite of himself, Ben could not stay at home; he strolled along, a prey to his bitter thoughts, and mechanically walked in the direction of the splendid grounds of the wealthy jeweler, Mr. Grandin. The sound of music from within aroused him.

He saw the lights glimmering through the beautiful shade trees, and could catch sight of the gayly-dressed figures flitting by the open windows.

"I can't feel any worse," muttered Ben, walking through the open gate, confident that he would attract no special attention.

He sauntered up the graveled walk, turning off to the right and moving slowly along, with his gaze fixed upon the gay lads and lasses within, who seemed to be in the very height of enjoyment.

At that instant someone caught his arm, and Ben turned with an apology for his forgetfulness.

"I beg pardon, but I was so interested in the scene that I did not notice where I stepped----"

He paused, fairly gasping for breath, for there stood Dolly Willard at his side, with her hand upon his arm. The light streaming from the windows fell upon her charming face, on which there was an expression that young Mayberry did not understand.

"Ben," said she, in a voice that sounded unnatural, "I've got something I want to say to you."

"And I have a good deal that I would like to say to you," he retorted, firing up, now that the little empress stood before him.



CHAPTER XXIV

STARTLING DISCOVERIES

"You say you have something to speak about," added the boy, looking into the enchanting face, as it reflected the light from the windows near at hand; "I have only to suggest that it took you a good time to find it out."

"It is not I, but you who are to blame."

"Possibly I am to be blamed for being born poor while you are rich; but I have paid for my mistake, and it is now too late to correct it."

The conversation had reached this point when the two seemed to conclude it was altogether too public to be in good taste. Several persons, standing near, stepped a little closer, so as to catch every word.

"It is so warm in there," said Dolly; "even with the windows open, that I came outdoors to get the fresh air. Aunt Maggie put my shawl about my shoulders so that I wouldn't take cold. Now, Ben, if you will walk with me to the summer-house yonder, we can sit down by ourselves, finish our talk, and then part forever."

The last expression sent a pang to the boy's heart, but he did not allow her to see it. He followed her a short distance to one of the romantic little lattice-work structures which Mr. Grandin had placed on his grounds.

A few rays of silvery moonlight penetrated the leafy shelter, so the two were not in complete darkness when they sat down on the rustic seat.

"I am ready to listen to you," said Ben in his most frigid voice, the two being separated by a space of several feet.

"In the first place, if you thought so lightly of me, you never should have told me different nor asked me to correspond with you."

"I do not understand you."

"How can you help understanding me?"

"Because I see no reason for your words. I thought all the world of you; the greatest pleasure of my life was to write to you and to receive your letters in return. All at once you stopped writing; I sent you three letters, and you paid no attention----"

"Ben, how dare you! It was you who laughed at my letters, and took no notice of them, except to show them to your friends and ridicule what I put on paper."

Ben Mayberry sprang to his feet. Like a flash it came upon him that some dreadful misunderstanding had been brought about by other parties, for which Dolly was not to blame.

"Tell me the whole story, Dolly," he said in a kinder voice than he had used since they met, as he resumed his seat.

"Well," said she, beginning to feel the same suspicion that thrilled her companion, "there is a good deal to say, but I will make it short. You know my father and Mr. Grandin are cousins, so the girls are really my second cousins. Rutherford Richmond is the son of an old friend of father, who lives in Boston. Father has a large insurance office, and he agreed to take Rutherford until he learned the business, so as to take charge of the same kind of office in Boston, which his father is going to fix up for him. That's how it is Rutherford has been living with us for some months.

"Well, a good while ago, I wrote you a letter, begging you to come and visit me; father said I might do so. You didn't accept the invitation. I wrote you again and got no answer to it; I was frightened, and thought maybe you were ill, and wrote once more, but there was no answer to it. I would have sent a letter to Cousin Jane to find out about you, but she was in Europe. After a while I sent a fourth letter, very long, and full of things which I wouldn't have anyone else know for the world. I sent----"

"Who by?"

"Rutherford took it and several other letters, and placed them in the mail-box at father's office, so they were sure to go. But there was no answer to the last, and then I gave up. I felt awful bad; but I was nearly wild when Rutherford came to me one day and said he had something which he thought he ought to tell me. When he said it was about you, I was dreadfully excited. He told me that he had made the acquaintance of a young man from Damietta, who was a close friend of yours. That young person, whose name Rutherford would not give, said that you showed all my letters to him and several others, and made fun of them. I wouldn't have believed it if he hadn't proved what he said?"

"How did he prove it?"

"By repeating what I had written; he gave me half of what was in that last letter, which he said was repeated to him by the person you told. He had them so exactly that my face burned like fire, and I was never so angry in all my life. I knew you must have done what Rutherford said, for how could he know what I had written you?"

"He knew it by opening your letter, reading the contents, and then destroying it. That letter, Dolly, I never saw, nor did I see the three which preceded it. I also sent you three letters, of which I never heard."

Now that the way was opened, full explanations quickly followed. There could be no earthly doubt that the last three letters sent by Ben Mayberry to Dolly Willard had been intercepted by Rutherford Richmond, who had not hesitated to do the same with those sent by Dolly, though most probably he had simply destroyed the three, and read only the last.

"You risked your life to save mine and that of my mother," she said in a tremulous voice, "and it was an awful thing for you to believe I could ever fail to think more of you than of anyone else in the world."

"I guess I shall have to own up," laughed the happy Ben; "but we were both placed in a false position."

"But we shall never be again----"

"Dolly, Dolly! Where are you?"

The cries came from a gay party of misses who came trooping forth to look for the belle, whose absence so long from her friends had attracted inquiry.

She sprang up.

"Good-by, Ben; I must go."

She caught his hand and returned the pressure, then hurried out and met her young friends, who escorted her back to the house, while Ben quietly departed without attracting attention.

It was past midnight, but Ben thought nothing of time. He had turned off from the street and entered the main business avenue of Damietta.

Just as he came opposite the large jewelry establishment of Mr. Grandin he glanced through the plate-glass window. A light was burning dimly in the rear of the store, as was the custom with many of the merchants in the city, but at the instant of looking Ben saw something like a shadow flit by the light. He looked again, and was certain that another movement had taken place, though he could not define its character.

He paused only an instant, when he walked on again; but in that instant he became convinced that burglars were operating in the jewelry establishment of Mr. Grandin.

He walked slowly forward, humming to himself, as was his custom, but wide awake and alert. Fifty feet further, he detected the shadowy figure of a man standing in one of the adjoining doorways. Ben pretended not to see him, and continued humming gayly to himself.

Ben sauntered along in the same aimless fashion until sure he was not watched, when he turned and made his way directly to the police office. The chief was there and Ben quickly told him everything he knew.

"Those are the parties who arranged to rob the bank year before last," said the chief, "but found out they were suspected."

"They certainly managed it well this time; that is, so far, for there hasn't a single cipher telegram passed through our office since."

"Well, we are ready to move," said the chief, as he observed that four of his best officers were awaiting his orders.

CHAPTER XXV

IN THE NICK OF TIME

Ben would have liked to accompany the officers, but that would have been unprofessional on their part, and he did not make the request. He waited until they had been gone several minutes, when he slipped out and passed down the street, determined to see what was to be seen.

The chief managed the delicate and dangerous business with great skill.

The first notice the burglars had of danger was from the rear. They were down behind a screen of dark muslin they had put up, carefully working at the safe, which contained diamonds and jewelry of immense value. They had already drilled a considerable distance into the chilled iron, when the "Philistines descended upon them."

The burglars sprang up like tigers, but they were caught so fairly that they were borne to the floor and handcuffs clicked around their wrists in a twinkling. There were only two, and the three policemen mastered them without difficulty.

But there were two others on the street outside, and they were quick to discover what was going on within. One of these was Dandy Sam, who ran forward and peered through the front window. His companion was at his elbow, and they instantly saw that something was wrong.

They turned to flee, when they found themselves face to face with the chief and his aid.

"Hold up your hands!" commanded the chief, leveling his pistol at the villains.

One of them complied, but Dandy Sam fired point-blank at the chief, whirled on his heel, and ran like a deer down the street. The chief was not touched, and pistol in hand he started after the criminal, leaving his aid to attend to the second one.

Dandy Sam was fleet of foot and was gaining on his pursuer, when he came face to face with Ben Mayberry, who was hurrying toward the scene of the burglary with a view of seeing how it terminated.

The two encountered where the lamp-light showed the face of each. Ben knew the scamp on the instant, from the description given him, and the sight of the flying rascal told him the truth.

Ben had his pistol in his pocket, but he could not bear the thought of shooting a person, especially when there was a possible doubt of the necessity.

Ben compromised matters by darting into the road, where he caught up a stone weighing fully a pound.

The chief was some distance away shouting "Stop thief!" and firing his pistol over his head, so there could be no doubt that Dandy Sam was "wanted."

Ben Mayberry stood about as far from the fugitive as the space between first and second base--thirty yards--when the stone left his hand like a thunderbolt. As before, it sped true to its aim, but struck higher than then, sending the scoundrel forward on his face, and stunning him; only for a minute or so, but this was sufficient.

While he was in the act of climbing to his feet again, the chief dropped upon him; there was a click, and Dandy Sam was at the end of his career of crime, at least for a considerable time to come.

The chief started for the station-house with his man, whom he watched closely despite the stunning blow he had received.

A few minutes later the other three officers came in with their prisoners, who were caught in the very act of committing burglary.

The aid was absent so long that the chief felt uneasy, and started out in quest of him, but at that moment he appeared with his man.

"He went peaceably enough for a while," explained the aid, "and then he tried to bribe me to let him go. When he found that wouldn't work he became ugly, and I had to use my club, but he ain't hurt much."

His face was bleeding, but Ben Mayberry, with a shock, recognized the prisoner as G. R. Burkhill, the uncle of Dolly Willard.

The capture of the burglars made great excitement in Damietta, and the part taken by Ben Mayberry once more placed his name in everyone's mouth. It was he who discovered the criminals, and was the direct means of securing the

desperado, Dandy Sam, the leader of the notorious gang.

It was a great shock to all, except a few, to find that Burkhill, the brother-in-law of Dolly Willard's father, was also one of the guilty ones. But there were others (and among them Mr. Willard and Mr. Grandin) who were not surprised in the least. The facts in this singular affair, as they ultimately came to light, were as follows:

George R. Burkhill was the black sheep in a most estimable family, of which Mrs. Willard, the mother of Dolly, was a member. She was the sister of Burkhill, and the only one who clung to the bad brother, pronounced incorrigible by everyone else, even when a small boy. She believed there was some good in him, and, in the face of protests, she labored to bring him to a sense of right. It was through her influence that he was saved from condign punishment for more than one serious offense.

All four of the burglars were duly tried, found guilty, and sentenced to the penitentiary for ten years. Rather curiously, both Dandy Sam and Burkhill died during the third year of their imprisonment, and it is safe to say the world was the gainer thereby.

Some few days after the capture of the burglars, came a glowing letter from Dolly, who had gone home to New York, in which she said that her father insisted that Ben should come and make them a visit, and would accept no excuse for refusing.

"I'll go this time!" exclaimed Ben, knowing he would have no trouble in obtaining permission to take a brief vacation.

And go he did.

CHAPTER XXVI

CONCLUSION

In closing the history of Ben Mayberry, the telegraph messenger boy, it seems to me I can do no better than by using the words of the hero himself. The following letter I received only a few days since. It is the last which has come to hand from Ben, who writes me regularly, as he has done ever since I was transferred from the office in Damietta. I should add that the date of the letter is nine years subsequent to that of his visit to the metropolis as the guest of Mr. James Willard:

"MY DEAR MR. MELVILLE,--I am now in my twenty-fifth year. In looking back it seems only a few years ago that you called me to you, on the street of my native city, and offered to make me general utility boy in the telegraph office of Damietta. My mother and I were nearly starving at the time, and no kindness could have been more appropriate than yours, nor could anyone have shown greater tact and wisdom in cultivating the good instincts of a ragged urchin, who, otherwise, was likely to go to ruin.

"You awakened my ambition and incited me to study; you impressed upon me the beauty and truth of the declaration that there is no royal road to learning; that if I expected to attain success in any walk of life it could only be done by hard, unremitting, patient work. There are many rounds to the ladder, and each must climb them one by one.

"Good fortune attended me in every respect. It was the providence of God which saved me and enabled me to help save sweet Dolly when the bridge went down in the storm and darkness, and her mother was lost; yet, but for my determination to do my best at all times, and never to give up so long as I could struggle, I must have succumbed.

"It was extremely fortunate that I saw the burglars at work in the jewelry establishment of Mr. Grandin on that memorable night in Damietta. The same stroke of fortune might have fallen to any boy, but it was incomplete until I was able to bring the leader to the ground with the stone which I hurled at him.

"It may be said that all these are but mere incidents of my history, and possibly I may have magnified their importance; but, though my progress was rapid, it never could have carried me successfully along without the regular, systematic, hard work with which I employed my spare hours, when not devoted to exercise. In this world that which wins, is work, work, work!

"When I was fifteen years old, I was made the manager of the office in Damietta, with a larger salary than I was entitled to. Three years later, the partiality of Mr. Musgrave made me assistant superintendent, and now I have been general superintendent of the district for more than two years, with a handsome salary, which enables me to give my dear mother comforts and elegances of which the good lady never dreamed.

"I married Dolly shortly after my promotion to the office of general superintendent, and the little fellow that is learning to lisp 'papa,' you know, has been named after you, my old, true, and invaluable friend, to whose counsel and kindness I feel I am so much indebted.

"Dolly sits at my elbow and continually reminds me that I must insist that you come down and spend Christmas with us. A chair and plate will be placed at the table for you, and you must allow nothing less than Providence itself to keep you away.

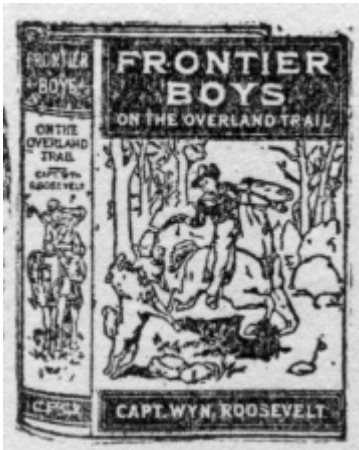
"As ever,
"Your devoted friend,
"BEN."

THE END

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