Left Behind or, Ten Days a Newsboy

James Otis

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CHAPTER I. PAUL'S INTRODUCTION TO NEW YORK.

He was a stray boy, with a very strange story. The two ragged boys, one of whom had a bundle of papers under his arm, and the other the outfit of a boot−black slung over his shoulder, thought that at the best he was stretching the truth to an alarming degree, even though his manner appeared to bear out what he said.

He had met these two boys at the corner of Cortlandt and West Streets, in New York City, and had stated his case to them, believing that they could tell him what to do. This was the story he told:

The family, consisting of his father, mother, sister, and himself, had come from Chicago for the purpose of sailing in a steamer which one he was unable to say for Europe. They went directly from the cars to the pier, and had gone on board the huge vessel which was to be their home while crossing the Atlantic. After they had been there some time, and he could see no evidences that the steamer was about to start, he had asked his mother's permission to go on deck for the purpose of making the acquaintance of a boy about his own age, whom he had seen when they first came on board. The attempt at making the acquaintance was so successful that in five minutes they were firm friends, and in as many more had laid all kinds of plans for future enjoyment.

Both the boys claimed to excel in the art of kinging the ring; but, unfortunately, neither one had a top with him. Then this one who was telling the story proposed that he should go on shore and buy two, while the other remained to inform the absent boy's parents where be had gone.

He had had some difficulty in finding a top to suit him, and he thought that he must have spent at least an hour in

the search. When at last he had procured two good ones and he showed them in proof of the truthfulness of his story he was nearly as long again in finding his way back to the steamer. Not knowing the name of the vessel, nor the line to which she belonged, he was obliged to visit each pier in succession, in order to find the right one.

When, from the appearance of the buildings opposite, he knew that he was back again to the point from which he had started, he learned to his dismay that the steamer had been gone fully an hour. At first he could hardly realize that he had been left behind, while his parents had started on such a long voyage, and he could not account for the neglect of his newly−made friend in not telling them that he had gone on shore, unless it was owing to the fact that he had neglected to point out his father, or to tell what his name was.

After he had fully realized that he was alone in a great city, with no means of providing himself with food and shelter, save through the medium of two very nice tops and six cents, he started in search of the depot which they had arrived at, intending to take the next train back to Chicago, providing the conductor would take his tops in payment. But he could not find the depot, and at nearly seven o'clock in the evening he had stopped to ask advice from two boys of about his own age neither one of them was over eleven years old in the hope that they could straighten matters out for him.

These two were very much inclined to doubt his story until he showed the tops as proof, and even then they would have looked upon some portions of it as false had he not also produced the six cents, and with three of them stood treat all round to that sticky delicacy known as "pea−nut taffy."

Then they believed all he had told them, and adjourning to a very broad door−step near by, they sat down to consult upon what it was best for him to do. To begin with, and in order that he might understand the case fully, one of the boys asked, as he struggled with the sticky dainty, "What's yer name?"

"Paul Weston," replied the stranger.

"Well, my name's Johnny Jones, though the boys call me Shiner," said the boy with the papers under his arm, "an' my chum here's named Ben Treat. Now you know us; an' we'll call you Polly, so's to make you feel more's if you was home."

Paul was not just certain as to how far this nickname would go towards making him feel at home, but he did not venture to make any remark upon it, preferring rather that his own condition, and how he could better it, should be the subject under discussion.

Johnny Jones told him at once that his idea of trying to get home by the cars without money enough in his pocket to buy his ticket was an impossibility; for he and Ben had tried riding on the cars without paying for it, even a short distance, and had always come to grief because of either the conductor or the brake−men, whom they looked upon as the natural enemies of boys. It was useless, therefore, to think of getting to Chicago in that way, and Johnny appealed to Ben to decide whether he was right or not.

"It's jest as Shiner says," replied Ben, rubbing the end of his nose thoughtfully, as if he believed that gave him more of an air of wisdom. "You couldn't git as far as Newark in a week, 'less you walked, an' you'd better not try it."

"But what shall I do!" asked Paul, in such distress that even the candy failed to soothe him.

"I don't see but one way," said Johnny, gravely, as he took the lump of sweetness from his mouth, lest it should dissolve while he was not able to give it his undivided attention, and he thus lose a portion of the treat. "You'll have to stay here till yer earn money enough ter pay for a whole ticket."

"But how much will that be?" asked Paul, astounded at the careless way with which the boy spoke of such an undertaking.

"I dunno; but it'll be a good deal. We'll find out termorrer." Then Johnny turned his attention to the candy again.

"But I can't earn any money;" and now Paul was on the verge of crying.

"Of course yer can," replied Ben, decidedly. "Yer can sell papers like Shiner does, or yer can get a box, an' go inter the same bizness I'm in. Ef yer smart, yer'll git three or four dollars a week, 'cordin' to the weather."

Paul opened his eyes wide with surprise as this enormous amount was spoken of, and he almost forgot his grief in the visions of wealth that floated through his brain.

"Shiner an' I hain't got much money in our pockets," continued Ben, "'cause we're buyin' some real estate, an' we put it all in that 'bout as fast as we git it; but we can patch up an' lend you enough to start with, an' you can pay it back when you git the chance."

Surely Paul thought he was fortunate in having made the acquaintance of two boys who were so well off in this world's goods as Ben and Johnny, and his position did not seem nearly as bad as it had half an hour ago, even though it was nearly dark, and he had no idea where he should sleep that night.

He did not know, any more than his newly−made friends did, that by telling his story to the police he would be taken care of until his relatives in Chicago could be written to, and he believed that he must depend upon his own exertions to get home. Therefore he eagerly accepted the generous offer.

"But where can I live?" he asked, as the thought came to him that even though a chance for making himself rich had suddenly presented itself, he was still without a home.

"Didn't Ben tell yer that we'd been 'vestin' our money in real estate?" asked Johnny, almost impatiently, and speaking rather indistinctly because of his mouth being so filled with candy. "We've got a place we bought of Dickey Spry, an' you can stay with us if you pay your share."

Paul was willing to go into any extravagances for the sake of having a home, provided his two tops, and the three cents still remaining of his wealth, was sufficient to make the first payment. This he told his friends.

"Shiner didn't mean that you was to pay it right down," said Ben, quickly. "After you git to makin' money for yourself, all you've got to do is to buy your share of the things."

As that was only just, Paul agreed to it, and Johnny, who had by this time succeeded in eating the dark−colored mixture that was by courtesy called candy, started off to dispose of the papers he still held under his arm, while Ben led Paul away with him.

"Johnny has got to 'tend right up to biz," said Ben, in a half−explanatory way, "or else he'd git stuck, you know."

"Would he!" asked Paul, in evident alarm. "Who would stick him?"

Ben looked at this young gentleman from Chicago in surprise, and then in pity. He could not understand how any one, and more especially a boy, could be so ignorant of the meaning of one of the most common words of slang. At first he looked as if he was about to reprove such ignorance; but he evidently thought better of it, for he said, instead,

"I mean that he'd be stuck by havin' a lot of this afternoon's papers left over on his hands, an' he couldn't sell 'em termorrer, you know."

Paul really looked relieved to know that no worse danger threatened Johnny; and as he walked along with Ben, the latter said:

"Yer see, Shiner would have been about through work if we hadn't met you, an' fooled away so much of our time. Now it'll take him quite a while to sell out, an' so you an' I might as well go down to ther house. I've had a pretty fair day's work, an' I'll git up such a supper as'll make Shiner's eyes stick out more'n a foot."

Just then they were opposite a grocery store, and he went in to begin the work of making his companion's eyes stick out. It was with the air of one who felt able to purchase at least half the store contained, in case he should want to, that he ordered half a pound of bologna sausage, a pound of crackers, and two candles. He was also very careful to see that he was given full weight.

Paul was a little mystified as to what share the candles could have in extending Johnny's eyes; but he thought it better to wait the course of events, rather than to ask any questions.

When Ben had been served, and there had been quite a delay in paying for the articles, owing to his inability to count his money three times, and have it amount to the same sum each time, he came out and completed his purchases by buying a quart of pea−nuts at a stand near by.

"There," Ben said, with evident satisfaction, as he gave Paul one of the bundles to carry, "I guess when Shiner gets home, an' finds all these things, he'll think we're havin' a reg'lar party."

Paul agreed very mildly to this assertion, for he had not been accustomed to look upon such an assortment as much of a treat, and already he began to have vague misgivings as to the value of the real estate Ben had spoken of so proudly.

To Paul, tired as he was from the walking he had already done, and the excitement through which he had passed, it seemed as if they would never reach this place which Ben called home, for his guide turned up one street and down another until he was quite worn out.

"That's the place, jest ahead there," said Ben, in a cautious whisper, as he halted at the corner of a street, and pointed to a small yard in the rear of what seemed to be a warehouse. "That's the place, but we've got to look out that nobody don't see us."

Paul believed that his companion referred to the building, and he was surprised to find it so large; yet why they had come around to the rear was more than he could understand.

"Now you keep right behind me, an' you come quick," said Ben, as he looked carefully around to assure himself that there was no one in sight.

Paul followed the directions, wondering why one was obliged to use such precautions in getting into his own house, and Ben led the way, not into the building, but over the fence and down into the yard, where was stored empty boxes and barrels of every description.

As if he was perfectly familiar with the way, Ben went among the boxes to the farther end of the yard, where there was a hogshead and a large packing−case close together. He pulled the case a few inches aside for it had been placed directly in front of the hogshead and whispered, "Get in, quick!"

Paul obeyed, hardly believing that this could be the real estate his companions had spoken of, and Ben followed him, pulling the box against the hogshead again so adroitly as to betoken considerable practice.

When one of the candles was lighted, and stuck into an empty ink−bottle that served as candlestick, Paul was able to see the interior, and he stared at it in surprise.

The case was evidently used as a place in which to keep their food, and as a sort of general storehouse, for an old coat was lying neatly folded up in one corner, and opposite it were several tin cans, all showing more or less marks of age, and in a battered condition.

The hogshead had been lined with old newspapers, and from the fact that quite a quantity of straw covered the bottom, it was easy to see that this was the sleeping−room.

"There!" said Ben, triumphantly, "you can stay here an' live off the fat of the land jest as long as you want to."

And Paul never realized that, if he had tried, he could not have hidden himself more completely from those who might be searching for him, than by thus sharing the fortunes of these two Arabs of the street.

CHAPTER II. STARTING IN BUSINESS.

There was a look of delight on Ben's face as he saw his companion examining their home so carefully, and each moment he expected to hear his exclamation of surprise at the very comfortable manner in which they lived. But since, after waiting some time, no such exclamation was heard, he asked, a trifle impatiently,

"Ain't it a stunner?"

Now Paul did not really think the place merited any such praise. In fact, he was considerably disappointed, and he compromised the matter by saying,

"I should think it might be real kind o' comfortable."

"Kind o' comfortable!" echoed Ben, angrily. "Well, I don't know anything about Chicago, but if you know of any fellers there that have got any better place than this, I'd like to go out an' stay two or three months with 'em."

"Well, you see I don't know much about it," said Paul, conscious that he had hurt his kind−hearted friend's feelings, and anxious to make amends in some way. "I've always lived in a regular house with father and another, so I don't know how boys do live that haven't got any home."

"You'll see how they live before you get back to Chicago," said Ben, grimly; and then he added, in a softened voice, "I'd like to see how it would seem to have a father an' a mother, an' a house to live in."

"Didn't you ever have any, Ben?"

"No," and the boy's voice trembled now in spite of himself; "I don't s'pose I ever did. Me an' Shiner have been livin' round this way ever since we can remember, an' I reckon we always lived so. We used to sleep 'round any where till Dickey Spry got a chance to run a stand out'n Jersey City, an' then he sold us this place for fifty cents, an' I tell you we've fatted right up ever since we had it."

The conversation was taking such a sorrowful turn that Johnny's entrance just then was very welcome. Paul stood very much in need of some cheerful company, to prevent the great lump that was growing in his throat from

getting the best of him.

"Well, you are goin' it strong!" exclaimed Johnny, as he closed the door, by pulling one portion of their house against the other. "Why this is 'bout as good as a 'lectric light, ain't it? I tell you we shall be jest as snug as mice when winter comes, for this candle makes the place so warm."

Johnny's idea of the heat from one candle could not be a correct one, if he thought that their house would be as warm in January from it as it was then in August. But January was so far away that no one thought of starting an argument on the subject.

Ben brought forward the dainties he had bought, and although Shiner's eyes did not stick out as far as he had said, there was enough of a pleasant surprise in his face to satisfy Ben for the outlay he had made.

"Now this is what I call livin' high," said Johnny, in a choking voice, as he tried to eat pea−nuts, bologna sausage, and crackers, all at the same time. "Seems like we'd had a reg'lar streak of luck ever since we bought this house, don't it?"

"It was a good trade, that's what it was, an' it's lucky for Polly that we had it, or he'd found out the difference in huntin' round for a place to sleep."

Poor Paul! he was doing his best to eat the portion of the feast that had been set aside as his, but, hungry as he had been, he found it difficult to swallow because of the lump in his throat, that kept growing larger and larger every moment, and which seemed to be doing its best to force the tears from his eyes.

He thought of his parents and his sister, who were probably going farther away from him each moment, grieving quite as much, if not more, because of his absence than he did himself; and when he realized that he might never see them again, the tears would roll from beneath his eyelids. But he brushed them away very quickly, as if ashamed to have his companions see them, honest though they were.

Then, as Ben and Johnny began to talk of their business, leaving him alone, as it seemed, the tears came faster and faster, until he could no longer wipe them away, and putting back into the paper the cracker he was trying to eat, he threw himself upon the straw, crying as if his heart would break.

Paul's hosts seemed bewildered by such singular behavior on his part. They could not understand why a boy who had had the good−fortune to find such a place in which to sleep as they had just offered Paul should cry, and not understanding it, they did the very best thing for him they let him cry, without trying to console him, though it sadly marred the happiness of their feast.

The tears were a relief to Paul in more ways than one, for before they were done flowing he was sound asleep, and he did not awake to a consciousness of his troubles until Ben shook him the following morning.

"It's time to get up," said the boy, in a kindly tone. "You see, Shiner has to get down about sunrise to buy his papers, an' I go with him, so's folks won't be so likely to see us comin' out of here."

It was some moments before Paul realized where he was, or what had happened to so change his sleeping−room from the neat, cleanly one he called his own at home, to this very rude shelter. But when all that had occurred came back to his mind, he leaped to his feet at once, striking his head against the top of the hogshead with a force that told him he must be careful to get up no higher than his hands and knees.

"You'll see now what a swell house we've got," said John's, when they were outside, and while Paul was still rubbing the top of his head. "We've got runnin' water near every room, jest like any place, an' you can come in

here an' wash yer face with jest as much water as Astor can git."

Johnny led the way to one corner of the building, where a water−pipe with a faucet jutted out from the brick−work, having evidently been placed there in case of fire, and turning the water on, the three boys scrubbed their faces and hands with the greatest vigor. But Paul found some difficulty in drying himself with straw as his companions did.

During this important ceremony the boys had been careful to screen themselves from the view of any one on the street by the boxes, which they had arranged beforehand. When they were as clean as the water would make them without soap, they started out of the yard at full speed, going over the fence as a rubber ball goes over any projection in its way.

Once on the street, where they were not afraid of any one seeing them, their movements were more leisurely, and they began to discuss plans for starting their guest in business.

But the discussion was not a long one, owing to the fact that but two avenues of trade were open to him that of blackening boots or selling papers; and when he was called upon to decide, he chose the latter, very much to Johnny's secret delight.

"Now, Ben," said Johnny, who appeared to think it his duty to look out for his guest's business education and welfare, "you'd better kinder lay 'round an' see that the boys don't try to come it on him the first day, an' I'll keep my eye on him too."

Ben nodded assent, and Johnny said to Paul, "You watch, an' see how I do it, after I git the papers, an' then you do jest as I do. If there is a big lot of news, it won't be a great deal of work; but if there ain't anything very 'portant, then you've got to holler."

After this lesson had been given, and while they were walking towards the newspaper offices, Ben divided what bologna had been left from the feast of the previous evening, and also put in Paul's pocket his share of the pea−nuts which he had not eaten with the others.

On account of finding an early customer who wanted his boots blackened, Ben did not go with them to get the papers, but promised to meet Paul on City Hall Square, where it had been decided he should make his first venture as newsboy.

Now the boys who sell the papers do not buy their stock in the business offices, as Paul had supposed, but are obliged to go into some room nearer the presses, and where they will be out of the way of more important customers. Therefore, when Johnny led him into a room lighted by gas, even though it was in the day−time, and filled by a crowd of noisy, pushing, eager boys, all wanting to be served first, Paul felt quite as much alarmed as surprised.

"It's all right," said Johnny, as he saw his companion was about to draw back; "there won't anybody try to hurt you here, an' you'll git used to it after you've come two or three times."

Paul hardly believed that he should become accustomed to anything of the kind; but before they had finished their rounds for Johnny carried four of the different morning papers he could look upon the scene, which was almost the same in each case, with something very nearly approaching interest.

When at last the stock was procured, Johnny divided it, giving half to Paul, and saying, as he did so, "I'll git all the papers for a while, till you kinder git used to it, an' then you can git 'em for yerself. Now come over here on the Square an' sing out, as loud as you know how, jest what I do."

Then, for example, Johnny began shouting his wares in a way that was more noisy than distinct. But after he had repeated it several times, selling two papers in the meanwhile, Paul had no more idea of what he said than if he had been speaking in a foreign tongue.

Johnny would have lost a good deal of the morning trade, which was quite brisk, in his efforts to start Paul aright, if Ben had not come along, and offered to give the beginner his first lesson.

Paul found it rather difficult to make as much noise as Ben seemed to think necessary, for the sound of his own voice frightened him; but in the course of an hour, during which time his instructor alternately blackened boots and gave him lessons, he had got along so well that he was selling quite a number of papers. His success did a great deal towards helping him fight off the homesick feeling that would come over him.

At first none of the other newsboys paid any attention to him, perhaps because they were too busy; but as trade began to grow dull they commenced to gather around Paul, until he was thoroughly alarmed at some of the demonstrations they made.

One boy, considerably larger than he was, insisted that if he wanted to sell papers he should go somewhere else to do it, because that particular portion of the city was under the immediate control of himself and his friends. Paul made no reply, for the very good reason that he did not know but that the claim which this boy set up was a just one, and he remained silent, which caused his tormentors to think exactly what was the true state of the case that he was afraid of them.

One boy, the same who had first spoken, began pushing him aside, and poor Paul, seeing at least a dozen boys, nearly all of them larger than he was, standing in threatening attitudes, looked around in vain for his two friends, who had promised to care for him.

"You want to get out of this, young feller, an' you don't want to show your nose 'round here agin," said the largest "member of the party, as he pushed Paul rudely aside with one hand, and with the other attempted to take his papers from him.

It was this, more than anything else, which made Paul resist; for even if he had no right on that particular spot, they surely had no right to take his papers from him; and besides, they were Johnny's property, not his. Therefore he felt he should defend them all the more strongly.

He was trying to call up all his strength and will in defence of his own rights, even though he knew the struggle could not be a long one, owing to the numbers that were opposed to him, when suddenly the crowd were pressed apart at one side, and Ben and Johnny stood ready to defend their guest.

"This feller lives with us," said Ben, defiantly, as he looked fiercely at the boy who had been trying to rob Paul, "an' he's goin' to sell papers here every day. Now don't any of you forget that if you pick any row with him, you pick it with me an' Johnny."

More than one of those present knew just what Ben could do if he should swing that box around in defence of any one who was being imposed upon, and they concluded that it was not best to discuss the matter any further. The crowd fell back, and Paul was safe, for a short time, at least.

Johnny had sold all his own stock out, and taking half of Paul's, the two commenced business again. They had no further trouble from those who had been so eager to drive the new boy away, and by dinner−time all the papers were sold. But Paul was ignorant that in every one was an advertisement setting forth an exact description of himself, together with the promise of a large reward to the person who would take him to his father at police head−quarters.

CHAPTER III. MAKING ACQUAINTANCES.

The first day's work at selling newspapers was particularly hard for Paul Weston, and more than once was it necessary for both Ben and Johnny to interfere, to save him from what might have been serious trouble with that class of newsboys who made it their especial business to drive any new−comer away.

And it would not have been a very long or difficult task to have made Paul retire from the business if he had not had these two friends, so experienced in the ways and hard corners of street life.

According to the best judgment of both Ben and Johnny, the only course which Paul could pursue, with any hope of ever reaching his friends in Chicago, was to earn sufficient money by the sale of papers to pay his fare on there. It is true that while Paul had given himself up to grief on the previous evening, and they had left their hogshead home in order that he might be alone, a wild idea of writing to some of his relatives had crossed their minds; but it had not assumed such shape that they felt warranted in speaking of it to him.

The surest way, they reasoned, to restore him to his home was for him to earn sufficient money to take him there properly, and to that end they labored during the first day of his apprenticeship.

They neglected their own work to make it known among their acquaintances that he was under their immediate care, and that they should resent to the utmost of their power any effort to drive him from his task. They also kept a strict watch over him, and whenever they saw signs of discouragement upon his face, which they did many times, they encouraged him by kind words and advice to continue in his labors, holding before him the hope of meeting his parents once more as the reward of his exertions.

Never once did the thought come to them that by keeping him within their world they were most effectually hiding him from his parents; and since they were doing their best to aid him, even if it was the worst thing they could do, they were none the less friends to him in the truest sense of the word.

That noon, in order to cheer the sorrowful boy as much as possible, they resolved on having such a feast as they allowed themselves only on extra occasions, and that was to go to a cheap restaurant, where a whole dinner (such as it was) could be bought for fifteen cents. To them it was a rare treat; but, greatly to their disappointment, Paul did not enjoy it as they had expected he would.

The afternoon papers were purchased, and even though their new friend was so wholly unacquainted with the business, and they were obliged to spend so much of their time in defending him from the assaults of the more evil disposed of their calling, trade was more than ordinarily good.

The reckless expenditure of forty−five cents for dinner was made up, and when the day's work was over they had a clear profit of forty−three cents; which, to say the least, encouraged them in their good work.

Instead of going directly to the home that Dickey Spry had founded, after their day's work was over, Ben proposed that Paul be introduced to some of their mutual friends, in order that his change in life might be made as agreeable as possible, and then came the question as to who should be honored by the first call.

Ben was in favor of visiting Nelly Green, whose mother kept a fruit−stand on Chatham Square, and who was always to be found acting as clerk, while Johnny was anxious to visit a mutual friend by the name of Mopsey Dowd, who had risen from boot−black to the proud eminence of owning a pea−nut stand near Fulton Market.

There was quite an argument as to which one of their friends Paul would be most pleased to meet, and each one held so strongly to his own views on the matter that the question was only settled by the agreement to call on

both.

Mopsey Dowd's place of business being near the corner where they held their consultation, the three concluded to visit there first, and Paul was considerably interested in this work of making acquaintances.

The traffic at the ferry was still quite brisk, and Mopsey was in the full tide of prosperity, selling his goods as rapidly as though he had extensively advertised to close out his entire stock a little below cost.

Between the intervals of waiting upon customers and turning the roaster to keep the nuts from burning, Ben related Paul's story to the pea−nut merchant, and Mopsey was so much interested that he not only favored Paul with a great deal of his attention, but insisted on presenting him with a large handful of the very best and warmest nuts.

Mopsey even went so far as to enter into negotiation with Paul for the purchase of the two tops that had caused him so much trouble in the getting. But owing to a sudden rush of customers the proposed trade was broken off, and the visitors took their leave, promising to call again at some time when they would be less liable to interruption from a pea−nut−hungry public.

Then the three started for Nelly Green's place of business, taking a roundabout course to get there, for the purpose of avoiding the crowd; and by doing this they met another of their acquaintances whom they were rejoiced to see, even though he was a creditor.

This individual was none other than Master Dickey Spry, who had earned his last name because of the quickness of his movements, and who had borne it so long that there was considerable doubt as to whether he remembered his parents' name or not.

Master Spry was leaning against a lamp−post in an attitude of deepest dejection, looking down into the gutter as if he expected to see there some help arise to aid him in his evident trouble.

Now Dickey Spry was the founder of the house in which Ben and Johnny took so much pride. He it was who had discovered that snug place, replete with all needful modern conveniences, and Ron and Johnny had purchased it of him for fifty cents, paying ten cents per week on the instalment plan, and having already made three payments according to agreement.

Dickey had not noticed them when they first came up, and it was not until Ben touched him on the shoulder that he appeared to hear what they said.

"What's the matter with yer?" asked Ben, anxiously. "You look as if somebody'd stole yer an' carried yer off. What's up now?"

"Busted," replied Dickey, mournfully, and then he began surveying the gutter again.

"Busted!" echoed the two boys in the same breath; and Ben asked, eagerly,

"You don't mean to say that you've gone up failed?"

"That's jest it. I trusted out as much as thirty cents, an' then I got Tim Dooley to 'tend the stand for me this forenoon, an' when I come back I couldn't find anything but the stand, an' that, you know, I hired. All ther nuts an' Tim had gone off."

The boys were so thoroughly overwhelmed by the news of this misfortune that it was some time before Ben could ask, "But can't you find out where Tim is?"

Dickey shook his head.

"I've been lookin' everywhere, an' I can't hear nothin' 'bout him, an' I can't make any of ther fellers pay me what they owe me, so I'm all cleaned out."

Ben looked at Johnny inquiringly for an instant, and when that young gentleman nodded his head, he said,

"Well, we owe yer twenty cents that ain't due yet, Dickey, but we've got ther money, an' we'll pay it to yer now."

"I don't want it," replied the unfortunate tradesman, "an' I didn't say what I did to make you pay me. If you fellers will let me own twenty cents' worth of ther house I'll be all right, for then I'll have a place to live, an' I kin get back in ther boot−blackin' bizness agin."

It would be crowding rather close to put four into the hogshead; but matters could be arranged by turning their store−room into a bedchamber, and Dickey's request was granted without the slightest show of hesitation.

"We're goin' round town awhile," said Johnny to the bankrupt merchant, "an' you'd better come along with us."

Dickey shook his head very decidedly. He had no desire to mingle with the world while his loss bore so heavily upon him, and he was so emphatic in his determination to go directly to the home he had once sold, that no amount of persuasion could induce him to change his mind.

After promising to return early, in order to cheer him in his troubles, the boys continued their interrupted way to Chatham Square, where, by the greatest good−luck, both Nelly and her mother were found seated behind a huge basket piled high with peaches and pears. They were sure of having a pleasant call at this establishment, for Mrs. Green could attend to the customers while the daughter entertained them.

Nelly was rather diffident before this strange boy, who was dressed so well, and apparently had very little in common with the society in which she moved; but after Ben had given her a detailed account of Paul's circumstances, as he had to Mopsey, the case seemed entirely changed, and she was even more sociable with Paul than with her friends. Johnny and Ben related everything of interest that they had learned since they had seen Nelly last, and concluded the recital by an account of Dickey Spry's misfortunes.

Nelly seemed unusually anxious to know how they could all live in the rather narrow quarters, and after some conversation regarding it, disclosed the reason of her sudden interest by informing the boys that since they had called last her mother had moved, and that their home was larger than formerly.

"We've got two rooms that we sha'n't use," continued Nelly, speaking quickly in her excitement, "an' mother thought perhaps you or some of the boys would come up an' board with us. We'll make it just as pleasant for you as we can, an' it won't cost you much more than it does the way you live now an' you don't eat more than half as often as you ought to."

Paul looked up with an expression of pleasure in his face, for the nearer the hour of retiring approached, the more distasteful and lonely did the hogshead home seem. He could say nothing against it, for it had served him as shelter when he was utterly alone; but this idea of living in a house, where some of the womankind would care for him, was very agreeable to him.

"Mother says that she'll board you, an' see to your clothes, an' do your washin', for two dollars'n a half a week, an' I think it would be awful nice for us all to live together."

The boys thought so too; but they also thought of their hogshead, which seemed so cheerful to them, if Paul did have a disdain for it, and there was a momentary feeling that they would not like to leave it, no matter what inducement might be offered. Then there arose before them the vision of a "regular home," wherein some one would care for and minister to their comfort, and the advantages of living in a hogshead grew very few indeed.

"Come up to the house in about an hour, an' see how you like it," suggested Nelly, thinking they were hesitating about accepting the offer. Then, after she had told them the street and number at which she lived, she added, "We'll be home in a little while now, an' then if you should think that your house is the nicest, you can still live where you are."

"We'll come," said Ben, decidedly, for he had already made up his mind that he should accept the proposition. Then he led the others away very quickly, as if he had some plan in his mind, as, indeed, he really had.

"We'll go home an' fix up, an' then we'll take the eye right outer them, for they think these are the only clothes we've got."

Johnny was delighted with the proposition of "taking the eye out" of Mrs. Green and her daughter by the splendor of their raiment, and the two walked so fast, in their eagerness to begin the serious operation of dressing, that Paul could hardly keep pace with them.

After they had taken the usual precautions to prevent any one from seeing them when they reached the vicinity of their home, and had succeeded in getting safely into the hogshead unobserved, they found the ruined merchant laying plans for the rebuilding of his shattered fortunes. It was in vain that they urged him to accompany them on their call. To all their arguments he had but one reply, and that was to the effect that he did not believe in their scheme of boarding.

"It's jest nothin' more nor less'n tryin' to put on airs," he said, impatiently. "Anybody'd think you 'xpected to be 'lected aldermen by ther way you're swellin' round; an' old Mother Green'll be tickled most to death when she sees what fools you're makin' of yourselves."

In fact it did look just a little as if they were "swelling" considerably. Ben blackened Paul's, Johnny's, and his own boots until they would have answered for mirrors, and then he attended to his own toilet.

Johnny had red hair, which was quite coarse, and persisted in growing in all directions at the same time; but on this occasion he had reduced it to something like subjection by a vigorous application of the unburned end of the candle, and it clung to his head as if it had been stuck there by glue. His freckled face had been scrubbed until it looked as if it had been polished, and his hands were almost clean.

But it was upon his costume that he depended for the greatest effect. That he did have another coat was shown when he put on one that had evidently been rescued from the oblivion of an ash−barrel. It was very short−waisted and very long−tailed; but this last defect, if indeed such a term could be applied, was remedied by one of the skirts having been cut off at least six inches shorter than the other, which gave a jaunty, careless appearance to the entire garment. His vest was the same he wore when at work; but by pinning the collar over so as to make it present more of the passably clean shirt, he changed its entire appearance. The trousers were unaltered, save that where the lower portions had been fringed by long usage, he had cut them off as well as he could with his knife. He deeply mourned the utter absence of a necktie, but consoled himself with the thought that the invitation had come at such a late hour in the day, and at a time when his funds were so low, that Mrs. Green and Nelly would probably understand the fact and overlook the omission.

Ben was clad in quite as startling a fashion, but in exactly the opposite way. Johnny's coat was long, very long, while his was short so short as to make it look as if it had originally belonged to a boy about half his size. His vest was buttoned snug to the chin, to conceal the ravages made by dirt on his shirt−front, while his necktie was made of the very narrowest and most brilliant red ribbon that could be found.

It would have been impossible to cut anything from the bottom of his trousers, for the very good reason that they were already so short as to give them the appearance of trying to crawl up his legs to get out of sight; but in his eyes the high polish of his shoes had a better chance of being seen. Ben's face and hands were as clean as Johnny's, but he had put none of the candle−grease on his hair, although he had smoothed it with water until two small streams were trickling down either side of his face, giving plenty of employment to his hands, as he tried to prevent it from running down his neck.

Paul looked on at these preparations with the greatest surprise; and when his friends announced that they were ready, and that he was to accompany them, he followed without a word, awed by the general magnificence.

CHAPTER IV. A GREAT ENTERPRISE.

It was not a long walk from the hogshead home to the house which Mrs. Green proposed to turn into a place where meals and lodgings could be procured on a limited scale; but neither Ben nor Johnny lost any opportunity of stopping to gaze in at the lighted windows that served as mirrors, in order to make sure that their attire had not been disarranged in any way by their rapid walk. And when they stood in front of the door, it seemed to Paul as if they never would get ready to ring the bell, so much time did they spend in making sure that their fine toilets were quite in order, and the general effect satisfactory.

But they did ring the bell at last, and when Nelly came to the door there was no mistaking the fact that their appearance was striking in the highest degree; for the girl stood regarding them with so much astonishment that it was some time before she could invite them to walk in.

As Ben told Dickey Spry, when they got home that night, it "jest took the eyes outer Mother Green an' Nelly to see them lookin' as soft as silk an' fine as fiddlers."

After the embarrassment caused by their costumes had passed away in a degree, although Nelly did not seem to recover from her surprise during the entire evening, Mrs. Green proceeded to the business on hand by showing the boys two rooms, furnished with no pretensions to elegance, but as neat as they were bare, which she told them she would let to four boys at the moderate price of two dollars and a half each per week, including meals and washing.

To Paul the difference was so great between the place and the one they were then occupying, that he was anxious to go there at once, and the others were quite as eager as he was. Ben was sure that he could induce Dickey to make the fourth in that perfection of boarding−houses, as he knew it would prove to be; and in case he should not succeed in convincing Master Spry that it would be better for him to live there rather than in his hogshead, he promised to use all his eloquence on Mopsey Dowd, or some other equally eligible party.

Thus it was decided that the boys should change their home on the following day, and all hands were remarkably well pleased; Mrs. Green because four boarders would bring in a weekly amount of ten dollars, and the boys because at last they were to live like other people.

It would not be a difficult matter to move, for two coats, rather the worse for wear, and three old tomato cans were all the property they had to bring; Paul's tops, which constituted his baggage, could be carried in the pocket of his jacket without any trouble.

When they got back to the hogshead that night, and told Dickey of the important change they were about to make, he read them a very severe lesson on the sinfulness of extravagance. It was perhaps a trifle more pointed than it would have been if he had not just been made bankrupt by the perfidy of a friend. But it was both time and labor thrown away to try to induce him to become a fourth boarder at Mrs. Green's. He positively refused to listen to the scheme, after it had been described to him, and the conversation ended by his buying back his old home at the original price, agreeing to pay ten cents each week as soon as he should be once more firmly established in business.

That night Paul had an attack of homesickness; but, being very tired, he went to sleep before it became so bad as to be noticed by his friends.

On the following morning Paul went about his work quite as if he had been accustomed to that sort of thing for some time; and owing to the fact that the papers contained an account of a terrible railroad disaster, trade was remarkably good with him and Johnny, and correspondingly bad with Ben. Three times during the morning they sold out their entire stock, and Paul was so excited by the rush, as well as the amount of money they were making, that he quite forgot his troubles.

When dinner−time came, Paul and Johnny had cleared two dollars and ninety cents, with a fair prospect of making as much more in the afternoon, since additional particulars of the accident were being received hourly. Ben had only made thirty cents; but he and Johnny had always been in partnership, dividing equally the profits of both, and the same arrangement held good after Paul was taken into the concern.

It was decided that Ben should give up his business of boot−blackening that afternoon, and sell papers with the others, so he carried his box to a friend who had a fancy−goods stand in the door−way of an unoccupied store, where he left it until he should finish his day's work. Each paper that Paul sold that day had the same advertisement offering a reward for any tidings of him, but since he never looked at what his wares contained, save to read the head−lines in large letters so as to get an idea what he should cry out, it did him as little good as if it had never been there.

Fortunately for the boys, as the demand for papers was so great and continued so long, Mrs. Green had set eight o'clock as the hour when they would have dinner. By this plan she would have plenty of time to cook it, and all hands would be through work and possessed of plenty of leisure for eating. Therefore they continued the trade in news until half−past seven, and then hurried for the last time to their hogshead, where they found Dickey Spry eating his supper of crackers and cheese.

The process of finding out exactly how much they had made was a long and difficult one for both Ben and Johnny. Each time they counted it over it was with a different result. When they were very warm, almost angry, and quite positive that the fault of the difference in reckoning was in the money itself, Paul took it upon himself to find out the amount of cash on hand.

Four dollars and eighty−three cents was the grand total of their earnings that day, and all hands were pleasantly surprised by the prosperity that had beamed upon them.

Of course they could not expect such a result except on days when the paper contained some important news; but business would be sure to be good on the following morning, because then all the details of the accident would have been received. After that perhaps Ben's business would have an impetus given it by some friendly shower.

At the end of the week they would owe Mrs. Green seven dollars and a half for the board of the firm, and Ben's proposition was unanimously adopted that they pay four dollars of that amount in advance, retaining the eighty−three cents as a working capital for their business the next day.

There was no attempt made to put on any better appearance than usual when they started for Mrs. Green's that night, for now that they were members of her family, they would be obliged to go there just as they were when they finished their work, and they might as well show themselves as they would be on future occasions. Ben attempted to take quite an elaborate and affecting farewell of Master Spry, but that young gentleman refused utterly anything more than the ordinary expressions of parting.

"You'll be back in less'n a month, wantin' to live here agin," he said, as, seated in the farthest corner of the hogshead, he looked out frowningly at their preparations for departure. "You can't swell very long at the rate of two dollars'n half a week, an' you'll be glad to crawl in here agin."

Ben thought that it was not exactly wise to say very much against this assertion of Dickey's, for it was just possible that he was right, and the less that was said about the matter then the easier it would be to take up their abode there again in case they were obliged to.

Each of the three boys took a tomato can, while Ben and Johnny carried, in addition, the coats in which they had arrayed themselves the night before, and in this manner they started for their new boarding−house. They were late; but Mrs. Green, knowing of the activity in the newspaper market, had expected they would be, and had made her preparations accordingly.

Paul felt wonderfully relieved at being able to wash himself with soap once more, and to have a towel to use, while it seemed as if Ben and Johnny never would make themselves ready to go to the table, so interested were they in the very "swell" thing of combing their hair before a looking−glass.

"I tell yer it's high!" said Ben, emphatically, as he took up the towel, and then wiped his hands on the skirts of his coat lest he should soil it "it's high, an' if we keep on at this rate we shall jest spread ourselves all over the block before we git through with it."

Johnny shook his head sagely, still unable to stop combing his hair in front of the glass, as if he wondered where all this luxury would lead them, while Paul contrasted this poorly furnished room, which his companions thought so magnificent, with what he had been accustomed to at home.

Mrs. Green succeeded in getting her boarders away from the contemplation of their surroundings by reminding them, in a very forcible voice, that everything would be spoiled if they waited much longer. They took their places at the table, and Ben and Johnny were in a dream of surprise during the meal, which was, as Ben afterwards told Mopsey, "one of the swellest dinners ever got up in New York City."

After they had eaten as much as they wanted and it seemed as if they never would get enough, so good did it taste Nelly showed the boarders through the rooms, which were above a store. There were two floors divided into five rooms, and an attic which could be of no use except as a store−room, because of the fact that it was hardly more than five feet from the floor to the roof.

Ben was highly delighted with everything he saw, Paul expressed neither surprise nor pleasure, and Johnny was not enthusiastic until he saw the attic. The moment he was taken there, a gigantic idea seemed to have come to him very suddenly, and he stood in the centre of the place almost too much excited to give words to the thoughts that crowded upon him.

"Fellers!" he cried, and he repeated it twice before he could say any more "fellers! do you know what we can do up here?"

Now it is possible that both Ben and Paul could have thought of very many things they could do in a space as large as that attic; but since they did not know what Johnny referred to, they shook their heads negatively, and

waited for him to tell them what it was that had so excited him.

"We can jest fix things up here, an' have a theatre a reg'lar theatre, an' make more money than than well, all we want."

And then in a very excited way he went on to tell them just what could be done to transform the place into as beautiful a theatre, save in one or two unimportant details, as could be found in the city.

Nelly stood by, looking first at one and then the other of the boys in mute surprise, while Paul, delighted at the idea of making a large sum of money at one bold stroke, and being saved thereby from weary days of waiting and working before he could return to his home, listened attentively.

Ben agreed with all his partner said, but he advised that Mrs. Green be consulted as to the scheme before they went very far in deciding what work they would be obliged to do in order to transform the place from a rather dreary attic into a theatre. It then occurred to Johnny that Mrs. Green might object to such a plan, and he hastened down−stairs to consult with her at once. After considerable argument, during which he set forth as prominently as possible the enormous amount of money that could be earned, of which she should have a fair share, Johnny succeeded in gaining Mrs. Green's consent to the plan. After that the boys went to bed, almost too much excited at the prospect of being managers and proprietors of a theatre to be able to sleep.

CHAPTER V. MESSRS. TREAT, JONES, WESTON DOWD.

The particular circle of society in which Ben and Johnny moved was shaken to its very centre by the news which was whispered from one to the other on the day after those young gentlemen and Paul had taken up their abode at Mrs. Green's.

Early that morning the most exciting topic of conversation had been Master Spry's misfortune and Tim Dooley's perfidy; and that had hardly begun to be commented upon when the news spread that Ben and Johnny, since the coming of their guest, who was evidently a suspicious sort of a person, as was shown by his clothes and his entire ignorance of the slang of the street, were no longer proud of their neat little bit of real estate, but had made a change which would probably be the means of their financial ruin. That they had been so extravagant as to engage rooms at a regular boarding−house, where they were to spend their substance on three square meals each day, seemed like a reckless disregard of money; and the price which they were to pay for board was stated at various sums from five to ten dollars per week. But that was not the only bit of wonderful news.

Jimmy Sullivan stated and he was supported by several others as the time wore on that Johnny himself had told him that they were to start a regular theatre, and had already engaged a hall, which would be converted into a first−class place of amusement as soon as possible. This would have been regarded simply as a rumor started for the purpose of injuring the credit of these young gentlemen, had it not come so directly from one of the parties concerned, and must therefore be true.

Business was in a great measure suspended for that day, and little knots of boys gathered at the street corners, eagerly discussing the news which threatened to destroy the credit, for a time at least, of two merchants who were well known in boot−blackening and news−selling circles.

It was fully understood by the majority of those who discussed this startling intelligence, that it was only three weeks since the firm of Treat Jones had bought a house on credit, and that there was still a mortgage of twenty cents upon it in favor of the now bankrupt merchant, Mr. Dickey Spry. To be sure, Messrs. Treat Jones had taken in a new partner very recently; but there were those who knew that this new boy had only brought to the firm three cents and two tops, which could not bring in any very large amount of money, even though a cash customer

was found for them at once. It was very clear that this new partner was more of a drawback than a help to the firm, and the mystery seemed greater than ever.

Dickey Spry, on being interviewed on the subject, assumed a wise air and shook his head gravely; which was very much as if he had said that he was sorry to see two promising boys ruining themselves as rapidly as these two were. Regarding the mortgage which he held on the hogshead home he refused to say anything, save that he had bought it back; and those who were better informed regarding transactions in real estate at once came to the conclusion that, having foreseen the coming ruin of his debtors, he had foreclosed the mortgage in order to save what he could.

Owing to the possibility of his becoming a boarder at Mrs. Green's, and a partner in the theatrical enterprise, Mopsey Dowd refused to express any opinion on the matter; but it was said by those who called upon him that he turned the handle of his pea−nut roaster nervously and quickly whenever the subject was mentioned.

Meanwhile those who had caused all these speculations and doubts were doing their best to sell their goods, and reaping almost as rich a harvest as they had the day previous. They could not fail to notice the singular actions of their friends, and also that whenever they approached three or four who were talking earnestly, the conversation would cease entirely, the boys either walking away or maintaining a positive silence until they had passed.

It caused them no little surprise, this singular behavior on the part of their friends; but there was too much money to be made for them to try to understand it then, and they continued the sale of their papers, while the others speculated gloomily as to the future of the rash youths who would change their positions in life by such hazardous ventures.

As a matter of fact, Johnny was the one who was responsible for all this excitement, since it was he who had told of the theatrical enterprise. He had been in such a state of mental excitement since he had first thought of the scheme, that it was almost an impossibility for him to get along ten minutes without speaking of it to some one; and when he told the story he was more apt to speak of the theatre as he hoped they could arrange it than as it would probably be. But it must not be supposed that either Ben or Paul were indifferent to the matter; they were almost as much excited about it as Johnny was, though they were not as eager to consult others regarding it.

As has been said, trade was very good that morning, and when they went home for a lunch, which, by−the−way, they thought was much better than any of the regular dinners they had been buying down town, even Mrs. Green was disposed to think that there might possibly be some chance that they could do as Johnny had proposed.

It had been their intention to call on Dickey Spry that evening, for the purpose of trying to cheer him a little in his troubles; but they were too eager to accomplish their new scheme to think of spending their time anywhere but in that famous attic, which was to afford an opportunity for the display of their histrionic talents as well as to bring in so much wealth.

It was just as well that they did not adhere to their original plan, for when Ben explained to Master Spry the reason why they could not keep their engagement with him, he gruffly told them that it was just as well, for he had already made up his mind to go to Jersey City in search of the defaulter, Tim Dooley. Therefore they were not troubled with any pangs of conscience because they were leaving Dickey to mourn alone while they planned the transformation of the attic, and their dinner was eaten with a celerity that astonished their landlady. Johnny took upon himself the duties of architect, and, considering the difficulties in the way of such labor, the others were not unwilling that he should hold the office.

Master Jones found that there was a vast deal of difference between thinking of what he would like to do in the way of making improvements, and actually planning how to make them. He knew that he wanted a stage at one end of the attic, but when the others waited to hear how he could go to work to build it with the limited amount of

capital at his disposal, he was almost at a loss to know what to say or do.

In order that they might set about their work understandingly, Nelly produced what had originally been a tape−measure one foot in length. It had seen such hard usage, however, that only about eight inches remained. With this the amateur architect set about a portion of his work, which was to him very painful.

He decided first that it would be a useless waste of material to build a stage entirely across one end of the attic, since they would not be crowded from lack of room, owing to the small number of performers, and after a great amount of pacing back and forth, as well as mental calculation, he drew two chalk lines at supposed equal distances from the walls. Between these lines he measured with his fragment of a tape−measure, and found that it was exactly thirty times the length of the tape. Thirty times eight inches was, therefore, the length of his proposed stage, or, more properly speaking, his platform, and he seated himself, with a look of perplexity on his face and a remarkably small piece of lead−pencil in his mouth, to figure up the grand total of inches. He could multiply the cipher easily enough, for he was positive that the answer would be the same, however large the multiplier might be; but the question of how much eight times three was troubled him greatly.

After trying in vain to arrive at the correct result by the process of multiplication, he, in his despair, was about to resort to the tiresome expedient of counting the number of inches on the tape−measure thirty times over, when Paul astonished him considerably by giving the result without even using the pencil and paper.

"How nice that is!" said Johnny, with a sigh of relief, as he wiped from his brow the perspiration that had been forced out by his mental exertions, and he began to realize that a knowledge of the multiplication table was very useful to a person in any line of business.

Paul further informed him that two hundred and forty inches was twenty feet; and then he proceeded with greater confidence to calculate the width, which he at first decided should be twelve feet, but afterwards changed to six when Ben suggested that they would require too much lumber if they had it so wide.

After it was settled that the platform should be raised two feet from the floor, and Paul had figured up the exact number of square feet of lumber which would be necessary to cover the proposed space, they commenced a serious discussion as to where the material could be procured.

Ben concluded, finally, that he would call upon a carpenter whom he knew, from having slept in his shop on the shavings several cold nights in the winter when he could find no other shelter, and thus that question was put aside for the time being.

It would be necessary to have some scenery, and that Johnny had already arranged for in his mind. He had decided that it could be made by pasting old newspapers together, hanging them on strings, and coloring them with red, green, and black crayons. For this purpose stout cord was necessary, and Ben went out and bought some, thereby giving tangible form to their enterprise, for this cord was really the only thing they had purchased towards effecting the desired transformation.

Their next step was to gather up all the old newspapers they could find in the house, and Nelly set about making some flour paste, while Johnny went in search of the crayons. Thus they made considerable progress in their enterprise that night; but it yet lacked a system, and, what was more important, capital. In order to remedy this, Johnny called for a strict account of the cash on hand, since they had been too busy to reckon up that day's sales.

By common consent Paul was chosen book−keeper, so far as figuring up the different amounts, whether of money or material desired, was concerned, and, thanks to his knowledge of arithmetic, it was not many minutes before he informed them that the capital of eighty−three cents with which they had commenced that day's business had been increased to three dollars and ninety−five cents a clear profit of three dollars and twelve cents. Out of this, one

dollar and a half was given to Mrs. Green towards the payment of the balance that would be due on their board bill, one dollar was set apart as the working capital of the theatre, and sixty−two cents was to be used in business the following day.

They had hardly settled these financial questions when Mrs. Green's voice from the floor below announced that Master Mopsey Dowd had called to see them, and was already on his way up−stairs.

If Master Dowd had had any doubts as to the desirability of becoming one of Mrs. Green's boarders, they were all dispelled when he saw that attic, every timber of which seemed to be begging to be converted into a theatre. In fact Master Dowd was so impressed with the advantages of that place as a theatre that he did not even speak to his friends until he had paced up and down the room, dreaming of the fame that might be achieved there.

Already the pea−nut merchant seemed to have put all thoughts of his roaster and his wares far from him, and to fancy that he was before an audience of his particular and critical friends, welcomed by them as an artist of whom all the world might be proud.

He was recalled from these pleasant dreams by stepping on a tack that penetrated his shoe at a place where a patch was much needed, and then he appeared to see for the first time his friends, who were anxiously waiting for him to complete his survey of the room.

"It's a stunner!" he said, patronizingly, to Ben, as he seated himself on the floor with easy grace, to remove the tack from his foot "it's a stunner! an' we can jest set the boys wild if we can play somethin' with plenty of murder in it."

"Then you'll come in with us?" asked Johnny, delighted at the praise of this boy, whom he was anxious to have for a partner because of the influence he wielded, and also because it had been whispered among their immediate circle of friends, not many months before, that Master Dowd had fixed up a play that "laid all over" anything that the world had ever yet seen at the Bowery theatre.

"Yes, I'll join yer," said Mopsey, impressively, looking around as if he expected to see every face light up with joy at his decision "I'll join yer, an' I'll come here to board tomorrow."

Then, as was perfectly proper, this new partner was informed of the amount of cash capital on hand; and after Paul had ascertained that their dollar represented thirty−three and one−third cents as the share of each one, Mopsey generously counted out thirty−four cents, disdaining any credit for the extra two−thirds of a cent. Thus it was that the firm of Treat, Jones, Weston Dowd sprang into existence.

CHAPTER VI. THE THEATRICAL ENTERPRISE.

When it became known among that portion of the mercantile world of which Ben and Johnny were members that Mopsey Dowd, the pea−nut merchant of Fulton Ferry, had connected himself with the theatrical enterprise about which so many comments had been made, the matter put on an entirely different aspect, and it was at once shrewdly guessed that he had put in the greater portion of the working capital.

There no longer seemed to be any doubt as to the success of the enterprise, and Ben, Johnny, and Paul found their regular business seriously interfered with by those of their acquaintances who were anxious to become actors. Had they given a position to each of their friends who asked for one, they would have been obliged to have given the entertainment without an audience, for all their acquaintances would have been employed in the theatre.

Master Dowd had foreseen this difficulty, and before he had been a member of the firm five minutes he decided

that no actors outside the firm should be employed, and that Nelly should do something towards the entertainment, probably in the way of a song. As to ticket−sellers, door−keepers, ushers, and such officers, Mopsey felt reasonably certain that Mrs. Green would consent to take her knitting and fill all the positions by sitting at the door, where she could collect the money for admissions, keep the audience in order, and keep a general eye to the safety of her house, all at the same time.

Thus, when any one pleaded old friendship, or services rendered, as a reason why they should be admitted as members of the company, everything was made plain and pleasant by referring to the mutual agreement that prevented any more actors, however brilliant they thought they were, from being engaged.

The public, or a certain portion of it, were more than anxious to know what the opening play was to be, and many inquiries were made of the first three of the partners, even before they had succeeded in procuring the material for the stage. Finally they spoke to Mopsey about it, for they thought the curiosity of their expected patrons should be satisfied.

Owing to its being generally understood that Mopsey was an author, making dramatic literature a specialty, the other partners, advised by Nelly Green, had left the important question of what the opening play should be entirely to the pea−nut merchant. When he was questioned on the subject by his partners, he refused to give them any information save that he was thinking up something which would go ahead of anything yet written, and that he would make the result of his thoughts known in due time.

Meanwhile the boys continued their regular business, for they had wisely concluded that it would not do to let the theatrical enterprise interfere with that which they knew would provide them a living, until the new scheme had been shown a success.

Paul had become quite proficient in the work of selling newspapers, and although he had not overcome the feeling of homesickness which would creep over him every night, he was becoming more reconciled to his lot, because each day's work seemed to bring him nearer to the attainment of his object.

Ben and Johnny had forgotten their plan of writing a letter to some of Paul's friends, or of proposing that he should do it, because of the great scheme of the theatre; and if either of them thought of it after it had first been spoken of, it was only as a useless labor, since, as soon as their place of amusement was open, they would all have money enough to go any where they wanted to.

Business had been as good as they could have expected. Of course they did not have such a rush as they had been favored with during the first two days that Paul was in partnership with them, because the news was not so exciting; but they did so well that their board was paid for a week before they had been at Mrs. Green's four days, and they had begun to think of adding to the theatrical fund.

Ben had heard of a small lot of timber which could be purchased for one dollar and a half, and Johnny insisted that each member of the firm be called upon for an addition of forty cents to his regular investment, which demand was promptly met. In four days the work on the scenery had advanced so well that Johnny felt sure enough papers had been pasted together, at least until after the stage had been built, and the timber was purchased and carried into the attic at once. It was no slight work to build the stage to their satisfaction, and the four labored hard two entire evenings before it was completed. But when it was up, they were fully repaid for all they had done, so thoroughly business−like did it look, and such a theatrical appearance it gave to the attic.

To be sure, one end was a few inches higher than the other, and there were not boards enough to floor the space completely over; but the first defect could and would be remedied by the scenery, and the second could be gotten over by a little extra care when they walked. Besides, Mopsey was not just certain but that those very holes could be utilized by him in his construction of the play for some very startling and novel effects.

The painting of the scenery was an artistic bit of work, which Johnny was certain he and Nelly, with perhaps some trifling assistance from Paul, could do in such a manner as would delight their patrons and cover themselves with credit. Therefore that portion of the work was left entirely in their hands one evening, while Ben and Mopsey started out to call on Dickey Spry for the purpose of consulting with him as to how they could procure material with which to build seats, for Dickey was supposed to be quite an authority in such matters.

Very little had been seen of Master Spry by this arm of dramatic managers, authors, and actors since the night on which he had purchased his old home. He had gone back to the business of blackening boots, as he had said he should; but he was plying his trade in Jersey City, in the hope that he might learn of the whereabouts of the boy who had ruined him. Therefore it was only right that they should call upon him, because of their friendship, even if they had not wanted his advice. With this twofold purpose in view they started out, fearing that they should not find him at home.

But their fears were groundless, for when they reached the hogshead, Master Spry was discovered at a feast of herrings and crackers. He was not a boy who indulged in any useless conversation; and when he saw who his visitors were, he welcomed them by passing to each a herring and a cracker, which was really more eloquent than words.

While he was eating, Ben glanced around, in order to see what changes the new occupant had made. The only unfamiliar thing he saw was a large sheet of brown paper tacked up at the end of the hogshead. On this paper was printed the following notice, the letters having evidently been made by a chewed stick, with liquid blacking considerably diluted with water:

RUNNED AWAY

TIM DOOLY RUNNED AWAY

WITH ALL THE THINGS

I HAD ON MY PENUT STAND IN

GERSEY SITE AN I WILL PAY ENNY

FEER TEN CENTS WHAT WILL

TELL ME WHER HE IS.

D. SPRY.

It is impossible to say what good Master Spry thought he could effect by having this notice put up in his own home, where no one would see it but his friends, who knew all the particulars; but it seemed to afford him a great deal of satisfaction to look at it, which Ben concluded was the reason why he had done it.

"Hain't heard nothin' 'bout Tim?" asked Ben, after he and Mopsey had spelled the notice out with considerable difficulty, and many misgivings as to whether Jersey should be spelled with a G or a J.

Dickey shook his head and tried to sigh; but he had such a large piece of herring in his mouth that he did not dare to attempt it.

"I don't 'xpect I ever shall," he said, sadly, as soon as he had swallowed enough of the fish to admit of his speaking plainly. "I've offered to give ten cents, jest as I've got it there, if anybody will tell me where he is; but I

don't hear nothin' of him."

Ben and Mopsey sat for a few moments in silence, as if to better express their sympathy, and then the latter asked, "How's biz, Dick?"

"Well, it ain't so awful good, nor it ain't so dreadful bad," was the non−committal reply. "I s'pose I shall get along; but I wish I could git a holt of Tim Dooley; then I'd be pretty well fixed."

The visitors looked as if they thought it would be of very little advantage to Dickey if he should succeed in finding the defaulter, and Dickey said, quickly, as if they had spoken their doubts,

"If I can catch him, I'll make him pay me back somehow, whether he's got it or not."

It was rather a rash assertion; but Dickey spoke so confidently that his visitors thought it best not to argue the question, and Ben concluded that it was about time to proceed with the business for which they had come. After he had explained just what it was they needed for the completion of their theatre, during which time Dickey sat rubbing his chin, the personification of wisdom, the two waited for Master Spry to give them the benefit of his knowledge.

It was some time before he condescended to speak; but when he did, it was slowly and emphatically, to show that his mind was fully made up, and could not be changed.

"I know where there's a lot of boards that I could trade for, an' you could put some blocks under each end of them, an' have the best kind of seats. But, yer see, I've bin thinkin' that you oughter taken me inter company with yer, for I can act all round anybody you've got in that crowd. Now I'll git all ther seats yer want, an' carry 'em up there, if you'll let me come in with yer."

It was a sudden proposal, and the two did not know what to say for some moments. It was gratifying to them, because Master Spry was very cautious in making any venture, and that he was anxious to become a partner showed that the public looked with favor upon the scheme, or Dickey Spry would have been the last boy to propose partnership.

"But each one of us have put in seventy−three cents," said Mopsey, hesitatingly, after he had thought the matter over for several moments.

"An' s'posin' I git as many as twenty long boards, an' the blocks to put under 'em, won't that be a good deal more'n that much money?"

Judging from the price they had paid for the timber with which the stage had been built, they knew that Dickey's offer was a good one; and after that young gentleman had gone out into the yard in order to allow them to discuss the matter privately, Mopsey said, as they called him back,

"We're willin' to 'gree to it, an' take you in with us; but of course we've got to see what Johnny an' Polly say to it, an' if you'll come over to the house with us, we'll fix the thing right up quick."

By way of reply, Dickey jammed his hat more firmly on his head, and extinguished the candle which actions his visitors understood to mean that he would accompany them.

During the walk Ben was anxious to know where and how Master Spry was going to procure this lumber which he offered for an interest in the concern; but Dickey did not hesitate to say that he would not tell them until after the question as to whether he was to be a partner or not had been settled, lest they should take advantage of the

information, and then refuse to make him an equal owner.

This seemed to cast a doubt upon their honesty; but they did not take offence at it, because Master Spry was suffering from the wickedness of a boy whom he had trusted, and it was only natural that he should be suspicious.

When they arrived at Mrs. Green's, and ascended to the attic which was the scene of so much industry, they found that the amateur artists had made great progress in their work, although it was shown more by the dense coloring that had been put on the newspaper scenery than from any very fine effects.

Johnny had two wide strips of paper, completely covered with patches of black and green, that were to be placed either side of the stage where the audience would see them, as one sees the wings at a more pretentious theatre. He pointed to his work with evident satisfaction, and assumed an injured look when neither one of the new−comers understood that it was a very fine representation of a forest.

Paul and Nelly were industriously engaged in coloring two other wings with alternate stripes of red and blue; but their work was not sufficiently advanced to render it possible to form any idea as to what it was, and they refused to give any information until they had finished it.

After the coloring of the scenery had been admired, and Dickey had examined with a critical eye all that had been done, Ben stated to Johnny and Paul the proposition which Master Spry had made, declaring himself in favor of accepting it.

Of course, after the advantages of this new connection had been explained, the artists were perfectly willing to admit Mr. Spry as a partner, and he was informed of the fact, with the intimation that it was necessary to have the seats there as quickly as possible.

Dickey promised to begin his labor on the following morning; and then, while the others worked on the scenery, he related to their the success he should make as an actor, provided he was given a part which admitted of his carrying a sword and shield.

CHAPTER VII. ARTISTS AND PRINTERS.

Dickey Spry kept his word, so far as having the timber for the seats at the theatre was concerned; for so anxious was he to fulfil his part of the contract that he devoted all the next afternoon and evening to the work.

He made arrangements with Mrs. Green, whereby he could get into the house during the afternoon while she was attending to her fruit−stand, and by nine o'clock in the evening he had made seats enough to accommodate at least two hundred boys, providing, of course, that they were willing to stow themselves in snugly.

After the work was done, there was not a member of the firm but thought they had a valuable acquisition in the person of Mr. Spry and his timber, and they listened with more attention to his suggestions than they had on the previous evening, when it was possible that he would not carry out his portion of the contract as fully as they desired.

When they stopped work that evening they surveyed their theatre with a great deal of pride; for it was now so nearly completed that any one could tell, at a very searching glance, what it was intended for. The scenery was all in its place, and Nelly had made a quantity of rosettes out of tissue−paper of various colors, which were to be fastened as ornaments on the rough, unpainted boards.

All that remained to be done was to make the curtain, and hang it so that it could be rolled up and down, and to

arrange a place for the candles that were to serve as foot−lights.

What that curtain should be made of had been a vexing question for the partners to settle, and many and serious had been the discussions regarding it. Ben had insisted that they ought to buy white cloth enough to make a regular curtain; but, on considering that proposition carefully, they had discovered that it would cost nearly three dollars, and they hardly felt warranted in going to so much expense.

Finally, it was decided to buy large sheets of stout brown paper, which could be both pasted and sewed together, in order to make sure that they would not pull apart by their own weight, and then these were to be ornamented in some artistic manner by each one of the party.

By the time this important question was settled, it was so late that no more work could be done that night; but before Dickey departed for his hogshead home there was an emphatic demand made upon Mr. Dowd for some particulars as to the play which he had promised to have in readiness for the opening night. It was then Wednesday; and since the first performance was to be given on the following Saturday evening, it did surely seem as if the actors should know what they were to do on that important occasion.

"It will be all right," Mopsey said, so decidedly that they would have been obliged to be satisfied, even if he had not added, "Friday night we'll all come here an' practise, an' then I'll tell you all about it."

On the following day business was so good that it was very late before any of the partners could get to work on their theatrical enterprise, and if their profits had not been so large, they would have deeply regretted the delay. But they worked the faster when they did get the chance; and while the others were interested in putting together the curtain, which bid fair to be a marvel of art, Ben labored industriously at making the tickets.

An acquaintance of his had a large lot of card−board clippings, which he had gathered from time to time as he delivered papers in a printing−office, and these Ben had purchased, with the understanding that he was to give free admission to the entertainment for them during three evenings, providing, of course, that the theatre remained open to the public that length of time. From these odds and ends Nelly had cut about a hundred tickets during the afternoon while she was in charge of the fruit−stand, and these Ben was converting into orders for admission by printing on them, in rather a shaky hand, and with a new lead−pencil he had bought for that express purpose, the following:

GRATE SHOW.

LET WUN CUM IN

5 CENTS

As it was proposed to charge eight cents for seats in the two front benches, Ben printed, in addition to the above, twenty very unique cards, similar to this:

PRESERVED CEAT.

FRUNT BENCH.

It was a long job, and he had bitten his tongue until it was sore in his efforts to make the printing legible, while his fingers ached from clutching the pencil so firmly; but he finished his task before the curtain was completed, and was able to give his advice as to the embellishment of it.

It was while working on the curtain that Johnny displayed his skill as an artist, for he assumed the sole charge of it, insisting that the others should proceed under his direction. It was spread on the floor, and Master Jones was pursuing his work on his hands and knees, with two candles stuck in bottles as his only light. But Johnny appeared to be equal to the emergency, for he was dashing on the color rapidly, not heeding the fact that one side of his nose was a beautiful green, and the other a vivid red, while his chin was as black as if he had been trying to paint a beard on it.

It was on the central figure of this intended work of art that Johnny was expending the most of his labors, and to those who were watching him it appeared something like an eccentric rainbow, or the interior of a paint−shop, until Master Jones printed under it, to avoid any possibility of mistake, "WiLD iNGuN," and then all could see the resemblance at once.

Johnny was proud of his work, and when at last it was completed, he stood at some distance from it, transfixed with silent admiration of what he had created, and quite regardless of the fact that the hot tallow from the candle which he held in his hand was running down over his fingers.

It had been decided to have a small painting in each of the four corners, to prevent the Indian from looking lonely, and one of these was to be done by each member of the firm.

Paul drew his entirely in black, in the right−hand lower corner, and it was a very fair representation of two guns and a sword, although the barrels of the guns were rather more crooked than they should have been, while the edge of the sword was notched, as if it had had some hard usage.

Dickey printed in red the same notice that the boys had seen in his home, offering a reward for the apprehension of Tim Dooley; and although his partners declared that it was not at all appropriate for the curtain of a dramatic stage, he insisted that it should remain there, citing as an argument the fact that he had contributed more than the others to the general fund. It was an argument that could not be disputed, and Dickey's notice was allowed to remain, although Johnny contended that the audience would think his Indian had been intended as a portrait of the missing Tim.

In the upper left−hand corner Mopsey painted, with all the colors at his command, a picture of a schooner under full sail, with a row of what was at first supposed to be guns showing over the rail, but which he explained were pea−nuts, adding that she was represented as having a full cargo on board.

Ben, with fingers still aching from severe exertion with the pencil, drew a picture of his blacking−box and brush, which would have been quite a correct likeness if he had not made the mistake of painting the brush nearly three times as large as the box.

Then, in order that Nelly might do something towards beautifying this wonderful curtain, she was allowed to print the name of each member of the firm, as well as her own, around the border, giving more color to the whole, even if it did not add to the artistic effect.

It was very late when all this was done, and the promoters of this grand enterprise were obliged to go to their respective beds, much as they would have liked to continue at their work all night.

The hundred and twenty tickets were divided equally among the five partners, that they might sell as many as possible before the opening of the doors on Saturday night, and thus lessen Mrs. Green's duties as door−keeper.

It was also agreed before they separated that night, that Ben and Dickey should not attempt to do any business the next day, but devote all their time to hanging the curtain and hunting up old bottles to use as holders for the foot−lights, so that everything would be in readiness for the rehearsal in the evening.

During the next forenoon, those of the partners who pursued their regular business had all they could do to attend to those who wished to buy papers and theatre tickets, and more particularly the latter.

There had been very much talk and speculation among this portion of the news−selling world as to the theatre, and every one was anxious to secure a ticket as early as possible, lest if they delayed until near the time of the performance they should be unable to gain admission.

Of course where so much had been said about any one particular thing as was said about this theatre, and where so many rumors were flying around, exaggeration as to the size, furnishing, and general appearance of the place could not be prevented. Some thought that an army of carpenters had been at work fitting up and decorating the whole theatre; others had it that it was upon the stage only that much labor had been expended, and that that portion of the theatre was more beautiful than any other that could be found in the city.

The more imaginative paid no attention to mere detail, but circulated the most startling rumors as to the excessive amount of brain−work Mopsey Dowd was doing on the new play, which was to be his masterpiece, and to far surpass anything Buffalo Rill or Sixteen−string Jack ever wrote.

Since Mopsey was found at his place of business with the same regularity as before this gigantic scheme was planned, some of his admirers insisted that he worked nights, spending the time when he should have been asleep in bringing forth the most startling and blood−curdling scenes, to be given with all their attendant horrors on the night of the opening of the theatre.

With all these things to give an impetus to the sale of tickets, it was little wonder that they were disposed of readily. When night came, all had been sold save those which Ben and Dickey had, and the demand was still very great.

Each member of the company was quite as much excited when they went home that night as if the performance was to be given then, for the rehearsal was to be held, and all had their parts to learn.

Ben and Dickey had worked faithfully, and performed all that had been given them to do. The curtain was hung, a little awkwardly, to be sure, on account of the uneven manner in which the stage was built; but there it was, whether straight or crooked, where all the beauty of its many−colored illustrations could be seen if the candles were held near enough to it.

When called upon to hoist and lower it, Ben and Dickey showed evident signs of nervousness; but they succeeded, after some considerable time, in getting it up and down without tearing it, although it was plain to be seen that they were relieved when it was up for the second time, and Mopsey had ordered it left there.

The foot−lights had been arranged by nailing narrow strips of board on the under side of the stage, and allowing them to project about six inches beyond where the curtain would come when it was lowered. On these strips the bottles, some large and some small, were to be placed, each with a candle in it. Ben was confident that they would remain there safely enough, provided no one walked very heavily on the stage; he also suggested to Mopsey that he should have as little fighting as possible in the play, because of the insecurity of these bottle foot−lights. This piece of advice, however, caused the author to frown severely, as if he felt that some of his best scenes would thus be interfered with.

No one had thought of lighting the main body of the hall until Ben and Dickey noticed the omission, and supplied it by tying candles around two barrel−hoops, and hanging them up like chandeliers, which added greatly to the general appearance and finish of the place. After all these things had been inspected the party adjourned to dinner, in order to fortify themselves for the trying mental labor before them, and Dickey remained as the guest of his partners, having been specially invited by them and Mrs. Green.

CHAPTER VIII. AN AUTHOR'S TRIALS.

When the dinner was ended and the members of the dramatic company made short work of it in order to begin their professional duties as soon as possible Mopsey Dowd fully realized that he was about to pass in judgment before his partners. Whether he was entitled to it or not, he had some considerable fame as an author, and for that reason he had taken upon himself, voluntarily and even eagerly, the task of preparing an original play for the great event; which goes to show, perhaps, more than anything else, that Mopsey's fame resulted from chance rather than merit.

When he rose from the table he knew that every eye was upon him, and that each one present expected to hear him say something relative to the brain−effort he was making. He was a genius, and would be until his friends found him out, which occurrence would not be very far off if he should say anything then, for the very good reason that he did not know what to say. He knew that something must be done, and that speedily, which would bear out his claim to distinction, and, with a view to gaining time, he said:

"You fellers go into the theatre, 'cause I ain't quite ready yet, an' I'll go up to my room to think over one or two things."

This speech was very much needed just then, for Mopsey had been so reticent as to his play that his partners were beginning to suspect that he was not all he claimed to be. But now perfect trust was restored by his words, and the proprietors of the theatre went up to their temple of art feeling every confidence in the author who was struggling in the privacy of his chamber for their success.

This delay in the beginning of the rehearsal was just what Nelly wanted, for it enabled her to add what she considered would be the crowning beauty of their decorations. She had conceived the idea only that afternoon, while engaged in the busy whirl of keeping the sound peaches at the top of the basket and the unripe ones at the bottom.

A friend of hers, whose mother kept a thread−and−needle emporium that was contained in a willow basket, and displayed to the public very near her fruit−stand, was skilful in the art of making paper flowers, and from time to time had presented Nelly with specimens of her skill, until everything in the house that could be pressed into service as a vase was filled with these never−fading and odorless roses.

It had occurred to her that these flowers might be so arranged on the wall as to form the word "Welcome;" and when she suggested her idea to the boys, after Mopsey had gone into his room, they were delighted. Therefore the delay caused by the author enabled them to go to work upon this last and most beautiful of their decorations at once.

Dickey went out for a paper of tacks, and Johnny drew on the wall, directly opposite the entrance of the hall, the outlines of the word to be filled up with the paper flowers. But there was a difference of opinion among those who were watching him as to how the word should be spelled. He had drawn out the letters "Welkum," while Paul insisted that it was not right, spelling the word correctly, and referring the matter to Ben for arbitration.

Thus appealed to, as if he was an authority in such matters, Ben looked wonderfully wise, but refused to give any decision until after he had written the word down on a bit of paper, spelling it in various ways, that he might see which looked correct.

After some moments of anxious suspense for Johnny, for he had built a very frail stand to enable him to reach a point on the wall where it would be impossible for any of the audience to tear the flowers down, Ben announced that neither was correct, and that the word should be spelled "Wellcom." It was in vain that Paul insisted Ben was

wrong. The decision had been given, and the others decided that where a matter was left to a third party for adjustment all must be satisfied with the ruling. Therefore Johnny marked out the letters as Ben had said, and after Dickey's return with the tacks the flowers were put up, forming a very gorgeous and badly spelled word.

Before the partners had finished admiring this very beautiful ornament on the wall of their theatre, a noise was heard on the stairs, and, on looking out, Dickey announced, by many frantic gestures, that the author was coming. It was a moment of anxious expectancy, for at last they were to know the result of their partner's labors, and they were to be shown just what they were to do on the important occasion. Dickey was particularly anxious, probably fearing lest his part should not be such as would admit of his carrying a sword and shield.

Mopsey walked into the room with slow and measured step, as if he knew the weight of the words he was about to speak, and feared lest, being too heavy, they might topple him over. But Master Dowd was not one who did anything in a careless manner; he did not deign to speak until he had walked the length of the room, disappeared behind the scenery, and stalked out upon the stage, holding a huge sheet of paper in his hand as if it was a weapon with which he was about to strike any refractory member of the firm, should his play not be exactly to their liking.

"Fellers," he said, as he cleared his throat, and then noticing the female portion of his company, he corrected himself by saying, "Fellers an' Nelly: When we first made up our minds to build this theatre " Here he waved his roll of paper around as if to designate which theatre he meant. The movement drew his attention to the new ornament, and caused him to forget what he was about to say.

"Who put that up?" he asked, almost angrily.

"I did," said Johnny, and then, anxious to shift any responsibility of the spelling to the shoulders on which it belonged, he added, "but Ben spelled it."

"Well, fix it," commanded the disturbed author. "If any of the fellers should see that they'd think we didn't know nothin' at all. Put it w−e−double l−k−o−m."

Johnny started to obey him, thinking with delight that he had been almost right before, and Mopsey continued:

"When we built this place I said I'd fix up a play myself, so's we'd be sure to have everythin' all right; but business has been so good, an' I had so much trouble with my pea−nut roaster for I broke it twice, an' had to hire one offer the Italian that keeps across the street that I thought we'd play somethin' the boys all knew, an' we'd kinder lay over anythin' they'd ever seen at the same time. So I thought we'd play the whole of Shakespeare, an' that would give everybody a fair show."

There was a look of disappointment on the faces of his hearers as he said this, and noticing it, he added, quickly,

"You see we couldn't get up a whole play new, an' give all hands a chance to do fightin'; an' then, agin, Dickey wouldn't have a shield an' a sword any other way than this."

This last argument changed the look on Dickey's face at once, and he was perfectly satisfied with any arrangement now, for he knew that his ambition was to be realized. The others were very careful to show no signs of approval until they were satisfied that they had been treated as well as Dickey.

"Of course," continued Mopsey, as he looked around at his audience much as if lie expected to hear some of them say that he couldn't write a play, "the first thing we had to have was a programme, an' I've made one out, so's you'll know jest what you've got to do."

Here Mopsey unfolded the paper he had carried in his hand, and displayed a bill of the play. It is unnecessary to say that this piece of literary work had cost the author a very great effort. Doubts as to the spelling arose at every turn, but the final result was as follows:

GRATE SHOW AT MIS GRENS. BORDIN HOUSE

THE HOLE OV SHAKSPIR

SATERDAY NITE, 8 IN THE EVENIN

RICHARD 3 . . . . . MOPSEY DOWD

MAKBETH . . . . . DICKEY SPRY

OTHELER . . . . . SHINER JONES

HAMLET . . . . . POLLY WESTON

THE GHOST . . . . . BEN TREAT

A SINGER . . . . . NELLY GREN

PRICE 5 CENTS. PRESERVED CEATS 8 CENTS

GRATE TIME.

Mopsey waited patiently until all had read this wonderful production, and he was pleased to see that nearly all were satisfied with their parts. Ben Treat was the only one who appeared to think he had any cause for complaint, and he very soon made his grievance known.

"I can't play ghost," he said, fretfully; "I don't know nothin' 'bout it, an' I want more to do."

Mopsey had made up his mind as to what course he should pursue in case of any dissatisfaction, and he said to Ben, in tones of deepest scorn,

"A great feller you are to get up a fuss before you know what you've got to do! an' you oughter be ashamed of yourself. Why, you've got an awful lot to do. In the first place, you've got to come an' 'most scare the life out of Polly, an' then when he runs away you've got to do a song an' dance, an' turn three or four hand−springs before you sink right down through one of these holes. I don't know what you do want if that don't suit you, unless it is to do the whole play."

Ben had nothing more to say; he realized that his was really an important part, and he was abashed by the withering sarcasm of the angry author. Then each of the others, fearing lest they should not have as good an opportunity for the display of their talents, demanded to know what they were to do.

"Now I'll begin an' tell you the whole thing," said Mopsey, as he prepared to show how all of Shakespeare's plays could be performed on one evening by a small company. "In the first place, Nelly comes out, all dressed up, an' sings a song; then the play commences. I come out with a sword an' pistols, an' tell about my hoss runnin' away, an' after I get through, Shiner comes out an' picks a fuss with me, an' I kill him."

Here the speaker was interrupted by the gentleman who had been selected to play the part of Othello, with the remark that it was hardly fair to dispose of him at such an early stage of the performance, more especially on the first night.

"But you come on agin an' dance," said Mopsey, fretfully. "Why don't you wait till I get through? After I kill Shiner, Dickey comes in an' we two have a reg'lar fight, an' we both run away. Then Shiner jumps up an' dances just as long as he can, an' down comes the curtain. In the next act Polly comes out an' talks a lot of stuff; an' when he gets through, Ben comes right up through the floor an' scares him awfully. An' when he runs off, Ben does a song an' dance, an' that ends that act. Then Nelly sings another song, an' we all come out fightin'; an' when we get through, Dickey dances a clog; an' if that ain't show enough for five cents, I don't know what is."

In fact the partners were of Mopsey's opinion, and since they were all to appear in the last act in a grand fight, they would not have complained even though it had been necessary for them all to die in the first scene. Even if Mopsey had not written an original play, he had covered himself with glory in this arrangement of Shakespeare's works; and if there had been any doubts as to the success of their enterprise, they were dispelled now.

Of course it was necessary to make some arrangements for costumes, and an exciting discussion began at once, during which Mrs. Green was called upon to see what she could do towards fitting the party out. Mopsey proposed that a further assessment of twenty−five cents be made upon each of the company, and announced that, prosperous as business was just then, he had decided to shut up shop the next day, in order to give his whole attention to the important work of preparation. Dickey volunteered to sacrifice his business also, in order to aid him, and it was believed that with the funds just raised these two could buy and hire weapons enough to arm the entire party.

Mrs. Green had several things which it was thought could be used with good effect, and all hands went to work making wooden swords, in case there should be any trouble in finding the real articles. Nelly made more tickets, so that all who were anxious to witness the performance might at least have one, and Paul was given charge of the money that had been received thus far; for all were anxious to see the entire receipts of that night's performance in one unbroken whole, even if it was necessary to advance funds from each individual pocket in order to make the necessary purchases. And during the remainder of that evening Mopsey rehearsed the different members of the combination separately, until he was convinced that they could carry out their respective *roles* perfectly.

CHAPTER IX. THE MOMENTOUS OCCASION.

However successful a venture the opening of a theatre might prove to the five boys interested, it was quite evident, before that eventful Saturday had passed, that it would seriously injure their regular business. At least half their time that day was spent in answering the questions of intending patrons, or those who had already purchased their tickets; and of course while they were thus engaged they could not sell papers or blacken hoots. Therefore, when they stopped work at five o'clock, according to agreement, so that they would be sure to have time to dress before eight, they had not made more than ten cents apiece. They did not realize what this loss of time had cost them, for nearly all of the tickets had been sold, and in contemplating the theatrical receipts, those that should have come from the legitimate business were entirely lost sight of. There was every prospect that they would have a large audience, and when they went to Mrs. Green's they congratulated themselves on having thought of such a brilliant project.

That Mopsey was a thoughtful manager, as well as sparkling author, was shown by a notice which the boys found fastened to the street−door. It read:

DORES OPEN AT HARF PAST SEVEN

and had evidently been prepared in anticipation of the rush of patrons which it was almost certain would fairly besiege the place before they were ready to receive them.

Once in the theatre, it was seen that Dickey and Mopsey had not been wasting their time, for there was such a collection of cast−off uniforms and weapons as would have furnished a much larger company than theirs with outfits. The two who had gathered this remarkable collection together were standing over it in conscious pride; but Mopsey did not give them much opportunity for admiration.

"Now all hands turn to an' git dressed," he said, in a tone of authority, well knowing that his command would be willingly obeyed. "We've got to be sure to be ready, an' we can eat dinner after we're rigged up jest as well as not."

As it was only too evident that Mopsey would be obliged to superintend the dressing of each boy, the party stood waiting for him to designate the one who should receive the first attention.

"We'll start on you, Dickey," said Mopsey; and some of the party thought that while the two had been alone that day, Master Spry had stipulated that he should have the honor of being arrayed first.

Dickey stepped in front of the busy−looking manager, his face beaming with delight, and his mouth open so wide that his smile seemed almost a grin.

Among the collection out of which Shakespeare's characters were to stalk into view were quite a number of Mrs. Green's kitchen utensils, and nearly all of the party were puzzled as to what was to be done with them when Dickey's toilet explained everything. Two tin covers that had evidently been taken from the wash−boilers were fastened on Master Spry's chest and back, and Mopsey insisted on lashing them on so strongly, lest they should become displaced in the fight, that poor Dickey found it impossible to hang his arms down by his side, but was obliged to hold them straight out, very much to his discomfort. A tin saucepan, somewhat the worse for wear, and well blackened, was placed on his head for a helmet, and in his hands a huge cavalier sabre. To throw a dash of color into what would otherwise have been a rather sombre−looking costume, Mopsey laced a quantity of red tape around each leg, which gave him a very striking appearance, to say the least.

But every rose must have a thorn, and Dickey soon found out what particular thorn there was in wearing the costume of Macbeth. In the first place, since he could not use his arms sufficiently to bring them around in front of him, he was obliged to dispense with a shield, for it would have been worse than useless; and again, when he tried to sit down, after he had been admired by his companions, he found that the tin covers were so long that they doomed him to stand until the close of the performance. He would have liked a rest just then, for he was very tired, but the exigencies of the case, and costume, prevented him, and he leaned up in the corner, looking, save about the legs, like a turtle in a restaurant window.

Johnny was the next one who was to be made happy, and perhaps uncomfortable, by Mr. Dowd's idea of costume. But his was on an entirely different scale, since he was to play the part of Othello. A pair of blue uniform trousers were first put on, and then pinned up, since they had originally been intended for a man; a broad leather belt was buckled tightly around his waist, and in this was placed a carving−knife, a pistol with no lock and but part of the barrel, and a jack−knife; an old sack of Mrs. Green's, made of red flannel and somewhat soiled, was put on as coat, and on the shoulders were pinned epaulets made of gilt paper. In addition to the weapons contained in his belt, Johnny had a genuine sword and scabbard fastened to his side, and an army musket to carry in his hands, that looked as if it might have been used in every battle during the late war.

It seemed singular that two should be condemned to stand, and through no one's fault; but Johnny also found it almost impossible to sit down, owing to the number of pins Mopsey had used, to make sure that the trousers would remain at the proper length, and he leaned against the wall by the side of Dickey.

Ben's costume required very little care, since it was simply a sheet thrown over his head; but he insisted so strongly that a ghost had just as much right as anybody else to have his legs laced up with red tape, and to wear a sword, that Mopsey was obliged to give way, and do as he desired. A profusion of tape was tied around his legs; and in order to produce a pleasing effect in case his feet could be seen below the sheet, he insisted on having quite a number of ends hanging down from the ankles. He also had a belt, with a carving−knife, and a pistol in about the same state of repair that Johnny's was, stuck into it; and then, with the sheet over his arm, so that he could have it handy, he looked on while the others dressed, envied by Dickey and Johnny because he could sit down so comfortably.

Paul made a very showy−looking Hamlet, to say the least. He wore a pair of rubber boots many sizes too large for him, with tops that reached his knees, and were ornamented with tissue−paper rosettes; a black frock−coat, which on close inspection proved to be Johnny's best one, that he had worn when he called upon Mrs. Green, hung about his shoulders, covering his hands completely with its profusion of sleeves, and giving him a singular, if not distinguished appearance. This coat had been made more gorgeous than it originally was by having gilt paper pasted to each button, and a red sash tied about the waist, in which were two table−forks and a wooden sword, the latter article interfering sadly with his knees when he walked. On his head he wore a huge paper cap that had been painted red, white, and blue, and ornamented with a tuft of feathers that had once done service in a dusting−brush. He also had a gun, and the weight of it was about as much as he could stagger under when he tried to carry it over his shoulder, so he dragged it along behind him, very much as a person of Hamlet's melancholy temperament would have been likely to do. He also could sit down, which was no small comfort.

All this costuming had taken some time, and Mrs. Green had already called up the staircase that dinner was nearly ready before Mopsey had commenced to clothe himself in such garments as he supposed Richard the Third wore. First he put on a thin pair of cotton pants that had once been white, but were now a drab, and which fitted quite closely to his skin. On the outside seams of these he pinned a strip of gilt paper, and then drew on a pair of boots, the tops of which came up quite as high on him as the rubber ones did on Paul. Around these boots was laced more red tape, until it would have been a difficult matter to have formed any idea as to what they might have been intended for originally. He had a broad leather belt, and outside of it was a red sash, with ends that nearly touched the floor. As weapons he wore a sword in a scabbard, a carving−knife, a portion of a pistol, and a table−fork. His coat was a soldier's overcoat, cut down to prevent it from trailing on the floor when he walked, and on his head was a paper cap nearly twice as large, and with very much more ornamentation in the way of feathers and red paint than had the one worn by Paul.

The company were now ready for their arduous duties on the stage, and could afford the time to go to dinner. More than once had Mrs. Green called out to them that that very important meal was ready, and should be eaten if they expected her to get the dishes washed in time to act as door−keeper. She had also become imbued with the excitement of this first performance, and had packed away her fruit−stand fully two hours earlier than usual, in order that she might first feed her actor−boarders, and then look out for their interest at the door.

It was a ferocious looking and, in at least two cases, an uncomfortable feeling company that filed down the stairs and into the dining−room, led by Dickey, who was obliged to enter the door sideways, because his arms stuck out so straight as to prevent his moving through any aperture less than five feet wide in any other way.

"Gracious!" ejaculated the startled landlady, as she saw this singular−looking object enter the room, followed by four others, more or less gorgeous, and all equally terrible. "How on earth did you contrive to make yourselves look so horrible?"

"Mopsey did it," squeaked Dickey, piteously, as if he had been accused of some wrong deed, and earnestly wishing that he was the ghost.

"He's Macbeth," said Mopsey, in explanation, and anxious to show that he had only done his duty in thus making Dickey so uncomfortable. "That's pretty near the way Macbeth always gits hisself up."

"Poor man!" said Mrs. Green, sympathizingly, "it must have been terrible hard for him, an' he couldn't had a great deal of comfort with his arms." And then, as she looked over her spectacles pityingly at the miniature Macbeth, and noticed that it was the covers of her wash−boilers that he wore, she said, "You must be awful careful not to tumble down, Dickey, for you never could get up; an' besides, if anybody should step on you they'd spoil them covers, an' one of 'em's 'most new."

Dickey made no promise, but his face showed plainly that he appreciated the danger he would be in if he should fall over, and that he was determined to stand as straight as possible in the combat which would take place in the third act.

All of the company save Dickey and Johnny seated themselves at the table, and began to make a hearty but hurried meal. Johnny stood up in a careful manner, and got along very well, but poor Dickey could neither sit down nor help himself. He made one or two vain efforts to pick up a biscuit from the table, but his armor would not permit, and he was about to lean back against the wall in helpless indignation, when Mrs. Green noticed him.

"Poor child!" she said, in a motherly tone, "I do think it is a shame for Mopsey to rig you up in such a way that you can't eat, an' you do have such a good appetite."

"He wanted to play Macbeth," said Mopsey, anxious to clear himself from any blame, "an' if he plays it he's got to go that way."

"Yes, I wanted to play it," said Dickey, in a pathetic tone that told he would never want to do such an uncomfortable thing again. "I wanted to, but I didn't know I was goin' to be fixed so's I couldn't even wiggle."

Mrs. Green went without her own supper for the sake of giving Dickey his, and she fed him patiently, while he stood with outstretched hands leaning against the wall, but able to eat all that was put in his mouth.

By the time the boys were through supper Nelly came into the room, dressed for her portion of the work in the evening's performance; and even Mopsey, who the day before had suggested that she should wear a sword, thought she looked charming in her white dress with blue ribbons.

It was very near the time set for opening the doors, and already they could hear a crowd of boys on the sidewalk, as they jostled and pushed in their efforts to enter before the managers were ready to receive them. Mopsey, excited at this clamor of the public, drove his company up−stairs, and hurried Mrs. Green to such an extent that she concluded to let her house−work go until after the performance, and went down to open the door.

CHAPTER X. THE FIRST ACT.

The noble company of actors stood in breathless expectancy behind the scenes of their theatre, waiting for the sound of tramping feet that should tell of the rush of the public to witness their genius, as shown in this particular line of business. The interest was so great that even Dickey forgot the discomfort of his Macbeth costume, and stood as near a crevice in the boards as possible, to see their patrons as they filed into the hall.

The auditorium was as near a scene of enchantment as tallow−candles could make it. The twelve bottle

foot−lights flared and flickered as if they were conscious of the wonderful display of talent they were there to illumine, while the barrel−hoop chandeliers cast even a more brilliant light than one would have supposed. The flower decorations on the wall, forming the word that meant quite as much as if it had been spelled correctly, stood forth in all their beauty, even more prominently than if the light had been stronger.

That Mrs. Green had never acted in the capacity of door−keeper of a theatre before, was shown by the trouble she was having. It had been her purpose to open the street door, and then go in advance of the crowd to the door of the hall, where she could receive either the money or the tickets of those who entered. But one look at the noisy throng was sufficient to convince her that more than half of them would distance her in the race up−stairs. She therefore changed her plan, and by exerting all her strength she was able to keep the door closed so far as to prevent more than one from entering at a time. By this means she succeeded in collecting tickets from nearly all who entered. As soon as she thought she could do so with safety, she ran up to the attic−door, where she could act the part of door−keeper with more comfort and dignity.

At least fifteen minutes before the advertised time for the performance to begin, every one of Dickey's board−seats were filled with a noisy, perspiring crowd of boys, who found considerable amusement in swaying back and forth on the not very secure seats, until one of them would go down with a crash. This seemed to afford the greatest amount of amusement to those who were thus thrown to the floor.

Good Mrs. Green was thoroughly astonished by the amount of patronage bestowed that night; for after she thought that the audience was complete, boys of all sizes continued to pour in, until she had quite a pile of five−cent pieces in her apron, besides the tickets, and nearly one−half of those present were obliged to stand.

Although it was not eight o'clock, the audience suddenly came to the conclusion that it was time for the performance to begin, and they announced that fact by piercing whistles, furious stamping of the feet, and such gentle admonitions to the managers as, "Hurry up, Mopsey," "Give it to us now, Shiner," as well as other phrases betokening extreme familiarity.

The managers of this theatre were not unmindful of the fact that their audience must be obeyed, even if some of the rules were broken, and Ben and Paul were ordered by the author, who had taken upon himself the position of sole manager, to raise the curtain. Then Nelly came out and sang a melody that all were familiar with, being assisted by the audience in the chorus, until Mrs. Green was obliged to cover her ears with her hands, lest the great volume of music should give her a headache.

This portion of the entertainment was greeted with the wildest applause; and when Master Dowd, after Nelly had left the stage, attempted to appear in all the gorgeousness of his costume, he was plainly told to go back and let Nelly sing again a command which he obeyed at once, lest some of his audience should take it into their heads to force compliance.

After Nelly had sung the second time the applause died away, as if the audience were willing that the regular business of the evening should proceed. All the actors were standing where they could go on to the stage at a moment's notice, save Dickey, who was leaning against the wall, holding his sword straight out, at the imminent peril of hitting some one of his partners as they passed.

"Now be all ready, Dickey," said Mopsey, warningly, as he prepared to go on the stage.

"See here," whispered Johnny; "be kinder careful when you an' I fight, 'cause there's lots of pins in these pants."

Mopsey nodded his head, as much as to say that he would look out for such things, and in another instant he was before the foot−lights, receiving a storm of applause, although he was at a loss to know whether it was directed to him personally, or to the costume he wore. So great was the enthusiasm manifested by his presence that it was

some moments before he could speak, and during that time the few lines he knew of the part of Richard the Third had entirely escaped his memory. It was a trying moment both to him and his brother actors, who were watching him, as he stood there with drawn sword, first on one foot and then on the other, waving his hand and then the weapon, as if he were about to speak, and yet making no sound.

"Go on, Mopsey say something," whispered Ben in a hoarse voice; and the audience hearing him, suggested kindly,

"Yes, give us somethin', old man."

Thus urged, Mopsey made one mighty effort, and shouted in his loudest tones, as he waved the sword still more frantically than ever,

"I've lost my hoss! I've lost my hoss, an' I want some one to tie up my head but but but I'm a match for any feller 'round here, and and "

It was not only evident to the audience, but to Mopsey himself, that it was of no use for him to try to remember the words he should have spoken, and he waved his sword frantically for Johnny to come on, hoping to save his good name by the bloody combat, which could be prolonged until their patrons were in good−humor. But just at this moment it was impossible for Johnny to be of any service. He had tried to alter the position of some of the pins in his trousers, so that they would not prick him so badly, and the consequence was that the entire work was undone, while one leg fell down over his foot in a manner that prevented him from stepping, unless at the risk of tumbling flat on his face. Ben did his best to repair the damage, while Mopsey stood waving his sword, whispering very audibly for Johnny not to mind the pins but to come on. Meantime the audience, in the loudest tones, coaxed Johnny to come out and take Mopsey away.

But Ben succeeded finally in getting the ill−costumed Othello arranged so that it was possible for him to walk, and he rushed on to the stage, the gun in one hand and the sword in the other, just as Mopsey was meditating a retreat from the freely−expressed criticism of his audience.

The relief of the author−actor when he saw Othello was greater than could be expressed by words, and he resolved to regain the good opinion of the audience by the ferocity with which he would wage the combat. It is probable that some such thought was expressed in his face when he rushed towards Johnny, for, startled by the furious bearing of his partner, Othello became frightened, and holding both weapons in front of him, he looked ready for instant flight. It seemed as if this very timidity restored to the prototype of the cruel Richard all his assurance, for now, suddenly remembering the words he should have spoken at Johnny's first appearance, he waved his sword still more furiously, and shouted,

"It looks as if there was more than a dozen of this same feller, for I've killed four or five already, an' here's a lot more of him."

Johnny was a trifle alarmed at the words, and looked almost timidly behind him to see if he was really there in several forms, or if it was only a portion of the play, when Mopsey struck his gun so severe a blow with the edge of his sword that it fell from his not over−strong grasp, striking directly on the toes of the blood−thirsty Richard.

There was a howl of pain as Mopsey dropped his sword with a clang, and appeared trying to gather his feet into his arms, where he could nurse them, while this shock of weapons on the frail stage caused such a motion of the footlights that two of them fell to the floor, smashing the bottles. The audience in the reserved seats, anxious to prevent any disturbance of the performance, scrambled for the candles, and the two who succeeded in getting them before they were extinguished kindly held them in their hands during the remainder of the scene.

"Don't you know enough to fight when the time comes?" cried Mopsey, who, having given up the useless task of nursing his bruised feet, picked up his sword again and advanced once more upon the timid Othello, who was trying to decide whether he should remain there or run away.

These words had the effect of spurring Johnny on to a more perfect acting of his part, more especially since some of his friends in the audience cried out, in a friendly way, "Go for him, Shiner, an' give him fits."

Then Johnny did "go for" his adversary almost too strongly, for he refused to die as Mopsey had told him he must, but continued to strike out wildly with his sword, hitting Mopsey's weapon a portion of the time, and when he failed in that, coming so near Richard's face that it seemed certain he would slice off one of his ears or his nose.

It was a furious combat, truly, and the audience favored it with the most generous applause, some inciting Mopsey and others Johnny to renewed exertions, until Mrs. Green started up in alarm, fearing that a riot would ensue.

"Why don't you die?" whispered Mopsey, hoarsely, as he panted from exertion, and believed that in justice to the other performers the battle should end.

But Johnny refused positively to die, and it is probable that he would have continued the fight as long as he had strength or breath left, had he not been the victim of his own architectural shortcomings. He, the one who had built the stage, actually forgot the pitfalls in the form of spaces left uncovered because of lack of lumber; and in the excitement and fury of the battle, minding only the shouts of encouragement from the audience, he fell into one of these yawning pits, and Richard had a chance to become himself once more. With head down and heels up, the unfortunate Othello struggled in the prisoning space until every one of the bottle foot−lights had been displaced, and an even dozen of the audience seated themselves on the floor, holding the candles in their hands obligingly. Ben had taken Dickey from his leaning−place against the wall, and brought him to the side from which he was to make his entrance when Richard and Othello had first begun to fight, so that when Johnny fell he rushed on in a sidelong way, in order to present his sword−arm to the conqueror.

King Richard was so entirely exhausted from his long struggle that he had apparently forgotten the course he had marked out for the rest of his company, and was leaning on his sword, gazing at the supposed−to−be−dead Othello, wondering whether he ought to help him to rise or not, when Ben launched Dickey full at him. He had no time to parry the shock, nor Macbeth to check the force with which Ben had sent him, and the consequence was that Richard and Macbeth fell almost directly on top of the struggling Othello with a thud that threatened to rend asunder each particular board of the frail stage.

Mrs. Green uttered a cry of horror as she realized that the cover of her new wash−boiler must have been injured; but that noise, as well as the terrified squeak from Othello, was drowned in the burst of applause that came from the spectators. Mopsey sprang to his feet as quickly as possible, bowing his acknowledgments to the audience as if he had planned the scene, while poor Dickey lay prone upon the almost suffocated Johnny, unable to rise, or even to move so that Othello might extricate himself.

As the audience continued to applaud, Mopsey felt that he was forced to remain before them, bowing, and almost expecting to be deluged with bouquets, and, of course, he was not aware that two members of his company needed his immediate assistance.

"Help Dickey! Why don't you help Dickey?" whispered Ben from the wings, thinking that it would not be seemly in the ghost of Hamlet's father to rush on to the stage before his time. But King Richard paid no attention to this call, if indeed he heard it, and, after waiting some moments, Ben, with his ghostly covering still flung over his arm, was obliged to go to the assistance of the two warriors, thereby causing a fresh burst of applause. He rolled Dickey over and over until Paul could drag him off by the shoulders, and then pulling Johnny out by the feet, he aided him in repairing the damages done to his costume by his descent through the stage.

It was now time that the dead Othello should do his song and dance, and in a very audible whisper he informed Mopsey that he had better get off, and give him the chance. Some of the audience suggested the same thing, and very reluctantly Mopsey left the stage, while Johnny concluded the act in a highly successful manner by a dance that was considerably better executed than was his sword−play.

CHAPTER XI. THE EVENING'S ENTERTAINMENT.

Surely if noise was any proof that the audience was satisfied with the performance given by Mopsey's company, then all must have been highly delighted, for such confusion was probably never heard in that house before as when the curtain fell on the first act of this new edition of Shakespeare's plays. The actors were in a perfect whirl of delight, and all save Dickey showed it by dancing and shaking hands, until there was almost as much confusion behind the curtain as in front.

Mopsey was so delighted at the success that his gigantic brain conceived a startling idea for the entrance of the ghost, which was neither more nor less than for Ben to crouch under the stage, in the very hole where Johnny had come to grief, and at the proper time to rise up in a ghostly fashion, which must surely be very effective. Ben was disposed to object to this hiding under the flooring, more especially since he would be enveloped in the sheet, and would doubtless be uncomfortably warm; but all his objections were overruled by the author and company, and he gave a very unwilling assent to the proposition.

In order that the audience might not be kept waiting until their patience was exhausted, or their good−humor began to evaporate, the curtain was raised as soon as the ghost could be tucked away in his hiding−place, and Paul made his first appearance on any stage. Mopsey had explained to him the part which he was to assume, and in a well−thumbed copy of Shakespeare's works belonging to Mrs. Green he had found the lines which Hamlet is supposed to speak after he sees the ghost. These he had committed to memory, although he had little idea of the meaning of them; and when he came upon the stage he addressed the audience as if in them he saw the ghost of his murdered father.

Now Ben had seen the play of "Hamlet" several times, and he knew enough about it to know that the speech Paul was delivering should be addressed to him. In his anxiety to have the scene played properly, he marred the effect of his own entrance somewhat by popping his head out of the hole and whispering, hoarsely,

"Turn 'round this way, Polly; turn 'round to me."

Paul heard the advice, and he turned his back to the audience. Ben, seeing that his suggestion had been carried out, ducked his head again, very much to Hamlet's perplexity.

Mopsey had stated particularly that as soon as he saw the ghost he must run away in alarm, and yet Ben would persist in keeping out of sight even though he had attracted his attention.

Paul repeated all of the speech he had committed to memory, and then waited for the ghostly visitant. Ben, who had not anticipated that there was so much speaking in Hamlet's part, was rather confused, and did not know whether it was time for him to come out and strike terror to the heart of his supposed son or not.

He popped out his head two or three times, but Paul was not standing in such a position as he fancied would be best suited for the reception of a ghost, and he went back again out of sight, delighting the audience with his agility, and confusing Hamlet.

Paul knew that it was not the proper thing for him to stand there silent, and, fearing lest he might not have said enough, he began to repeat the same speech over again.

Ben realized that it was but a repetition that doomed him still to remain in hiding, and believing it to be a mistake on Paul's part, he whispered, loudly,

"You've said that before; say something else."

Paul was perfectly well aware that he had repeated those words before, and he was doing so for the very good reason that he did not know what else to say; but the ghost's command confused him, and he stood silent and motionless, resolved to remain quiet rather than make a mistake.

By this time Mopsey had discovered that there was something the matter with the two actors who were supposed to be delighting the audience, and he found that it was the ghost who was delaying the progress of the play.

"Come out of there, Ben," he whispered, loudly; and some of the audience hearing him, they called, in pleasant tones,

"Yes, come out, Ben, and show yourself."

Thus urged, the ghost could do no less than make his appearance, and he arose from his place of partial concealment as majestically as he could, considering the fact that the sheet had been caught upon a nail, and he was obliged to stoop two or three times to unfasten it. But he did succeed in rising at last, and then, to make himself look as much like a spectre as possible, he held both arms straight out as he walked slowly down the stage.

It is very likely that he would have made a good impression if it had not been for that portion of his costume that did not properly belong to the character he was assuming. The long ends of tape that he had insisted on allowing to hang down from his ankles persisted in getting under his feet, and he tripped himself up with a force that gave Hamlet a genuine fright. The sheet which covered Ben's head prevented him from rising as quickly as he would have liked, and while he was trying to disengage himself from it, Paul, realizing that he should run away, did so by leaping over the prostrate ghost, to the great delight of the patrons.

The shock of Ben's fall and Paul's leap so shook the frail structure which Johnny had built that the curtain came down with a thud, tearing away from its fastenings above, and the poor ghost was made doubly a prisoner by this additional covering.

"Don't tear it, Ben!" shouted Johnny, fearing lest his artistic labors in the way of the "Wild Indian" would be ruined, and then he and Mopsey sprang on the stage, rescuing the curtain from the frantic clutch of the ghost, and leaving that worthy to get to his feet as best he might.

Of course the audience enjoyed all this highly; and while they hooted and shrieked in the excess of their delight, Ben succeeded in escaping from the rather awkward mantle.

"I can dance, if I don't do the ghost very well!" he shouted, almost angrily, to the noisy audience; and then he began to prove the truth of his words with a force that threatened the immediate destruction of the entire theatrical surroundings.

And the audience seemed to realize that Ben could dance, for they insisted on his continuing that portion of his duties until he was bathed in perspiration, and so tired that he could hardly move.

Of course, now that the curtain had been wrecked, there was no opportunity for dividing the acts, and after the applause which Ben's efforts had produced died away, Mopsey sent Nelly on to sing again. The audience greeted her kindly, as before, and not only insisted on joining in the chorus, but demanded more than she had intended to

give. They were evidently determined to get the full value of their money, and, suspecting that she would appear no more that evening, dictated to her such songs as they wanted to hear.

It was of no use for her to refuse, for they insisted upon their demands being complied with so noisily that the performance could not proceed until they were ready. She stood there singing until she was hoarse, while the entire company waited, in battle−array, for the time to come when they should make their last appearance in the great combat.

It was nearly half an hour before Nelly was allowed to go; and as soon as she was clear of the stage the waiting forces rushed on, displaying the most wonderful skill with their swords.

It would not be exactly correct to say that all of the company rushed on, for Dickey made his appearance very carefully. Of course he was obliged to come sideways, and he moved with great caution, lest he should fall down again, thus working more damage to the covers of Mrs. Green's wash−boilers. But he got on with the others, even if he was slower in his movements, and soon was in the very midst of the mimic battle, apparently the most wounded one there, judging from the blows that were rained upon his armor.

The combatants had soon found out that their stage was hardly large enough for the movements of an army of five with such long swords, and that the greatest caution must be used to prevent serious injury to some of them. Therefore, when Mopsey hit a resounding blow on the front−piece of Dickey's armor with the back of his sword, all saw that the din of battle could be represented in that way much better and with less danger than by clashing their swords together.

And thus it happened that poor Dickey found himself in the midst of a blood−thirsty crowd, each one pounding him on the chest or back, while he was unable to parry the attack, save when some one incautiously moved towards his sword−arm. He cried for mercy at the full force of his lungs, while Mrs. Green shouted the same request because of her tin−ware. The audience were equally divided in opinion as to whether Macbeth had been punished enough, and still the blows were delivered with such force and noise that one would have thought an army of tinsmiths were at work.

How long this unequal combat might have gone on it is impossible to say; for when Dickey found that he was likely to have no mercy shown him so long as the audience was so well pleased, he dropped to his knees, and then tried to roll off the stage. Of course, he could roll over no more easily than a turtle, but he had stopped the supposed sanguinary fight, and he was satisfied. Having no one on whom they could wreak their vengeance without considerable danger to themselves, the combatants dispersed, and not until then did Mopsey remember that the very one whom they had been using so roughly was the one upon whom they depended to close the performance.

When the self−elected manager thought of this, he called to Ben to help him set the vanquished Macbeth on his feet, and to get him in dancing condition. It was quite an easy matter to get the tin−encased hero on his feet, but quite another matter to bolster him up so that he could dance. Dickey was wearied with long standing, sore from the effects of the pounding, and so thoroughly cured of his desire to wear an armor, that all he thought of or wanted was to get where he could take off the trappings of war, and become a humble boot−blacking citizen once more. In fact he utterly refused to dance, which would really have been an impossibility, unless he had been relieved from the embarrassment of the boiler covers, and Ben and Johnny went on in a double clog to give a proper finish to the performance.

Inasmuch as there was no curtain, it was found necessary for Mopsey to go forward and announce that the evening's entertainment was finished an announcement which the audience was not inclined to accept as a fact. They utterly refused to leave their seats, and it was not until Nelly had appeared and sung three more songs that they left the theatre. Then, although they drew some comparisons between that theatre and others which they had

attended, which were certainly not very favorable to Mopsey, they departed, apparently very well satisfied that they had received the full worth of their money.

The entertainment had lasted fully two hours, and every one of the performers, but more especially Dickey, was greatly pleased when the last one of the audience passed out of the door. It would be stating it all too mildly to say that Mrs. Green was relieved when they had gone. The good woman had been in a deplorable condition of fear since the time the first hearty applause was raised, and she had been seriously afraid that they would go through the floor of her attic in some of their more vigorous manifestations of pleasure.

Before the last one of their patrons had left the hall Dickey had asked Paul to help him cast aside the uncomfortable costume of Macbeth. When that was done, Master Spry stated most emphatically that if he ever acted again it would be in some part where the use of armor was entirely forbidden.

As a matter of course, the first thing the partners were anxious about, after their patrons had departed, was to know how large their profits were from that evening's excessive labor. Without waiting to change their costumes, save as has been related in the case of Dickey, they gathered around Mrs. Green, who was beginning to recover some of the senses that had been frightened from her. She and Paul counted the money she had in her apron, and the amount was found to be three dollars and five cents. There was already in Treasurer Paul's hands eight dollars and sixty cents, and when it was announced that the evening's performance had netted them the very handsome amount of eleven dollars and sixty−five cents, the joy of the partners showed itself in many extravagant ways.

Ben proposed, and the boys agreed to it willingly, that one dollar of that amount be paid to Mrs. Green for the use of the attic. This being so much more than she had expected, caused her to look upon the theatrical enterprise as a gigantic success.

Then quite a discussion arose as to what should be done with the funds on hand. Mopsey was in favor of making an immediate division; but such a plan was thought by the others to be most unwise. Dickey proposed that a certain sum be set aside as working capital, and the balance divided among them all, including Nelly, of course, since she had contributed in no slight degree to the success of the entertainment.

This appeared satisfactory to the majority of the party, and would probably have been done if Ben, who had taken no part in the discussion, but appeared to be thinking deeply of something, had not said,

"I've got a plan that I reckon you'll all agree to; but I don't want to tell what it is yet awhile. Now I say, let's let Paul keep it till Monday night; it won't spoil if we don't divide it till then."

Since there was no good reason why this request should not be granted, and since Ben seemed so anxious to have it left that way, the rest of the partners agreed quite willingly. Then the tired company of actors crept off to bed, proud in the belief that their venture had been a success, but anxious to rest.

CHAPTER XII. A GENEROUS ACT.

On Monday morning before they parted, and while Dickey was still their guest, Ben was very mysterious in his actions. He avoided Paul so much that one would have said he suspected the treasurer of having embezzled some of the funds of the concern.

But if any one knowing him had suspected that such was the case, that supposition would have been rejected as soon as a full view had been had of his face. He appeared to be in the most perfect good−humor, but considerably excited. Before he left the house he had succeeded in whispering these same words to Mopsey, Dickey, and Johnny, without having been overheard by Paul:

"Meet me at Nelly's stand 'bout 'leven o'clock, an' don't let Polly know anything about it."

The only one of that party who had not been in the best of spirits during the Sabbath, when Mrs. Green had exacted a due observance of the day by her boarders, was Paul, and he had been very sad. It was the second Sunday that had passed since he had been so unfortunately separated from his parents, and his distress of mind seemed to have increased; instead of being soothed, by time; in fact, as the days passed on, and he still found himself very far from accomplishing his purpose, he began to despair of ever succeeding.

As successful as they had been with their theatrical enterprise, the proceeds were not as large as he had expected; and when he figured out the amount which was each one's share, he realized that it would be very long before he could get from that source money enough to buy his ticket home.

A few days previous to the giving of the entertainment, he had asked at one of the numerous ticket−offices on Broadway how much they would sell him a ticket for, and had been told that he could go for half fare, which would be fourteen dollars a sum of money which seemed almost a fortune to him. During that day Ben had talked with him about his chances of getting home, what he would do when he got there, and many questions about his relatives, all of which Paul had answered readily, although it added to his distress to speak of such matters.

When Monday came, and the boys started out to attend to their business duties, Paul noticed that there was an evident anxiety on the part of all his companions to avoid him. This pained him more than he would have been willing to admit, and it was with a heavy heart that he went about his work, wondering what he had done to cause any change in their feelings towards him.

As all of that theatrical company had expected, they heard many criticisms on the performance they had given, and it seemed as though all of their patrons bestowed more tinge on giving them advice for future guidance than on their regular business. Some advised that Saturday evening performances be given each week, assuring the arm of their support during the entire season. Others were so unkind as to advise that a small theatre be built for Mopsey, where he could take all the parts himself, and very many had suggestions to give Dickey as to the kind of armor he should wear the next time he played the part of Macbeth.

Some of this advice Dickey received in a kindly spirit, assuring his friends of his determination never to play a part again that required any such uncomfortable costume; but to others he displayed considerable ill−feeling, and was so unwise as to be angry, when he should have remembered that as the public's servant, in the capacity of an actor, he was obliged to hear their criticisms. But the partners were made happy by knowing that, in the majority of individual cases they heard of, their performance had given satisfaction, and that if they could only get a new play, since they had exhausted all of Shakespeare's in one evening, they might feel assured of considerable patronage again.

Having been told of this at an early hour in the morning, Mopsey set about the task of writing, or thinking of, another play immediately; and it was said by those who watched him closely that he drove away at least four customers that forenoon by his seeming discourtesy, while he was trying to decide how a new play could be arranged.

At eleven o'clock, agreeably to the appointment made by Ben, all the partners, except Paul, met at Mrs. Green's fruit−stand, wondering not a little as to why they had been summoned. Ben was there, almost bursting with importance; and when he found that all, including Mrs. Green and Nelly, were ready to listen to him, he said, as if he were again on the stage:

"I've got a big plan, an' I hope you'll all think jest the same about it that I do. You know how bad Polly feels 'cause he can't git back to his folks, for you see how he moped round yesterday when we was all feelin' so good. Now, I

jest come from a place where they sell railroad tickets, an' I found out that a little feller like him can get to Chicager for fourteen dollars."

"It won't be long before he gets that much, if nothin' happens to the theatre," said Mopsey, much as if he had been speaking of a gold−mine.

"Not long!" echoed Ben, almost contemptuously; "it'll take him longer than you think for if he depends on that. I asked him yesterday to figger up an' see how much every one would have after payin' Mother Green, an' he made it a doller'n seventy cents. Now that's a healthy pile ter go to Chicager on, ain't it?"

"Well, how can he fix it any other way?" asked Dickey, in considerable surprise, not understanding what Ben was trying to get at.

"I'll tell you how we can. We can all turn to, Mother Green an' all, an' give him the whole of the money. Then he won't have to git only a little over two dollars to fix him right, an' I reckon me an' Johnny can fix him out on that."

The partners looked at each other in surprise as this startling proposition of Ben's was understood by them. For some moments no one spoke, and then Dickey said, as if his mind was made up so firmly that it would be impossible for any one to try to change it,

"He can have my share, an' I'll 'gree to put in enough more to make up as much as he's got to have jest as soon as I kin earn it."

"Good for you, Dickey," said Nelly, admiringly, knowing that the ruined merchant's offer meant a great deal, coming at a time when he was almost penniless. "Mother an' I'll put in our share, won't we, mother?"

"Indeed we will," replied Mrs. Green; and before she could say any more Johnny spoke up,

"Of course I'm in for anything Ben is, 'cause he's my partner, an' I'm mighty glad he thought of such a thing."

Mopsey was the only one who appeared to be at all averse to the generous deed, and there seemed to be a great struggle going on in his mind, when lie should have been the first to agree to it, since he had more money than all the others save Mrs. Green.

"Shame on you, Mopsey, for not speaking right up, and saying that you'll do as much as the others will," cried Nelly, in great excitement, lest one of the party should frustrate the others in their good work.

"Why don't you give a feller a chance to say what he'll do?" replied Mopsey, angry with himself for having hesitated at such a time. "I'm willin' to come in with the rest, only I want to think it over first."

"Then you'll agree to it, will you?" asked Ben, anxious for the success of his plan.

"Of course I will; didn't I say so?" asked the pea−nut merchant, sulkily.

"Then it's all right," said Ben, joyfully; "an' now let's get what money he's got of ours, in some way so's he won't know what we want it for, an' add enough to it so's to buy the ticket, an' give it to him to−night."

The others, with the possible exception of Mopsey, were eager to complete the good work at once and Mrs. Green was called upon to tell them how much money was needed, and how much each person would be obliged to give. She was not an adept in the art of arithmetic, but after some little time, during which a good many figures were made, she informed them that the total amount needed was two dollars and thirty−five cents, and that as there

were six of them, including herself and Nelly, each one would be obliged to give a fraction over thirty−nine cents.

Ben responded at once with forty cents, although he then had but ten cents left, and in a few moments the entire sum was contributed. It was only necessary to get the money which Paul had, and the ticket could be purchased.

It was decided that, since Ben had formed the plan, he should carry it out a task which he was perfectly willing to perform; and, after promising to let his partners know as soon as he had succeeded, he started off, happy at the thought of being able to give Paul so much pleasure. When he met the boy whom he was eager to make happy once more, he had not been able to form any plan for getting the theatrical funds from him without running the risk of raising his suspicions. But since there was no other course which he could pursue, he said, as innocently as possible,

"I've been talkin' with the other fellers, Paul, an' I want you to let me have the money that come from the theatre. We're thinkin' of doin' somethin' with it, an' when you come home to−night we'll tell you what it is."

Paul had been thinking so much of his home and of his parents, whom he feared he should not see again, that he could have had no idea of Ben's purpose, even though he had spoken more plainly, and he handed him the money without a word.

During the remainder of that day Paul was considerably mystified at the singular behavior of his friends; they indulged in the most wonderful winks and nods to one another whenever they were where he was, and something which Ben showed them frown time to time seemed to please them immensely. Whenever he asked the reason for their unusual good−humor, and apparent secrecy about something, he was told that he should know at dinner−time, but not before.

Without having the slightest suspicion as to what his friends had done for him, Paul was so excited by the evident secret which was being kept from him that he was very impatient for the time to come when he could know what it was.

Never before had the boys seemed so anxious to be with him as they were during that afternoon, and he quite forgot their seeming coolness of the morning. One or all of them excepting Mopsey, of course, who was obliged to remain at his stand in the absence of the boy who sometimes acted as clerk for him kept near Paul all the day; and when it was time to go to dinner, it seemed as if they were escorting him home.

Once or twice while they were eating dinner some one of the party had said, "Now, Ben, now!" but Ben had shaken his head significantly and continued eating, as if he had no other duty before him.

When the meal was finished, instead of getting up from the table as they were in the habit of doing, each one of Mrs. Green's boarders, as well as herself and Nelly, remained at the table as if waiting for something, and Paul looked at them in the greatest surprise.

"Mister Weston," said Ben, gravely, as he pushed his plate farther on the table, and arose from his seat as if he had a long speech to deliver, "us fellers have seen that you wasn't feelin' very nice at havin' to stay with us, an' we kinder thought you wanted to leave us 'cause things didn't go to suit you."

As he paused for a moment, Paul, who had been in a perfect maze of wonder at this preface to the speech, said, quickly,

"I'm sure things go to please me as much as you can make them; but you mustn't feel angry if I don't want to stay, 'cause you know just how it happened that I came here; an' when I think of my father an' mother an' my sister, I can't help feeling "

Here Paul burst into a flood of tears at the thought that his companions were reproving him for grieving for those whom he loved so dearly, and whom he feared he might never meet again. Ben hesitated at this grief of his friend, and for a moment it seemed as if he could not continue until he had tried to console him; but like one who has a duty to perform, and must do it as quickly as possible, he continued:

"We ain't layin' anything up agin you 'cause you don't want to stay round here, for we don't blame you, seein's how you've got a good home to go to; an' if we had one we should tear round worse'n you do. But all the same, we've seen how you felt about it, an' we've come to the 'clusion that you'd better not stay here any longer."

Paul looked up in fear and surprise, for it certainly seemed as if he was being turned away.

"No," continued Ben, in a loud voice, growing more emphatic the nearer he approached the conclusion of his speech "we've made up our minds that you've got to go, an' Dickey here's all ready to take your place as one of the boarders. We give a pretty good show Saturday night, an' we got so much money out of it that we've bought this for you so's you can go home."

Ben handed Paul the ticket, which he had opened to full length as he ceased speaking, and it was some moments before the surprised boy could understand it all. But when he realized that now he could go to his friends, if not to his parents, his joy was more than he could control, and from its very excess came the tears in an irresistible torrent.

CHAPTER XIII. A JOYFUL MEETING.

It is highly probable that one might have searched over New York City that night and not found a happier household than that of Mrs. Green's. Paul was so wonderfully happy in the thought that he was going back to Chicago, where, even though he could not see his parents, he should find relatives and friends, that he could talk of little else. Even the theatre was forgotten by him; for when Mopsey spoke of the necessity of getting another boy to take his place in the dramatic company he hardly gave the matter a thought, except to say that he hoped they would make plenty of money out of it. And Paul's partners were happy, more happy than they could possibly have been by any other outlay of their money; Paul's pleasure reflected on them to such a degree that they became almost as much excited as he was before the evening was over.

Good Mrs. Green alternately laughed and cried, until she seemed to realize that such nervousness was not exactly suitable to the occasion, and then she busied herself by reading one of the papers Ben had brought home.

Master Treat had spent so much time on the good work he had carried through so successfully, and then had paid so much more attention to the boy he was going to surprise than to the sale of his goods, that, instead of helping Johnny as had been his purpose when he took some of his papers to sell, he was a drawback, and the consequence was that Mrs. Green had three evening papers to read, while Messrs. Jones and Treat had been "stuck" just that number.

After she had joined in the general good time over Paul's good−fortune with her daughter and her boarders, and found that she was marring rather than adding to it by her nervousness, she ceased to pay any more attention to what was said by those about her, but became interested in the advertisements of fruit for sale. Suddenly she came across something that seemed to surprise her greatly, for she took off her glasses and wiped them, as though she mistrusted that which she saw was on the glass and not in the paper.

After satisfying herself that she was not the victim of an optical delusion, her face was a remarkable sight, exhibiting as it did surprise and delight alternately. It appeared as if it was difficult for her to speak, for she tried several times before she succeeded in saying,

"Listen to me every one of you, an' if I ain't mistaken Paul will be more glad to hear this than he was to get his ticket. This is what it says in this paper, word for word: 'Paul Weston' that's in big letters. 'Any one who can give information of Paul Weston, who strayed from an outward−bound steamer on the afternoon of the seventeenth, will receive a handsome reward by calling on the undersigned. Said boy is ten years old, has light hair, blue eyes, nose slightly turned up, and at the time of his disappearance was dressed in dark blue clothes; he would most likely be trying to make his way to Chicago, and any one who has seen such a boy will please communicate at once with Rufus Weston, Fifth Avenue Hotel.' There! what do you think of that?" and Mrs. Green looked around at her circle of listeners, who appeared to have been stricken dumb with astonishment.

"Why, that means me!" exclaimed Paul, suddenly, as if he had thought some one else was spoken of. "And Rufus Weston, that's my father! He didn't go away, after all. And now, somebody, tell me where that hotel is."

As he spoke he had grasped his coat and hat, running from the house at full speed before he even knew which direction he should take. There were none of that party who had a very clear idea of what they were saying or doing just then; but as the most important thing in their minds was to see this father of Paul's, who had come at a time when his son was about to go home without his assistance, each one of the boys started out in the same rapid way, overtaking their more excited companion just as he was stopping to consider which direction he should take.

"This way, Polly!" shouted Ben, waving his hand, and started along as if he were going to a fire.

No one thought of walking, for it seemed as if every moment was precious then, and that they might not find him if they were two or three minutes late. On they ran, at full speed; and when they stood in a row before the clerk of the Fifth Avenue Hotel, they were so breathless that they could not speak distinctly.

"Polly's come to see his father," said Ben, after they had stood there so long that the clerk was about to order one of the porters to turn this quite dirty and very ragged crowd, who appeared to have come there simply to look at him, out−of−doors.

"Who is his father?" asked the man, hardly believing that any guest in that hotel would claim a son from that rather disreputable−looking party, for Paul looked almost as dirty and ragged as the others did.

"His name's Rufus Weston," said Paul, speaking in a low voice, because of the tears that would persist in coming into his eyes, so much afraid was he that his father was no longer there.

Almost every one in the hotel knew Mr. Weston's story, and no sooner did he hear the name than the clerk, calling one of the servants, ordered him to show this odd−looking party to Mr. Weston's room. Paul almost ran ahead of the man in his eagerness to see his father, while the others were inclined to remain quite a distance in the rear, awed by the elegant things they saw around them, and not quite certain as to whether they ought to follow their friend. When, finally, the man stopped before one of the doors, knocked, and Paul rushed into the room, the boys heard a scream of delight, and then they were shut out, as if their companion had forgotten them entirely.

Ranged close to the wall, opposite the door which Paul had entered, wondering whether they ought to go or stay, four boys stood in bewilderment, hardly daring to speak. Porters, servants, and guests passed them with looks of wonder at the motionless line, who appeared to be trying to make themselves as small as possible, so that they should be in no one's way; and each time they were favored with a look of scrutiny or surprise they fancied that they were to be ordered to leave the house at once.

"I guess we'd better go," whispered Dickey, after one of the porters had looked at them unusually hard.

"Yes," replied Mopsey, in an injured tone; "he's got all he can out of us, an' we sha'n't see him agin."

"Now don't you go to tryin' to be a fool, Mopsey Dowd," said Ben, indignantly. "Polly ain't the kind of a feller to forget his chums, an' I'm going to stay here till he comes out, if it ain't till mornin'. S'posen you had a father that had got lost, an' you'd jest found him, wouldn't it be quite a while afore you'd think of such a lot of duffers as we be?"

Mopsey was silent, but not convinced; he shook his head in a knowing way, as if to say that his companions would soon see that he had spoken the truth, and then he tried to push himself farther into the wall in order to occupy less space in the hall. For fully ten minutes the boys stood there, first on one foot and then on the other, like motherless chickens in a rain−storm, and then the turning of the handle of the door caused them to straighten up into what they intended should be careless attitudes, which should say that they had intended to go right away, but had been delayed by the discussion of some important question. It was Paul who came out of the room; and if the boys had had any doubts as to whether they had done right in staying, they were convinced now, for their companion looked around as if he were absolutely certain they would be there.

"Father wants to see you; come in," he said, holding the door open for them to enter.

But they were not disposed to accept the invitation; they had waited to see Paul, not his father, and they had an idea that they should not feel exactly at their ease in there.

"Come in," insisted Paul; "there's no one here but father, and he wants to see all of you."

Mopsey was the first to enter; he had settled it in his mind that they ought to be invited to see Mr. Weston, and he considered it his right to go in because of the money he had contributed towards Paul's ticket to Chicago. The others followed him, but did not appear as confident as he did. Whatever extravagant idea Mopsey may have had as to the way in which they ought to be received by Mr. Weston, he was not disappointed. Paul's father welcomed them in the most cordial manner possible, and had they been his most intimate and esteemed friends they could not have been received more kindly.

Paul had given his father a brief account of his life since the time he learned that the steamer had sailed without him, and he had spoken in the warmest terms of the boys who had befriended him when he was in such bitter trouble. After the boys had entered the room, Mr. Weston explained why it was that he was still in New York City, when it seemed almost certain that he had sailed for Europe.

In a very few moments after the steamer had started from the pier Mrs. Weston had asked him to send Paul to their cabin, she needing his service in some trifling matter; and when Mr. Weston looked around for his son, of course he could not be found. A hasty and vain search was made, and then the boy whom Paul had left behind to acquaint his father of the important business of buying tops that had called him away, told the story which he would probably have told before had he known which one of the many passengers his newly−made friend's father was. Leaving his wife and daughter to continue the journey alone, Mr. Weston had come back with the pilot, and from that day until then he had searched for his son, never once thinking that almost any newsboy in the vicinity of City Hall could have given him full particulars.

Paul had told him of the generosity which his friends had shown in devoting all the theatrical funds, and nearly all of the money they had individually, to the purchase of the ticket to Chicago; and after he had told them how it was that he had remained in the city, he said, as he took the ticket Paul was holding in his hand to give back to his friends,

"I shall keep this ticket, boys, even though Paul will not need it, for we shall sail for Europe in the next steamer. I want it as a reminder of generosity and nobility as shown by four boys, who could not have been censured if they had let the lost boy work his own way back to his home. I shall have it framed, with your names written on it; and when any one asks the meaning of it, I shall tell them that it was bought for my son by four noble boys of New

York."

Ben's eyes fairly sparkled with delight as Mr. Weston bestowed this praise, and Mopsey drew himself up at full height, as if the idea of doing the charitable deed had originated with him, instead of his having been opposed to it.

"Now, boys," continued Mr. Weston, "I shall try to do something towards repaying you for your kindness to Paul; but then I have another matter to settle with you. I advertised that I would give a reward to any one who should bring me information of my son. You have done that by bringing the boy himself, and are, therefore, entitled to the sum I should have paid any one else."

As he spoke he handed some money to Paul, and he in turn handed it to Ben, who said, as he took it rather unwillingly,

"We don't want any pay for comin' here with Polly, an', besides, it warn't very far, so we won't say nothin' 'bout it."

"All we shall say about it, my boy, is that you will keep that money in order that I may keep my word. To−morrow we will see what can be done to reward you for your kindness to Paul, and he and I will call at your house some time in the evening, where I hope you will all wait for us."

Ben concluded from this that Mr. Weston wanted to be alone with his son, and he said, as he went towards the door,

"We'll keep the money, though it don't seem jest right; it kinder looks as though we was takin' what didn't belong to us, an' the only way I know of to get square on it is for us to give a show all for you alone, an' let you come in for nothin'."

Mr. Weston seemed highly pleased at the novel idea, and he told them, as he shook their hands in parting, that he would be obliged to give the matter some considerable attention before he could accept any such generous offer, but that they could talk the matter over the following evening. Paul bade them good−night, with the assurance that he would see them the next day, and the boys marched out of the hotel saying not a word, but looking as if they believed they had grown considerably in importance during their call.

Once in the street, Mopsey stopped under the nearest gas−light and asked Ben to see how much money Mr. Weston had given them. Ben unfolded the bills, which he held crumpled up in his hand, and the surprise of all four may be imagined when he unrolled five twenty−dollar notes.

"Jinks!" squeaked Dickey, with delight, after he had turned four consecutive handsprings to quiet himself down a little, "that's a hundred dollars; an' if we don't swell 'round with that it'll be 'cause we don't know how to put on style."

Then, quite as fast as they had left Mrs. Green's, they ran back to relate the startling news, and surprise their landlady and her daughter with the treasure that had come because of their generous act.

CHAPTER XIV. A DAY'S PLEASURING.

As may be supposed, Paul's good−fortune in finding his father was the topic of conversation during the forenoon following that happy event, and there was even more excitement regarding it in the news−selling world than there had been when the fact was first circulated that Ben and Johnny had embarked in a theatrical enterprise.

Of course the good−fortune that had come to the firm through Paul was known as soon as the other, and whenever one of the partners passed a group of merchants in his same line of business, he was sure to be pointed out as one of the boys who were the happy possessors of a clear hundred dollars.

As it was quite likely that Paul and his father would come down town during the day, no one of the merchants knowing of the facts went very far from the City Hall, lest they should miss the chance of seeing him. There was a great deal of pride manifested because they had had a rich man's son among their number, even though it had only been for a few days; and those who had tried to drive him away during the first of his attempts to sell papers now tried to show how often they had befriended him.

Some even allowed such flights to their imaginations that they came to believe Paul's father would give them money enough to make them all rich, and they came to think of the five cents which they had spent for a theatre ticket as just so much money given directly to Paul. But the boys who had actually received money from Mr. Weston were so much excited by the wealth which had so suddenly become theirs that they could do no business at all that day. From the time they had reached home with the hundred dollars in their pockets they had been in earnest discussion as to what they should do with their money.

Mopsey had used every argument he could think of to show that it was not only wise but proper for them to invest it all in their theatre; and so earnest was he in his attempts to have it so expended that he took upon himself the excessive labor of figuring the cash result of ten performances at the same amount of receipts as those of the previous Saturday, showing that they would receive in return the amount of their investment and considerably more. But he was unable to give any reason as to why they should not have as liberal patronage if they continued their efforts in the same place without any further outlay of money.

Ben was willing that a small portion of the amount should be spent for the purchase of a curtain, and for more secure foot−limits; but he insisted that the greater portion of it should be invested where it would be safe.

Dickey was of the same opinion as Ben; and he further proposed, since Mopsey was so anxious to carry out his ideas, that rather than spend it all on their theatre they should divide the money, so that each could do with his share as he thought best.

Johnny advised buying or starting a news−stand in some good location, and this Mrs. Green seemed to think was the most sensible plan of all. Of course the boys knew that she and Nelly each had a share in the money, and her advice had great weight with them. But they had come to no decision when they went to bed that night, and the morning found them quite as divided in opinion as to what should be done with their great wealth.

None of the boys, not even Mopsey, had been able to go to work that day, and the greater portion of the forenoon was spent in City Hall Square, trying to come to some understanding about their money. As a matter of course, they remembered what Mr. Weston had said about rewarding them still further because of what they had done for Paul; but since it was Ben and Johnny who had really cared for the boy when he did not know where to go or what to do, they would be the only ones who would probably be benefited, although Mopsey felt that there was a great deal yet due him for the theatrical education which he had bestowed.

While they were still engaged in argument, and with no more prospect of coming to any agreement in the matter, Mr. Weston and Paul stood before them, having approached unobserved, because of the exciting discussion which had occupied their attention to the exclusion of everything else. Mr. Weston had heard enough of the conversation to know that the question of what should be done with the money he had given them was under discussion, and after seating himself on one of the benches, with the boys all around him, he succeeded in gaining their confidence so far that they talked unreservedly before him.

When each one had advanced his views on the matter, Mr. Weston agreed with Dickey that it was better for them to divide it equally, and Paul figured out to them what each one of the six would have as his portion.

Then Mr. Weston startled them by an invitation which almost took their breath away. He said that he could not keep his appointment with them that evening, because of business matters which would require his attention, but, instead, he would invite them, as well as Mrs. Green and Nelly, to go to Coney Island with himself and Paul for a holiday.

Of course there was but one answer to such a proposal, and they accepted it with the greatest pleasure, agreeing to meet him at the pier on the following morning.

Then Mr. Weston and Paul went to the steamship office to engage passage to Europe for the coming Saturday, and the partners went to startle Mrs. Green and her daughter with the wonderful news. To their great surprise Mrs. Green, even though she did own one−sixth of the hundred dollars, decided that she could not afford to close up her basket−store for the day, even when she had been invited to make one of the pleasure−party; but she was willing and anxious for Nelly to go, which was, perhaps, just as well.

Nine o'clock was the time when Mr. Weston had said that he and Paul would meet the party at the pier; but they, fearing lest they might be late, had arrived there a little before eight on the following morning, as full of pleasure as any five children that could have been found in New York City.

Ben and Johnny presented very nearly the same gorgeous appearance they had on the night when they first called on Mrs. Green, while Dickey and Mopsey were attired in costumes that were models of their own idea of fashion. Nelly, who looked very sweet and modest in her clean gingham dress, had tried in vain to persuade her friends to go in their usual working−clothes, rather than put on such a striking array as they did; but each one of the boys indignantly repelled the idea of showing so little regard for the gentleman who was to give them so much pleasure, by not making themselves look as beautiful as possible, and she could not persuade them to do differently.

It was hardly more than half−past eight when they began to express their doubts as to whether Mr. Weston would arrive in time to take the steamer he had designated, and they were fearing lest they should be disappointed after all, when Paul and his father arrived.

Mopsey was in favor of giving Mr. Weston three cheers as a mark of their appreciation and admiration, when that gentleman appeared at the head of the pier, and, finding that his companions objected to it, would have done all the cheering himself if Ben had not forcibly prevented him by holding his hand firmly over his mouth.

Paul greeted his friends as warmly as if he had been separated from them for weeks instead of hours, and then the party went on board the steamer, feeling that they were justly the observed of all observers.

Mopsey explained everything they saw with a reckless disregard of accuracy; and if his companions had not known to the contrary, they would have thought that all his life had been spent on the steamers running from New York to Coney Island.

It was not until Mr. Weston asked him some question about the theatre that he laid aside the duties of guide and historian, to launch out in glowing details of their temple of histrionic art, which must one day be the resort of the general public. The others quietly enjoyed the sail, drinking in deep draughts of pleasure from everything around them excepting Mopsey's loud boasting.

Johnny seemed plunged in an ecstasy of delight, from which he emerged but once; and then it was to express the wish that he might always be a passenger on one of these steamers, with no other object than to enjoy the

continual sail.

Nelly and Dickey sat side by side, speaking only at rare intervals, while Paul and Ben discussed the latter's prospects in life, or spoke of the wonderful journey which the former was to make in order to rejoin his mother and sister. As for Mr. Weston, he appeared to find as much enjoyment in the delight and wonder of his guests as they did in the sail, and there was every prospect that the holiday would be a remarkably pleasant one to all.

When they landed, and were in the very midst of the pleasure−seeking crowd, which appeared to have no other aim than enjoyment, their delight and bewilderment were so great that even Mopsey was silenced, and could hardly have been induced to talk even if he had been directly approached on the subject of the theatre, or the new play he was supposed to be preparing.

After leading the way to one of the hotels, Mr. Weston, thinking that perhaps his presence was some check upon the full enjoyment of his guests, told them that they had all better go off by themselves to see what was new or wonderful, while he remained there until they should return, cautioning them, however, to come back by dinner−time.

It would be almost impossible to describe all they did or what they said during that forenoon, when they were indulging in such a day of pleasure as they never had had before. As Ben afterwards expressed it, they "saw about everything there was to be seen, an' they scooped in about as much fun as ever anybody did who went to Coney Island."

Owing to Paul's watchfulness, they were back at the hotel at the time Mr. Weston had said they would have dinner, and Dickey asked, wonderingly, as they entered, and Paul looked around for his father,

"Are we goin' to eat here, jest as if we was reg'lar folks?"

"Of course we are," said Paul, decidedly; "we're all going to sit down to the table with father, and have just as good a dinner as we can get."

Dickey had nothing more to say; he was overwhelmed with the idea of acting like "reg'lar folks," and after that nothing could have astonished him.

Mr. Weston had engaged a private dining−room, in order that his guests might feel more at their ease if they were alone than if they went into the public dining−room. The boys and Nelly seated themselves at the table with as much solemnity as if they were participating in some very important ceremony, opening their eyes wide with astonishment as the waiter brought on the different courses, but never neglecting to do full justice to everything that was set before them.

Mr. Weston did all he could to make the dinner seem less formal; but he did not succeed until after the roast chickens were put on the table and the servant left the room. Then, when they were alone, and with three whole chickens before them, their tongues seemed suddenly to have been loosened, and they talked as fast as the most fun−loving host could have asked for, until each one's plate was piled high with chicken and vegetables, when they relapsed again into silent activity.

That visit, and more especially that dinner, was a new experience in their lives, and one which they could never forget. They ate until it seemed impossible they could eat any more, and even then Dickey succeeded in disposing of an extra piece of pie, together with some nuts and raisins. After the meal was ended, and before they started out again to take one more look at all that was strange around them, Mr. Weston said, as he handed Dickey and Mopsey each five dollars, and Nelly ten,

"I want to return to some of you the money you paid for Paul's railroad ticket. Nelly has her mother's share as well as her own."

"But we didn't pay so much as this," said Dickey, in evident perplexity. "It only cost fourteen dollars in all."

"That comes near enough to the amount," replied Mr. Weston, "and you will oblige me by thinking that you have simply had returned to you the money you paid out. As for Ben and Johnny, who took charge of Paul when he was sadly in need of some one's care, I have got what I hope will be a pleasant surprise in store for them; and if they will come to the hotel at nine o'clock in the morning, Paul and I will show them what it is."

There was very little opportunity for any one to make a reply, for as Mr. Weston spoke he arose from the table, and then added,

"Now go and see all that you can until five o'clock, and then we will start for home."

It was a tired party who landed in New York quite early that evening, some going to Mrs. Green's and two to the hotel; but they were quite as happy as they were weary, and had had such a day of enjoyment as they had never even dreamed of before, which could be set down to the credit of the kind act of befriending a homeless boy.

CHAPTER XV. THE GREAT SURPRISE.

If Mrs. Green had been able to have understood what five children were saying to her at one time, she would have had a very clear idea of that day of pleasure; but as it was, when each was eager to tell the story, and all spoke together, she had only a general idea until she was alone with Nelly.

After the attempt to enlighten her as to where they had been and what they had seen, the conversation turned upon the surprise which Mr. Weston said he had for Ben and Johnny, and many were the speculations as to what it might be. Mopsey was very certain that he had purchased one of the largest theatres in the city, and was to present it to them in due form; and so positive did he become as to the correctness of his idea, that he would persist in talking about what they would do after the two boys were installed there, to the exclusion of everything else. He even awakened them after they had gone to sleep that night, in order to make them promise that they would let him direct the entertainments, in case he was right regarding the gift of a theatre. Of course the two most interested were in a high state of excitement as to the gift, although they did not try to guess what it might be. It was a difficult matter for them to go to sleep after they went to bed, so anxious were they to know what good−fortune was to be theirs; and after Mopsey had awakened them, they remained in anything but a sleepy condition for several hours.

But the morning came at last, as all mornings do come, and they were the first ones up and dressed, although they spent a great deal of time on their toilet. Mopsey proposed that the others escort the two fortunate ones to the hotel, in order that they might learn what this great surprise was as soon as possible; but Dickey insisted that Ben and Johnny go alone, since Mr. Weston had not said anything about their bringing any friends with them.

It did seem to these two boys, after their companions had gone to work, that the hands of the clock would never point to nine. They had walked slowly from their boarding−house to the hotel, hoping to pass away the time by looking in the shop−windows; and yet, walking as slowly as they did, they were on the sidewalk opposite the house as early as eight o'clock.

Since they could not content themselves anywhere else, they remained there until it should be time for them to call, still speculating as to what their good−fortune was to be, and wishing the minutes would pass more quickly. The clock was just striking the hour of nine when they entered the office of the hotel, and found Mr. Weston and

Paul evidently awaiting their arrival.

Whatever the surprise was that Mr. Weston had in store for them, it was not in the hotel that they were to receive it; for as soon as they entered Paul and his father started towards them, leading the way out into the street at once. It was quite evident that Paul did not intend to allow himself to run any risk of betraying the secret, for he walked on ahead with his father, glancing over his shoulder every few moments at the puzzled−looking boys behind.

Down Twenty−third Street to Sixth Avenue Mr. Weston led the way, and after they had gone down the avenue some distance he entered a neat−looking little periodical and stationary store, nodding familiarly to the proprietor, as if he had been a regular visitor there. Now more then ever were the two boys perplexed, and they had just come to the conclusion that Paul's father was going to buy them something as a present when the proprietor said,

"All the money which has been taken this morning is in the drawer, and unless there is something more you want to say to me I will go, as I made an engagement down town for ten o'clock."

"I don't think there is anything more to be said," replied Mr. Weston; "of course you will come in whenever you are passing this way to see how matters are going?"

"Oh yes," and the man started towards the door; "I'll see that everything goes on smoothly, although I have no doubt but that the new proprietors will get along all right. The goods are all marked at the selling price, and there can hardly be any mistake made."

Then the man went out, and they were left alone in the store, which, to say the least, seemed a very strange proceeding to Ben and Johnny.

"Well, boys, what do you think of the store?" asked Mr. Weston; and as they hardly knew what reply to make, he added, "I hope you will like it, for I think you can make considerable money here."

"We make money here?" asked Ben, in surprise.

"Yes, for it all belongs to you. I bought the stock in your name, with myself as trustee, since minors can't hold property, and the rent is paid for one year. You must be careful to keep the stock well up with good, seasonable articles, and if you work hard there is no reason why you should not have a good−sized bank account by the end of the year."

The boys looked at each other and then at Mr. Weston, but appeared unable to understand what he meant. It did not seem possible that all those goods were theirs, and they were quite sure that they had misunderstood what he said, or that he was not speaking to them.

"All of these goods are yours Paul's present to you for your kindness to him. I guess you will understand it after a while, and we will come back presently, after you feel perfectly sure about the proprietorship."

Then Paul and his father went out, leaving the two owners to stand looking at each other as if they were uncertain as to their own identity. It was some moments before they spoke after they were alone, and then Johnny went near the door and stood on his head, in a grave, business−like manner, until his face was as red as a boiled beet. After this feat had been accomplished he appeared to feel considerably relieved, and he said, as he went close up to Ben,

"Do you s'pose he meant jest what he said?"

"He must have meant it," replied Ben; but the look on his face told that even then he was uncertain about it.

Then the boys began examining their stock, finding beautiful things, such as they had admired from outside shop−windows, but never believed they should really own.

When Paul came in alone, half an hour later for he was too eager to know what his friends thought of their store to be able to wait any longer he found the newly−made proprietors in a state of delight bordering almost on frenzy. They shook him by the hands, hugged him, and once Johnny looked as if he would have kissed him had it not been that he was a little ashamed to do so, while they kept asking him over and over again if he was quite sure that his father had really given them that entire stock of goods all for their very own.

When Paul told them that his father had spoken of doing some such thing as this the first night that he had found him, after hearing the story of what the two had done for his son, and that the money had been paid over that very morning in his presence, they became fully assured of their good−fortune.

Johnny, by Ben's direction, started down town to inform their friends of their magnificent gift, and to invite them all up to look the property over; which invitation, it is almost unnecessary to say, was accepted at once.

During the greater portion of that day the store was filled with such a crowd of newsboys and boot−blacks as was never seen in that vicinity before, and the other merchants looked out in alarm, as if they feared that a riot was in progress.

Dickey was almost as delighted as the proprietors themselves at this magnificent gift; but Mopsey did not hesitate to say that, from what he had seen of Mr. Weston, he fully expected that he would have been sensible enough to have purchased a theatre; and the author also intimated that some folks did not recognize genius when they saw it, or he would have been both proprietor and manager of a theatre, in the place of Ben and Johnny being installed behind the counter of a periodical depot.

Paul had his father's permission to remain at the store all day, for he was as much delighted with it as were the new owners, and he received quite as much attention from the visitors as the goods did, all seeming to think him a curiosity, and all equally certain that they would have cared for him as willingly as Ben and Johnny did had he met them first.

It was quite late in the afternoon when Mr. Weston returned to see how the new merchants were getting along, and both of them tried to express their thanks for what he had done for them; but it was a difficult matter to find words to convey all they felt.

"Don't try to thank me, my lads, but live so that you will merit the confidence I now have in you. The money which I have paid out to buy these goods is but a small part of what I would have been willing to give to have known that I should find my son alive and well. From what he has told me of you, I believe that you deserve this start in life; and if you continue as honest and kindly−hearted as I think you are, you will repay me for this in almost as great a proportion as you already have done."

After Mr. Weston had explained to them several details of business which it was necessary they should know, he went back to the hotel, taking Paul with him, but promising that he should come back and help them keep store all the next day, since it would be the last he would be in New York for some time.

Neither of the boys thought of going home for anything to eat until it should be time for them to close the store, and in the evening Mrs. Green and Nelly called upon them to say that they had purposely delayed dinner until they could be there, when it would be made a sort of thanksgiving meal. As a matter of course, they were as much delighted with the store as any of the other visitors had been, and Mrs. Green took advantage of the occasion to point out to Mopsey what the difference might have been if he had refused to help a companion in distress, as he apparently had been on the point of doing when he was appealed to for his share of the money with which to buy

the ticket.

Since there was quite a trade in daily papers at the new store, and it would be inconvenient for the two boys to buy and deliver their papers and attend to the store at the same time, they made a trade with Dickey, whereby he should become a partner to the extent of one−third of the profits thereby making him quite as happy as they were, which was more happy than can be described by words.

Very proud were the three partners as they locked the store that night, and, with the keys in their pockets, walked home with Mrs. Green and Nelly, surrounded by quite a numerous escort of their particular and intimate friends. And as they passed the different stores into which they had hardly dared to enter even when they were pursuing their legitimate business, they seemed suddenly to have degenerated into very shabby affairs since they had one of their own which was so beautiful.

Of the meal which followed Mrs. Green had made quite a feast, in order to celebrate the good−fortune which had come to two of her boarders. A cold boiled ham with smoking hot potatoes, followed by pies and fruit, made up a dinner that would have been thought fit for a king, had it not been for the remembrance of the "swell affair" at Coney Island. All were in the best of spirits save Mopsey; and when Dickey asked the cause of his apparent trouble, it was learned that the present of the store was a severe blow to him, since it deprived him of nearly all his theatrical company, as well as partners in the enterprise.

"I'll tell you what it is, Mopsey," said Ben, after he had whispered with Johnny and Dickey, and they had nodded their heads as if agreeing with what he said, "we'll give you our share of the theatre 'cause, of course, we can't spend any time actin', now that we've got the store, an' you an' Nelly can own it alone. You can get some other actors, an' we'll buy tickets every time you have a show, whether we can come or not."

This present was all Mopsey needed to make him as happy as if he had been given an interest in the store. He began to think of such of his friends as he was quite positive would make bright and shining lights in the dramatic world, and was so generous as to offer to tell them all about the play as soon as he should have it mapped out in his mind.

When the partners went to bed that night, impressed with a sense of their growing importance, Johnny remarked to Ben, just as his eyes were closing in sleep,

"Now we're reg'lar folks at last, ain't we?"

And Ben quite agreed with him.

CHAPTER XVI. IN CONCLUSION.

As Paul had agreed, he spent the next day with Ben and Johnny in their store; and surely no shopman ever felt more pride in selling goods than they did. Paul acted as clerk; and a very inquisitive one he was, too, for he insisted on looking everywhere, so that he should know just what kind of goods his friends had for sale.

Trade was very good; and when the money was counted for about the fifteenth time, and it was found that they had sold twenty dollars' worth of goods, there was not one of the four who did not believe that in less than a year Ben and Johnny would be numbered among the merchant princes of the country.

When it was time for Paul to go back to the hotel, the question of escorting him to the steamer arose, for he was to make one more effort to start with his father for Europe, and it was quite certain that there would be no mistake this time. The steamer was to sail at ten o'clock; and of course all the boys could not go, since some one must be

left to attend to the store, though who that unfortunate one would be promised to be a vexing question, till Ben said,

"I'm the oldest, an' so I s'pose it must be me. I'll have to say good−bye now, Polly, for I can't see you in the mornin'. When you come back, be sure an' come up here, won't you? And if you'll write to us, Johnny an' I'll answer you back, for we're goin' to study awful hard, now that we've got a store of our own, an' it won't be long before we can write an' figger an' do all them things."

Paul promised that he would send letters regularly to his friends; and when he left the store with Dickey to be sure that he did not miss the way, Ben felt more sad at parting with him than he would have thought it possible for a boy to feel who was half owner of such a beautiful store.

The business of selling newspapers seemed to have been nearly forsaken the next morning, for fully forty newsboys and at least a dozen boot−blacks were at the pier to say good−bye to Polly Weston, the boy who had once seemed so forlorn, and who had played Hamlet so successfully. Paul was highly pleased at such attention on the part of his acquaintances, and he presented nearly all of them to his father, who was not a little surprised at the number of friends his son had made in so short a time.

After Paul had said good−bye to each one individually, and was just about going on board the steamer, Mopsey stopped him, taking him aside with a great show of secrecy.

"I own all the theatre now, Polly," he whispered, "an' when you come back I'll let you be one of the actors, if you want to, an' I'll fix up a play where you'll have all the best chances."

Paul thanked Mopsey for his kindness; but before he could say whether he accepted the generous offer or not, his father called him, and he was obliged to go on board, leaving the sole proprietor (and author) of the theatre at a loss to know whether he should write a play especially for Paul or not.

Then the huge steamer slowly started from the dock, and Paul stood near the stern, where he could see his army of small acquaintances, the greater portion of whom had been so kind to him when he most needed friends. The ragged crowd were all swinging their hats, and Paul had just begun to wave his handkerchief when Mopsey saw the chance to bestow a very delicate compliment. Jumping on a pile of merchandise, where he could better see and be seen, he waved his hat furiously and shouted, in his shrillest dramatic key,

"Three cheers for Polly, an' three more for Polly's father!"

Then that crowd of boys swarmed up over everything that would raise them more prominently into view, pushing aside any one in their way, and both looking and acting like a hive of bees getting ready to swarm, until they stood high above all the others.

"Now!" shouted Mopsey; and then the cheers were given with a will that startled the officers of the ship into looking around to see what distinguished passengers they had on board.

Then Paul waved his hat, the boys cheered again, and the ship was so far out into the stream that no more courtesies could be exchanged.

* * * * * * * * * *

It is now two years since Paul Weston started for Europe, and he is expected home in a few weeks, as Ben or Johnny will tell you in case you should make inquiries. In that time very many gradual but not startling changes have been made in those boys whom we left in New York; therefore it may be assumed that Paul has also changed

considerably, and in all probability for the better.

Ben, Johnny, and Dickey are still in business in the same place that Mr. Weston purchased for them, but one would hardly recognize the dirty, ragged boys whom Paul first met, in the neat, gentlemanly little tradesmen who are so courteous to their patrons, and so prompt in all their business transactions. That they did study, as Ben told Paul they would, is shown by their manner of speaking, their accounts, which are kept in the most precise order, and their general information when one enters into conversation with them.

And their business has improved quite as much as they have. By strict attention to it, and by integrity in all their dealings, they have gained new customers so fast that they are now obliged to use every available inch of space; and they intend to hire the next store, making the two into one large shop, as soon as Mr. Weston comes home to advise with them regarding it.

They still board with Mrs. Green; she has gone out of the fruit business now entirely, has moved into the dwelling directly over their store, and does nothing but attend to her boarders. Nelly, when she is not at school, acts as clerk for the boys, and is very useful to the firm during the rush of morning and evening trade.

Mopsey has gone out of the theatrical business altogether. He gave two more performances, but they were not as great successes as he had fancied they would be, and required more of his time than he could afford to give. He has given up both play writing and acting, very much to the benefit of his legitimate business. He still sells pea−nuts at Fulton Ferry, and has capital enough to start on a larger scale, which he says he shall do in another year.

About a year ago Dickey met Tim Dooley, the boy who made him bankrupt; but he did not try to make him return any of the money he had stolen. Tim was doing a small business in the way of blackening boots, having reaped no benefit from his ill−gotten gains, and Dickey, so far from showing any feeling of resentment, talked kindly to the boy, and offered to be his friend again if he would try to be honest.

Paul kept his promise, and wrote to his former partners very regularly. He had not neglected his studies while he was away, and in the last letter which the firm received from him he stated that in a few weeks he would return for the purpose of going to school in this country. He also wrote that his father had promised to let him remain a fortnight in New York, during which time he would be with his old friends, and again live over the time when he was a newsboy for ten days.

The story of Ben and Johnny is a true one; their start in life is not without many parallels. To be sure, it is but seldom that such opportunities for advancement come; but each boy has it within himself to win his way in the world quite as well as either Ben, Johnny, or Dickey. May all my young readers who have followed the fortunes of these three try to win the good opinion of those around them by earnest, honest purpose and integrity, like these boys, who knew no home until they made one for themselves.