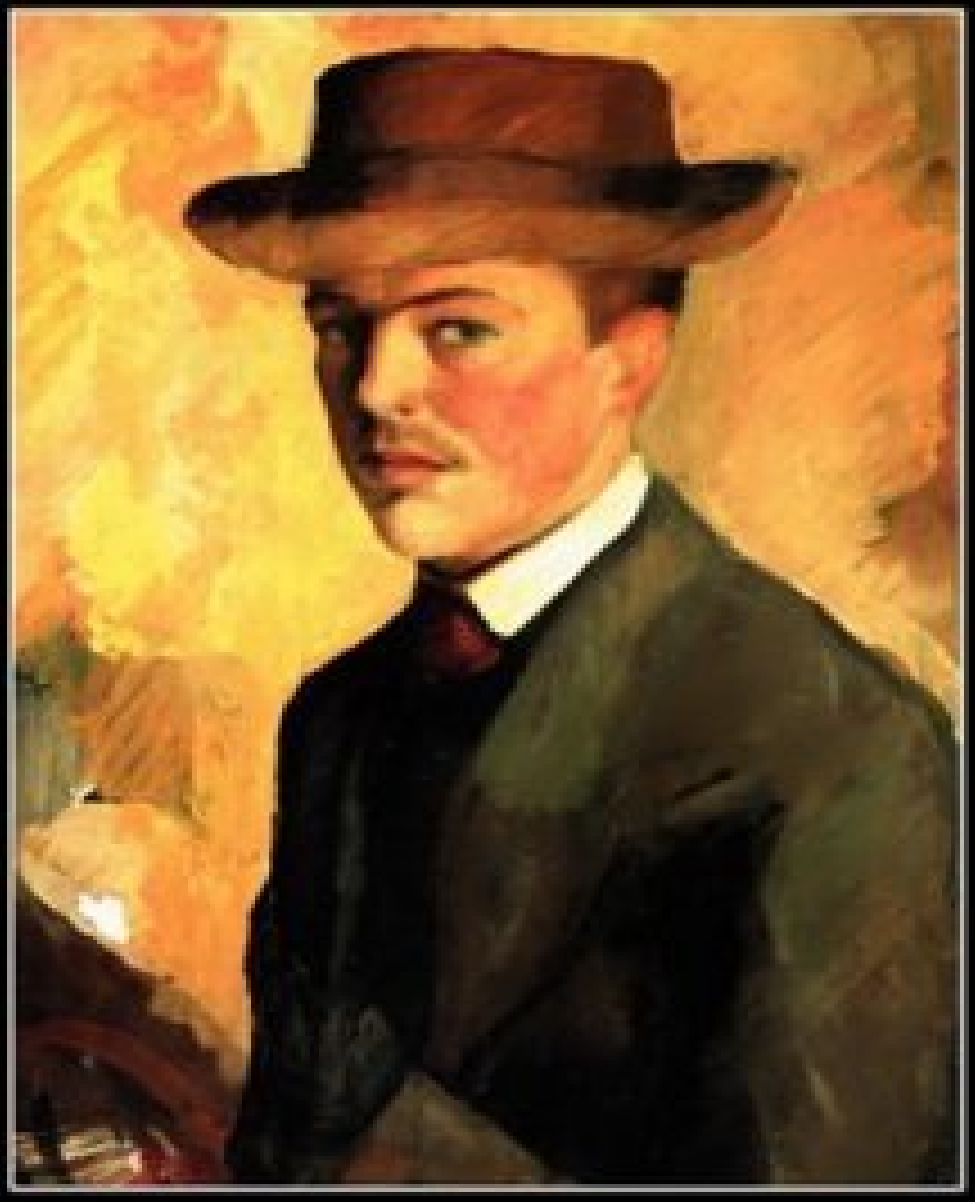

# Flip's "Islands of Providence"

Illustrated Edition

Annie Fellows Johnston

DODO PRESS

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Author: Annie Fellows Johnston

Illustrator: E. F. Bonsall

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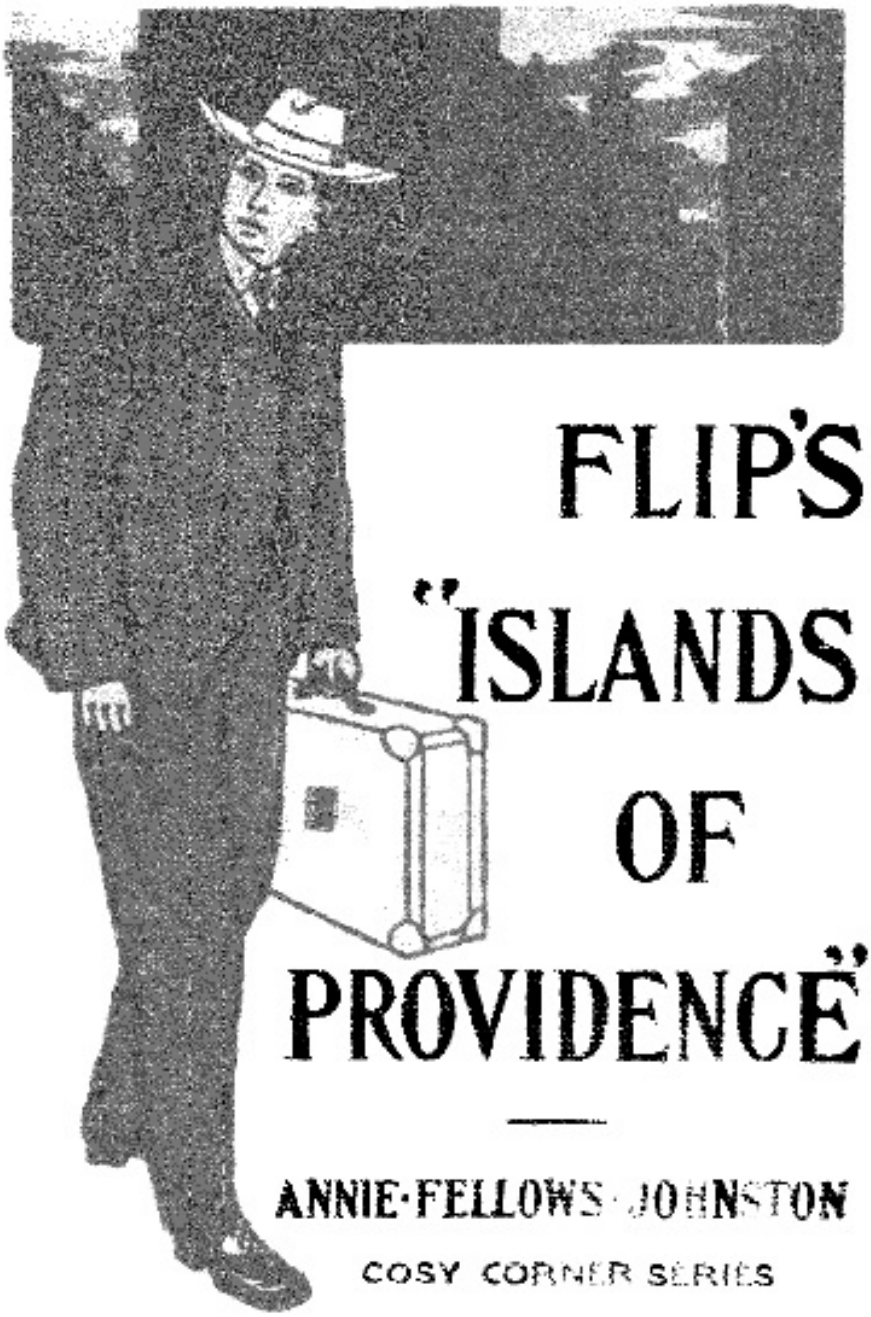
# FLIP'S "ISLANDS OF PROVIDENCE"



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'"ALEC,' HE SAID, PAUSING IN THE DOORWAY, 'WHAT'S A GREEN GOODS MAN?"'

(*SEE PAGE 75*)

Cosy Corner Series

# FLIP'S "ISLANDS OF PROVIDENCE"

By

# Annie Fellows Johnston

Author of "Asa Holmes," "The Little Colonel Stories,"
"Big Brother," etc.

*Illustrated by*
E. F. Bonsall

"*I know not where His islands lift*
*Their fronded palms in air;*"
*—Whittier*

*Boston*
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# LIST OF ILLUSTRATIONS

# FLIP'S "ISLANDS OF PROVIDENCE"

# CHAPTER I.

Carefully locking the door of his little gable bedroom, Alec Stoker put down the cup of hot water he carried, and peered into the mirror above his wash-stand. Then, although he had come up-stairs fully determined to attempt his first shave, he stood irresolute, stroking the almost imperceptible down on his boyish lip and chin.

"It does make me look older, that's a fact," he muttered to his reflection in the glass. "Maybe I'd better not cut it off until I've had my interview with the agent. The older I look, the more likely he'll be to trust me with a responsible position. Still," he continued, surveying himself critically, "I might make a more favourable impression if I had that 'well-groomed' look the papers lay so much stress on nowadays, and I could mention in a careless, offhand way something about having just shaved."

It was not yet dark out-of-doors, but after a few minutes of further deliberation, Alec pulled down the blind over his window and lighted the lamp. Then, opening a box that he took from his bureau, he drew out his Grandfather Macklin's razor and ivory-handled shaving-brush.

"I'm sure the old gentleman never dreamed, when they made me his namesake, that this was all of his property I would fall heir to," he thought, bitterly.

The moody expression that settled on his face at the thought had become almost habitual in the last four weeks. The happy-go-lucky boy of seventeen seemed to have changed in that time to a morose man. June had left him the jolliest boy in the high school graduating class. September found him a morbid cynic.

It had been nine years since his mother, just before her death, had brought him back to the old home for her sister Eunice to take care of —Alec and the little five-year-old Philippa and the baby Macklin. Their Aunt Eunice had made a happy home for them, and although she rarely laughed herself, and her hair had whitened long before its time, she had allowed no part of her burdens to touch their thoughtless young lives. It was only lately that Alec had been aroused to the fact that she had any burdens. He was rehearsing them all now, as he rubbed the lather over his chin, so busily that he did not hear Philippa's light step on the back stairs. Philippa could step very lightly

when she chose, despite the fact that she was long and awkward, with that temporary awkwardness of a growing girl who finds it hard to adjust herself and her skirts to her constantly increasing height.

Alec almost dropped his brush as she suddenly banged on his door. "Is that you, Flip?" he called, although he knew no one but Philippa ever beat such thundering tattoos on his door.

"Yes! Let me in! I want to ask you something."

He knew just how her sharp gray eyes would scan him, and he hesitated an instant, divided between a desire to let her see him in the manly act of shaving himself and the certain knowledge that she would tease him if he did.

Finally he threw open the door and turned to the glass in his most indifferent manner, as if it were an every-day occurrence with him. "Come in," he said; "I'm only shaving. I'm going out this evening."

If he had thought she would be impressed by his lordly air, he was mistaken, for, after one prolonged stare, she threw herself on the bed, shrieking with laughter. Long practice in bandying words with her brother had made her an expert tease. Usually they both enjoyed such combats, but now, to her surprise, he seemed indifferent to her most provoking comments, and scraped away at his chin in dignified silence.

"I believe you said you had something to say to me, Philippa," he said presently, in a stern tone that made her stare. Never, except when he was very angry, did he call her anything but Flip.

Suddenly sobered, she took her face out of the pillows and peered at him curiously, twisting one of the long plaits of hair that hung over her shoulder.

"I have," she said. "I want to know what's the matter with you. What has come over you lately? You've been as sullen as a brown bear for days and days. I asked Aunt Eunice just now, while we were washing the supper dishes, what had changed you so. You used to be whistling and joking whenever you came near the house. Now you never open your lips except to make some sarcastic speech.

"She said that it was probably because you were so disappointed about not getting that position in the bank that you had set your heart on, and she was afraid that you were growing discouraged about ever finding any position worth while in this sleepy little village. She didn't know that I saw it, but while she was talking a tear splashed right

down in the dish-water, and I made up my mind that it must be something lots worse than just plain disappointment or discouragement, and that I was going to ask you. Now, you needn't snap your mouth shut that way, like a clam. You've got to tell me!"

"Aunt Eunice doesn't want you to know," he said, turning away from the glass, razor in hand, to look at her intently. "But you're a big girl, Flip—nearly as tall as she is, if you are only fifteen. You're bound to hear it sometime, and in my opinion it would be better for you to hear it from me than to have it knock you flat coming unexpectedly from a stranger, as I heard it.'

**'"YOU'RE BOUND TO HEAR IT SOMETIME."'**

"Tell me," she urged, her curiosity aroused.

"Can you stand a pretty tough knock?"

"As well as you," she answered, meeting his gaze steadily, yet with a queer kind of chill creeping over her at his mysterious manner.

"Well, what do you suppose you and Mack and I have been living on all these years that we have been living with Aunt Eunice?"

"Why—I—I don't know! Mother's share of Grandfather Macklin's property, I suppose. He divided it equally between her and Aunt Eunice."

"Well, we just haven't!" Alec exclaimed. "That was spent before we came here, and nearly all of Aunt Eunice's share, too. She's been drawing right out of the principal the last two years so that she could keep us in school, and there's hardly anything left but this old house and the ground it stands on. She never told me until this summer. That's why I took the first job that offered, and drove Murray's delivery wagon till the regular driver was well. It wasn't particularly good pay, but it paid for my board and kept me from feeling that I was a burden on Aunt Eunice.

"I was sure of getting that position in the bank. One of the directors had as good as promised it to me. While it wouldn't have paid much at first, it would have been an entering wedge, and have put me in the direct line of promotion. And you know that from the time I was Macklin's age it has been my ambition to be a banker like grandfather. Since I failed to get that, nobody, not even Aunt Eunice, knows how hard I've tried to get into some steady, good-paying job. I've been to every business man in the village, and done everything a fellow could do, seems to me, but in a little place like this there's absolutely no opening unless somebody dies. The good places are already filled by reliable, middle-aged men who have grown up in them. There's no use trying any longer. Every time I get my hopes up it's only to have them dashed to pieces—shipwrecked, you might say."

He paused a minute, ostensibly to give his chin a fresh coating of lather, but in reality to gather courage for the words he found so difficult to say. In the silence, Macklin's voice came floating up to them from the porch below. Sitting on the steps in the twilight, with his bare feet doubled under him, he was reciting something to his Aunt Eunice in a high, sturdy voice. It came in shrilly through the open window of Alec's room, where the brown shade and overhanging muslin curtains

flapped back and forth in the evening breeze.

Philippa smiled as she listened. He was reciting a poem that Aunt Eunice had taught each of them in turn, after the Creed and the Commandments and the Catechism. It was Whittier's hymn—"The Eternal Goodness." She had paid them a penny a stanza for learning it, and as there are twenty-two stanzas in all, Philippa remembered how rich she felt the day she dropped the last copper down the chimney of her little red savings-bank.

It had been seven years since Alec learned it, but the words were as familiar still as the letters of the alphabet. As Macklin's high-pitched voice reached them, Philippa joined in in a singsong undertone, and even Alec found himself unconsciously following the well-remembered lines in his thought:

"I know not where His islands lift
Their fronded palms in air;
I only know I cannot drift
Beyond His love and care."

"There!" said Philippa, stopping abruptly, "you were talking about shipwrecks. According to that hymn, there's always some island ready for you to be washed up on. How do you know but that you're going to land some place where you'll be lots better off than if you'd stayed here in Ridgeville?"

There was a contemptuous sneer on Alec's face, not pleasant to see, as he answered, roughly: "Bosh! That's all right for people who can believe in such things, but I'm past such Robinson Crusoe fables."

"Why, Alec Stoker!" she cried, in amazement, "do you mean to say that you don't believe in Providence any more?" There was a look of horror on her face.

He shrugged his shoulders. "I've come to think it's a case of every fellow for himself; sink or swim—and if you're not strong enough to push to shore, it's drown and leave more room for the rest."

"Alec Mack—lin Sto—ker!" was all that Philippa could find breath to say at first. Presently she exclaimed, "I should think you'd be ashamed to talk so! Any boy that had such a grand old grandfather as you! He didn't have any better chance than you in the beginning, and had to struggle along for years. Look what a place he made for himself in the world!"

"That's all you know about it!" cried Alec, his hand trembling with an emotion he was trying hard to control. In that instant the razor slipped, slightly cutting his chin.

"Now!" he muttered, hastily tearing a bit of paper from the margin of a newspaper to stop the blood, and then rummaging in the wash-stand drawer for a piece of court-plaster. He was a long time adjusting it to his satisfaction, for the words he wanted to say would not take shape. He knew what he had to tell her would wound deeply, and he hesitated to begin. When he faced her again, his voice trembled with suppressed excitement. He spoke rapidly:

"I may as well out with it. You want to know why I didn't get that position in the bank? It is because my father, J. Stillwell Stoker, died behind the bars of a penitentiary! I'm the son of a jailbird—a defaulter and a forger! That's why the bank didn't want me. They'd had their fingers burned with him, and didn't want to risk another of that name. Thought there might be something in the blood, I suppose. That's where all grandfather's property went, to pay it back; all but this house and the little Aunt Eunice kept for our support. And that's why mother came back here with us and died of a broken heart! Now do you wonder that I can't believe in the eternal goodness when it starts me out in life handicapped like that? Do you blame me when I say I am going to get out of this town and go away to some place where I'll not have my father's disgrace thrown in my teeth every time I try to do anything worth while? No wonder I'm moody! No wonder I'm a pessimist when I think of the legacy he's saddled us with! Aunt Eunice thought she could always shield us from the knowledge of it, but she could no more do it than she could hide fire!"

Philippa sat on the bed as if stunned by the words flowing in such a vehement rush from her brother's lips. She was white and trembled. "O Alec," she gasped, with a shudder, "it can't be true!" Then, after a distressing silence, she sobbed, "Does everybody know it?"

"Everybody in the village now, but little Mack, and he'll have to be knocked flat with the fact some day, I suppose, just as we have been."

Philippa shivered and drew herself up into a disconsolate bunch against the foot-board. "To think of the way I've prided myself on our family!" she said, in a husky voice. "I've actually bragged of the Macklins and paraded the virtues of my ancestors."

Alec made no answer. Down-stairs the big kitchen clock slowly struck seven.

"I'll have to hurry," he remarked. Catching up his blacking-brush, he began polishing his shoes in nervous haste. "It's later than I thought. I'm due at the hotel in thirty minutes."

"At the hotel!" repeated Philippa, wondering dully how he could take any interest in anything more in life, knowing all that had blighted their young lives.

"Yes; but don't you tell Aunt Eunice until it's all settled. I promised to meet a man there, who's been talking to me about a position a thousand miles from here. He's interested in a manufacturing business. His firm has a scheme for making money hand over fist. He didn't tell me what it is, but he wants some young fellow about my age to go into it. 'Somebody who can keep his mouth shut,' he said, 'write a good letter, and make a favourable impression on strangers in introducing the goods.' Stumpy Fisher introduced me to him last night, and he gave me a hint of what he might do if I suited. Seemed to think I was just the man for the place. There's another fellow after it, but he thought I'd make a better impression on strangers, and that is a great consideration in their business. We're to settle it this evening, as he has to leave on the nine o'clock train. If we come to terms, he'll want me to follow next week."

"Stumpy Fisher introduced you?" repeated Philippa; "why, he—he's the man that runs the Golconda, isn't he?"

"Yes," admitted Alec, inwardly resenting the disapproval in her tone. "They do gamble in there, I know, and sometimes have a pretty tough row, but Stumpy is as kind-hearted a man as there is in the village."

Throwing the blacking-brush hastily back into its box, Alec straightened himself up and faced his sister, "There, skip along now, Flip, like a good girl. I have to dress. And don't say a word to Aunt Eunice. I'll tell her myself."

Philippa rose slowly from the bed and started toward the door. "I feel as if I were in a horrible nightmare," she said. "What you have just told me about our—him, you know, and then your going away to live. It's all so sudden and so dreadful. O Alec, I can't stand it to have you go!"

To his great surprise and confusion, for Philippa had never been demonstrative in her affection, she threw her arms round his neck, and, dropping her head on his shoulder, began sobbing violently.

"Oh, come now, Flip," he protested, awkwardly patting the heavy braids of hair swung over her shoulder; "I wouldn't have told you if I'd thought you'd take it so. I thought you had so much grit that you'd stand by me and back me up if Aunt Eunice objected. We're not going to be separated for ever. From what the man told me of the business, I'm sure that I can make enough in a year or so to send for you. Then you can come and keep house for me, and we'll pay back every cent we've cost Aunt Eunice, so she'll have something in her old age. Oh, stop crying, like a good girl, Flip! Don't make it any harder for me than it already is. You don't want me to be late, do you, and miss the best chance of my life? Punctuality counts for everything when a man's looking for a reliable employee."

Without a word, but still sobbing, Philippa rushed from the room. He heard her going down the back stairs and across the kitchen. When the outer door closed behind her, he knew as well as if he had seen her that she was running down the orchard path to her old refuge in the June-apple-tree.

"The stars ought to be out now," thought Alec, a few minutes later, as he slipped into his best coat. Pulling up the shade, he peered out through the open window. "There'll not be any to-night," he added; "looks as if it would rain."

The wind was rising. It blew the muslin curtains softly across his face. It had driven Miss Eunice and Macklin from the porch. Alec could hear their voices in the sitting-room. Suddenly another puff of wind blew the hall door shut, and the cheerful sound was lost.

"It's certainly going to storm!" he exclaimed, aloud. Raising his lamp for one more scrutiny of himself in the little mirror, he set it on his desk, while he hunted in the closet for an umbrella.

When he reached the hotel, it was in the deepest voice that he could summon that he asked to be shown to Mr. Humphrey Long's room. Then he blushed, startled by its unfamiliar sound; it was so deep.

Mr. Long was busy, he was told. He had been closeted in his room for an hour with a stranger who had taken supper with him, and had left orders that Alec, if he came, was not to be shown up till the other man had gone.

Alec wandered from the office into the parlour, walking round nervously while he waited. Half an hour went by. He watched the clock anxiously, than desperately. The minutes were slipping by so fast that

he was afraid there would be no time for his turn before the bus started to the train. What if the other man should be taken in his stead after all Mr. Long's fair speeches! The thought made him break into a cold perspiration. He drummed nervously on the table beside him with impatient fingers.

Presently, through his absorption, came the consciousness that the bell in the town hall was clanging the fire alarm. It was an unusual sound in the quiet little village. Noisy shouts in the next street proclaimed that the volunteer fire brigade was dragging out the hand-power engine and hose reel. From all directions came the sound of hurrying feet and the cry of "Fire! fire!"

He rushed to the door and looked out. Half a mile toward the north, he judged the distance to be, an angry glow was spreading upward. It was in the direction of his home.

"Where's the fire, Bob?" called a voice across the street.

"The old Macklin house," was the answer, tossed back over a man's shoulder as he ran. Instantly there flashed into Alec's mind the remembrance of the muslin curtains flapping across his face, and the lamp left near them on his desk. Had he blown it out or not? He could not remember. He tried to think as he dashed up the street after the running crowds.

# CHAPTER II.

There was no faster runner in the village than Alec Stoker. In the last two field-day contests he had carried off the honours, and now he surpassed all previous records in that mad dash from the hotel to the burning house.

Swift as he was, however, the flames were bursting from the windows of his room by the time he reached the gate, and curling up over the eaves with long, licking tongues. It was as he had feared. He had forgotten to put out the light, the curtains had blown over it, and, fanned by the rising wind, the fire had leaped from curtain to bed, from mosquito-bar to wall, until the whole room was in a blaze.

Shielded by the tall cedars in front of the house, it had burned some time before a passing neighbour discovered it. By the time the alarm brought any response, the upper story was full of stifling pine smoke. The yard swarmed with neighbours when Alec reached it. In and out they ran, bumping precious old family portraits against wash-tubs and coal-scuttles, emptying bureau drawers into sheets, and dumping books and dishes in a pile in the orchard, in wildest confusion. Everything was taken out of the lower story. Even the carpets were ripped up from the floors before the warning cry came to stand back, that the roof was about to fall in. The fire brigade turned its attention to saving the barn, but that was old, too, and burned like tinder, as the breath of the approaching storm fanned the flames higher and higher.

As Alec leaned back against the fence, breathless and flushed from his frantic exertions, Philippa came up to him, carrying the parlour clock and her best hat.

"Come on," she said; "we've got to get all these things under shelter before the storm strikes us, or they'll be spoiled. Mrs. Sears has offered us part of her house. There are four empty rooms in the west wing, and Aunt Eunice says that we can't do any better than to take them for awhile."

Again the neighbours came to the rescue, and, spurred on by the warning thunder, hurried the scattered household goods into shelter. They were all piled into one room in a hopeless tangle.

"We'll not attempt to straighten out anything to-night," said Miss

Eunice, looking round wearily when the last sympathetic neighbour had departed in time to escape the breaking storm. She and Philippa had accepted Mrs. Sears's offer of her guest-chamber for the night. Macklin had gone home with the minister's son. Alec had had many invitations, but he refused them all. With a morbid feeling that because his carelessness caused the fire he ought to do penance and not allow himself to be comfortable, he pulled a pillow and a mattress from the pile of goods into the empty room adjoining, and threw himself down on that.

In the excitement of the scene through which he had just passed, he had entirely forgotten the engagement he had run away from. Now, as he stretched himself wearily out on the mattress, it flashed across his mind that he had failed to keep his appointment, and that the man had gone. A groan of disappointment escaped him.

"If I wasn't born to a dog's luck!" he exclaimed, "to miss a position like that just when we need it the most. Goodness only knows what we are going to do now. But I needn't say that. It's a hard world, and there's no goodness in it."

The next instant, he pulled the sheet over his eyes to shut out the blinding glare of lightning that lit up the empty room. The crash of thunder that followed seemed to his distorted fancy the defiant challenge of all the powers of darkness. All sorts of rebellious thoughts flocked through the boy's mind, as he lay there in the darkness of the empty room, thinking bitterly of his thwarted plans. Midnight always magnifies troubles, and as he brooded over his disappointments and railed at his fate, not only his past wrongs loomed up to colossal size, but a vague premonition of worse evil to come began to weigh on him. It was nearly morning before he dropped into a troubled sleep.

Refreshed by a long night's rest and the tempting breakfast Mrs. Sears spread for her three guests, Philippa soon recovered her usual gay spirits. The news that Alec had disclosed the night before, which sent her stunned and heart-sick to her retreat in the old apple-tree, had faded into the background in the excitement of the fire. She thought of it all the time she was dressing, but the keenness of her distress was not so overwhelming as it had been. It was like some old pain that had lost its worst sting in the healing passage of time.

She was young enough to take a keen pleasure in the novelty of the situation, and ran up-stairs and down with hammer and broom, laughing and joking over the settlement of every picture and piece of

furniture with contagious good humour. Alec could not understand it. Even his Aunt Eunice was not as downcast as he had pictured her in the night, over the loss of her old home. With patient, steady effort, she moved along, bringing order out of confusion, and when Philippa's fresh young voice up-stairs broke out in the song that had come to be regarded as the family hymn, she joined in, at her work below, with a full, strong alto:

"Yet, in the maddening maze of things,
Though tossed by storm and flood,
To one fixed trust my spirit clings:
I know that God is good."

"Jine in, Br'er Stoker," called Philippa, laughingly waving her duster in the doorway. "Why don't you sing?"

Alec, who was prone on the floor, tacking down a bedroom carpet, hammered away without an answer. After waiting a minute, she dropped down on the floor beside him, upsetting a saucer full of tacks as she did so. "Say, Alec," she began, in a confidential tone, "what did the man at the hotel say last night? Is he going to take you?"

"Of course not," was the sulky reply. "You didn't suppose I'd be lucky enough for that, did you? I didn't even see him. Another fellow was there ahead of me, and the fire-alarm sounded while I waited, and then it was all up. I couldn't dally round waiting for an interview when our home was burning, could I?"

"Maybe he left some word for you," she suggested.

"No; I ran down to the hotel to inquire, just as soon as I got the kitchen stove set up this morning. He left on the nine o'clock train last night, as he warned me he would, and as I didn't come according to my agreement, that's the last he'll ever think of me. Such luck as mine is, anyhow! It was my anxiety to get the place that made me go off and leave the lamp burning, and now I've not only missed the last chance I'll ever have, but I've been the means of burning the roof off from over our heads. You haven't any idea of the way I feel, Flip. I'm desperate! It fairly sets my teeth on edge to hear you go round singing of 'The Eternal Goodness' when I'm knocked out every way I turn, no matter how hard I try."

"But, Alec," she answered, between taps of his noisy hammer, "it's foolish of you to take it so to heart, and look on nothing but the dark side. Of course, it is dreadful to be burned out of house and home, but it might have been lots worse. All the down-stairs furniture was saved,

and the insurance company is going to put us up a nice little cottage as soon as possible. We were not without a roof over our heads for one single hour. Before the old one fell in, Mrs. Sears offered these rooms, and already things are beginning to look homelike. Mrs. Sears was one of our 'islands.'

"There we were, you see. It was black night, and we didn't know which way to turn, but here were these empty rooms, all nice and clean, waiting for us. And it will be the same way about your getting a place if you don't lose faith and courage. You'll float along awhile farther, and when you're least expecting it, you'll come on your island that's been waiting for you all the time."

"Oh, you don't know what you're talking about, Flip," answered Alec, impatiently, pounding away harder than ever. "You make me tired."

"I do know what I'm talking about," she retorted, scrambling to her feet; "and I'll let you know, sir, my singing doesn't set your teeth on edge half as bad as your sour looks do mine. I wouldn't be such a grumble-bug! You act like a baby instead of a boy who prides himself on being old enough to shave."

With this parting thrust, she flounced out of the room, unmindful of what he called after her, but she thought, guiltily, as she ran, "Now I've done it! He'll be furious all day; but I just had to! He needed somebody to shake him up out of himself, and I don't care!"

Nevertheless, she sang no more that day, and a few tears dropped on her books, as she made a place for them on the shelves. All Alec's had been burned. He had lost more than any of them, for his was the only up-stairs room that was occupied. Philippa loved her brother too dearly not to suffer with him in all his losses and disappointments.

It was a day of hard work for all of them, but four energetic, determined people can accomplish much, especially when one is a ten-year-old boy, whose sturdy legs can make countless trips up and down stairs without tiring, and another is an athletic young fellow with the endurance of a man.

Late in the afternoon, Alec made a final round of inspection. Up-stairs the two bedrooms were in spotless order. They were furnished even better than those in the old house, for the library rugs and curtains had found place there, with some of the best pictures and ornaments. Down-stairs Philippa was standing in the centre of the room, about to remove the cover and lamp from the dining-room

table.

"Now it is the parlour," she said, gaily, waving her hand toward the old piano, the bookcases, and the familiar bric-à-brac on the mantel. "But shut your eyes a minute, and—*abracadabra!* it's the dining-room." As she spoke, she whisked a white cloth on the old claw-footed mahogany table, and, throwing open a closet door, displayed the orderly rows of china.

"We'll not have much for supper to-night, but I'm bound it shall be set out in style to celebrate our house-warming; so, Mack, if you have any legs left to toddle on, I wish you'd run out and get me a handful of purple asters to put in this glass bowl. I am glad that it wasn't broken. Some kind but agitated friend pitched it out of the window into the geranium bed."

She rattled along gaily, with a furtive side-glance at Alec. He had had nothing to say to her since her outburst up-stairs, and now, ignoring her pleasantries, he walked into the kitchen in his most dignified manner.

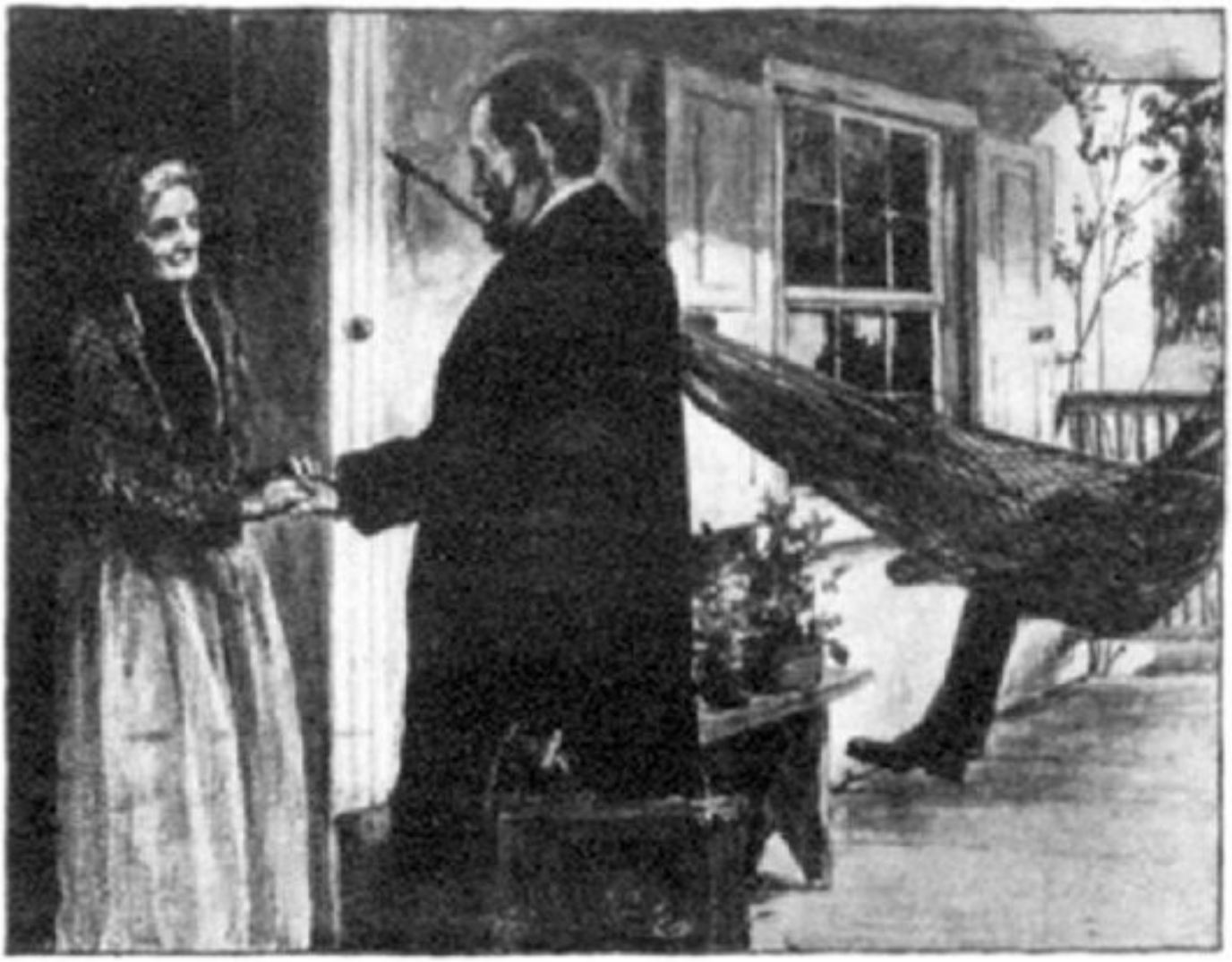
"Is there anything more you want me to do, Aunt Eunice?" he asked.

Finding that there was nothing just then, he went out to the side porch opening off the room which was to be used as both dining-room and parlour. He had hung the hammock there a little while before, and he threw himself into it with a sigh of relief. Swinging back and forth in the shelter of the vines, the feeling of comfort began to steal over him that comes with the relaxation of tired muscles. The rattle of dishes and aroma of hot coffee coming out to him were pleasantly suggestive to his healthy young appetite.

He closed his eyes, not intending to go to sleep, but the hammock stopped swinging almost instantly, and he did not hear the footsteps going past him a few minutes later, nor his Aunt Eunice's surprised cry of welcome as a tall, bearded stranger knocked at the door.

The continuous murmur of voices finally roused him, and he lay there blinking and listening, trying to recognize the deep bass voice that laughed and talked so familiarly with his aunt.

"The Lord has certainly sent you, Dick," Alec heard her say in a tremulous tone, and then he knew instantly who had come.



**"'THE LORD HAS CERTAINLY SENT YOU, DICK.'"**

All his life he had heard of Dick Willis, one of the many boys his grandfather had befriended and taken into the shelter of his home for awhile. Dick had lived five years in the old house that had just burned, when Eunice and Sally Macklin were children; and all the stories of their school days were full of their foster-brother's mischievous sayings and doings.

That the harum-scarum boy had given place to this middle-aged, successful business man, with the deep voice and big whiskers, was hard for Alec to realize, for in all Miss Eunice's reminiscences he had kept the perennial prankishness of youth. But now Alec, listening, learned the changes that had taken place since the man's last visit to his home. He had thought every year that he would come back for another visit, he told Miss Eunice, but he had put it off from season to season, hard pressed by the demands of business, and now it was too late for him to ever see the old homestead again. He had seen an account of the fire in a paper which he read on the train on his way

East, and he decided to stop his journey long enough to run over to the old place for a few hours, and see if she did not need his help. He wanted her to feel that he stood ready to give it to the extent of his power, and expected her to call upon him as freely as if he were a real brother.

Then it was that Miss Eunice's tremulous voice exclaimed again: "The Lord has certainly sent you, Dick! I have been worried for weeks over Alec's future. There is no outlook here in the village for him. If you could only get him a position somewhere—" She paused, the tears in her eyes. Alec listened breathlessly for his answer.

"Why didn't you write me before this, Eunice? My business, travelling for a wholesale shoe house, takes me over a wide territory and gives me a large acquaintance. I am sure that I can get him into something or other very soon. You know that I would do anything for Sally's boy, and when you add to that the fact that he is Alexander Macklin's grandson, and I owe everything I am under heaven to that man, you may know that I'd leave no stone unturned to repay a little of his kindness to me."

Alec's heart gave a great throb of hope. The good cheer of the hearty voice inspired him with a courage he had not felt in weeks. There was a patter of bare feet down the garden path, and, peering out between the vines, Alec saw one of the neighbour's boys coming in with a big dish covered carefully with a napkin.

"It's fried chicken," announced the boy, with a grin, as Alec went down the step to meet him. "Mother said to eat it while it was hot. She knew you all would be too tired to cook much to-night."

Without waiting to hear Alec's thanks, he scampered down the path again and squeezed through the gap in the fence made by a missing picket. Alec carried the dish round the house to the kitchen, where Philippa was putting the finishing touches to the supper, in her aunt's stead.

"Did you know that Uncle Dick has come?" she asked, joyfully. "Oh, how good of Mrs. Pine to send the chicken! We didn't have anything for supper but coffee and rolls and eggs. He's certainly bringing good things in his wake. How delicious that chicken does smell! Let's take it as a good omen, Alec, a forerunner of better days. He'll surely get you out of your slough of despond."

"Who, Flip? The chicken or Uncle Dick?" asked Alec, in his old jesting way, giving one of her long braids a tweak as he passed. A

heavy load seemed to lift itself from Philippa's heart at this sign of Alec's return to his merry old self. All during supper she kept glancing at him, for, absorbed in their guest's interesting reminiscences, he seemed to have forgotten the grievances he had brooded over so long, and laughed and joked as he had not done for weeks.

To their great regret, Uncle Dick had to leave that night. Alec walked to the station with him, feeling that he was being subjected to a very close cross-examination as to his capabilities and preferences. The train was late, and as they sat in the waiting-room, the man fell into a profound silence, his hands thrust into his pockets and his brows drawn together in deep thought.

Finally he said: "You want to be a banker, like your grandfather. Well, I can't manage that, my boy. My influence doesn't lie in that direction. The best I can do is to get you in with the firm that manufactures all the shoes I sell. It is a big concern. The general manager of the factory at Salesbury is a good friend of mine, and I happen to know he is on the lookout for a reliable young fellow to put in training as his assistant. He is constantly giving somebody a trial, but nobody measures up to his requirements. Whoever takes it must go through a regular apprenticeship in the factory and learn the business from the ground up. According to his ideas, you'd not be fitted until you'd tried your hand at every piece of machinery in the factory, and knew how to turn out a pair of shoes from the raw leather. The wages will be small at first. Some of the duties are disagreeable, many of the requirements exacting, but promotion is rapid, and probably by the end of the year you'd be in the office, learning to take an oversight of the different departments; that is, if you had proved there was good stuff in you. If money is what you are after, this opening is better a thousand times than anything the village bank could give you in years, and in my opinion it's just as respectable a calling to handle leather as lucre. You'll have to work and work hard."

"I don't mind how hard the work is," answered Alec. "I hate to give up the one thing that has been my ambition all my life, but I have come to the point where I'd do anything honest to get a place somewhere out of this town. I'd even scrub floors. You don't know what I've been through this summer, Uncle Dick. Of course, you know about my father?"

He asked the question with such bitterness of tone that his listener scanned his face intently, then sympathetically.

"Well, I must get away from that," Alec continued. "It's an awful

handicap. The thought of it made me desperate at times. If they should hear about him in Salesbury and turn me down on his account —well, I'd just give up! I couldn't stand any more than I have already suffered on his account."

There was no answer for a minute, then the deep voice answered, cheerily: "Alec, your grandmother Macklin once told me that when she was a very small child she went to visit her grandmother; quite a remote ancestor of yours that would be, wouldn't it? For some reason, she was put to sleep in a trundle-bed in the old lady's room, and along late in the night she was awakened by a very earnest voice. She sat up in the little trundle-bed to listen, and there was the old saint on her knees, praying for—now, what do you suppose? For 'all her posterity to the latest generation!' She said she didn't understand then what the words meant, but years afterward, when she held her first baby in her arms, they came back to her with a feeling of awe, to think that prayers uttered for him, long years before he was born, were still working to his blessing.

"It is the same with you, Alec. Evil influences were set afloat by your father's crime that will undoubtedly work against you many a time, but you must remember all the good that lies on the other hand to counteract them. Even your great-great-grandmother's prayers must count for something in your behalf. I remember that Alexander Macklin planted an apple orchard after he was eighty years old. He never lived to gather even its first harvest, but you have been enjoying it all your life. He did a thousand unrecorded kindnesses that brought him no returns seemingly, but 'bread cast upon the waters' does come back after many days, my boy, every time. And you will be eating the results of that scattering all your life. The little that I may be able to do for you will only be the result of kindness he showed me, and which I could not repay, but am glad now to pass it on to his grandson. Don't grow bitter because of your father, and say that fate has handicapped you. That admission of itself will sap your courage and go far toward defeating you. Say, instead, '*The Eternal Goodness* will more than compensate for the evil that this one man has wrought me.' Then go on, trusting in that, and win in spite of everything. The harder the struggle the more praise to the victor, you know."

The whistle of the approaching train brought his little sermon to a close, and, seizing his satchel, he started hurriedly to the door. "I'll see the manager in a few days," he continued, hurriedly. "I have only a few stops to make this time on my way to Salesbury. Probably I'll have something definite to write you the last of the week. Good-bye and

good luck to you!" He shook hands heartily, swung himself up on the platform, and disappeared into the car.

Philippa was waiting in the hammock with a shawl over her head when Alec returned. The moonlight nights were chilly, but she could not bear to go inside until she heard the result of their conversation.

"Oh, Alec," she exclaimed, as he came up wide awake and glowing from his walk and his hopeful interview, "wasn't it just like a lovely story to have the traditional uncle drop down long enough to restore the family fortunes and then disappear again?"

"Yes, you're a good prophet," he laughed. "I drifted on to my island when I least expected it, and in the middle of my darkest night. Salesbury is four hundred miles from here, Flip, and we sha'n't see each other often, so if it will be any comfort to you, you may say, 'I told you so,' three times a day, from now on until I leave."

# CHAPTER III.

Philippa, coming home from school one afternoon, late in September, loitered at the gate for a few more words with the girls who had walked that far with her. Sometimes the little group lingered there until nearly sundown, between the laburnum bushes and hollyhocks of the old garden, but to-day, Alec's impatient whistle from an upper window signalled her. He waved a letter toward her, calling, excitedly, "It's come, Flip! It's come! I'm to start in the morning. I'm packing my trunk now."

With a hurried good-bye to the girls at the gate, Philippa rushed up the stairs to her brother's room. The bureau drawers had all been emptied on the bed, and every chair was full.

"Here's some things that need buttons," he announced, as she came in. "Aunt Eunice is pressing my best suit, and Mack has gone down-town after the shoes that I left to be half-soled. I'll have to rush, for the letter says to come at once. I didn't suppose they'd be in such a hurry. They're hustlers, I guess."

His haste was so contagious that Philippa ran into the next room for her sewing-basket, without waiting to take off her hat, and sitting down on the floor beside the window began to sew on buttons as fast as she asked questions. She always had plenty to say to Alec, and now that the time for conversation was limited to a few short hours, she could not talk fast enough.

Presently the click of the gate made her look out. "Here comes Mack," she said. "Your shoes are wrapped in a newspaper, and he's so busy reading something on it that he doesn't know where he is going. Look out, snail!" she called; "you'll bump into the house in a minute if you are not careful!"

The boy came slowly up the stairs still spelling out the paragraph that interested him.

"Alec," he said, pausing in the doorway, "what's a green goods man? This says that a gang of 'em were arrested in New York. The detectives traced them by a letter one of them left here in Ridgeville at the hotel. Think of that! Jonas Clark is the man's real name, alias H-u-m-p-h," he spelled, "Humphrey (I guess it is) Long."

Alec snatched the knotty bundle and glanced at the paragraph so eagerly that Philippa looked at him in surprise. She was still more surprised to see a deep flush spread over his face, as he tore the newspaper off the shoes and glanced at the date. Then he dropped it on the bed and began to fumble for something in the bottom of his trunk, saying, carelessly, "Oh, green goods men are just fellows who rope people in to buy counterfeit money. Here, Mack, you'll not have a chance to run many more errands for me. Trot down to Aunt Eunice with these neckties, please, and ask her to press them for me while she's in the business."

As soon as Mack disappeared, Alec caught up the paper again. "Flip," he said, in an impressive voice, after his second reading, "do you remember the night of the fire I was to meet a man at the hotel and make the final arrangement with him for taking a position he had offered me?"

Philippa nodded.

"Well, that is the man; Humphrey Long. Think of what I have escaped. From what he said about his sure scheme for making money and making it easy, I know now that is what he meant; but I never suspected such a thing then. He was the smoothest talker I ever saw, and was as gentlemanly and well dressed as the minister. And such a way as he had! He could almost make a body believe that black was white. Suppose I had gone off with him. Whillikens! but I would be in hot water now! Everybody would have said, 'Only a chip off the old block. Just what might have been expected with such a father.'"

"But, Alec, you wouldn't have gone after he had told you what his business was!" Philippa exclaimed, in a horrified tone. "You know that you wouldn't."

"No," he answered, slowly, "but I think now that he intended to keep me in the dark till he got me just where he wanted me, in too deep to inform on them. And I was so desperate for a job away from here that I would have accepted his offer with very few questions. Don't you see, my very ignorance of his schemes would have made me a better decoy in some cases than if I had not been such an innocent young duck. Of course, Stumpy Fisher told him all about me," he added, after a moment's thought. "He might have counted on my being enough like my father to take kindly to his crookedness."

"How queerly things work out!" said Philippa. "If you had had your

own way, you'd have been off with that man and probably in jail with him now. But the fire stopped you. And if it hadn't been for the fire, Uncle Dick never would have been aroused to the necessity of leaving his business long enough to make us a visit, and if it hadn't been for the visit you never would have had this position in Salesbury."

"That's so," Alec assented, gravely. "It's a whole chain of those islands that you and Aunt Eunice are always singing about. I'll make a map of them some day and name each one: 'Fire Island,' 'Isle of Uncle Dick,' etc. Then I'll name the whole group after you: 'Flip's Providence Islands,' or something like that."

Then the subject was dropped, as Macklin came clattering back up the stairs.

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If the history of Alec's experiences during the next few weeks could have been written, it would have differed little from that of thousands of boys who yearly leave farm and village to push their way into the already overcrowded cities. Eager and hopeful, his ambition placed no limit to the success he meant to achieve. That he might fall short of the goal he set for himself never once entered his thoughts. He knew the conditions requisite to success, and felt an honest pride in the consciousness that he could meet them. He had a strong, healthy body, a thorough education so far as the high school could take him, good habits, and high ideals.

As the train whirled him on toward Salesbury, he felt that at last he was placing himself in line with the long list of illustrious men who had begun life as poor boys and ended it as the benefactors of mankind. And he felt that he had a distinct advantage over Franklin and some of his ilk, for he faced his future with far more than a loaf of bread under his arm. Forward in the baggage-car his grandfather's old leather trunk held ample provision for his present, and an assured position awaited him.

Salesbury was not a large city, but it seemed a crowded metropolis to Alec's eyes, accustomed to the quiet life of the little inland village. But it was not as a gaping backwoodsman he viewed its sights. If he had never seen a trolley-car before, he had carefully studied the power that propels one. The whir and clang, the rush of automobiles, the pounding of machinery in the great factory all seemed familiar, because they were a part of the world he had learned to know in his extensive reading. Keenly alive to new impressions, he was so

interested in everything that went on round him that he had little time to be lonesome at first.

He stayed only a few days at the hotel. Anxious to repay his Aunt Eunice as soon as possible the money she had spent in replenishing his wardrobe after the fire, and defraying his travelling expenses, he took a room in a lodging-house, and his meals at a cheap restaurant. In that way he was able to save nearly twice as much each week toward cancelling his indebtedness.

The letters he wrote home were re-read many times. They were so bright and cheerful and full of interesting descriptions. He didn't like the work in the factory, but he liked the manager, and with the determination to make his apprenticeship as short as possible and gain a place in the office, he pegged away with a faithfulness and energy that he felt sure must bring a speedy reward.

Not till the cold November nights came did Miss Eunice detect a little note of homesickness creeping into his letters. She would not have wondered could she have looked in on him while he wrote, buttoned up in his overcoat and with his hat on. His chilly little bedroom, with its dim lamp and worn matting, was a dismal contrast to the cheerful home where he had always spent his winter evenings. Then she noticed that there was nearly always some reference to the restaurant fare, some longing expressed for one more taste of her cooking—the good cream gravy, the mince turnovers, the crisp doughnuts that had been his favourite dishes at home.

Once he wrote to Philippa:

> "Think of it, Flip! I don't know a single girl in town. Excepting my landlady, I haven't spoken to a woman since I pulled out of the depot at Ridgeville two months ago. It seems so strange to know only the factory fellows, when at home I was acquainted with everybody. The manager, Mr. Windom, has a pretty daughter whom I'd give a good deal to know. She drives down to the office with him sometimes, and I see her at church. She looks something like your chum, Nordic Gray, laughing sort of eyes, and soft, light hair, and a saucy little nose like your own."

Later, in a reply to a question from Miss Eunice, he wrote:

> "No, I haven't put in my church letter yet. I took it with me every Sunday for awhile, but I can't get screwed up to the point, somehow. People here are so stand-offish with strangers. I've gone pretty regularly, but nobody has spoken to me yet. I

suppose they think that a gawky country boy doesn't belong in such a fashionable congregation. The minister doesn't come down after service to shake hands with people, as Doctor Meldrum does at home. They have a Christian Endeavour Society that I think might be nice if there was any way of breaking the ice to get into it. The young people seem to have the best kind of times among themselves, but they don't seem to care for anybody that hasn't the inside track in their exclusive little circle."

Then the letters grew shorter. "He had no time to write during the day," he explained. At night he was either so tired that he went to bed as soon as he had his supper, or some of the boys that worked where he did came round for him to go out with them. He had been to the library several times, and to a free band-concert. When he was out of debt, he intended to get a season lecture course ticket and go to other entertainments once in awhile to keep from getting the blues.

He did not mention some of the other places to which he had gone with the boys. It would only worry his Aunt Eunice, he thought. Probably she wouldn't think it was any harm if she lived in the city. People in little places were apt to be narrow-minded, he told himself. He could feel that his own opinions were broadening every day.

He wrote to Macklin on Thanksgiving Day, saying that he intended to make the most of his holiday and skate all the afternoon. He was glad that he had brought his skates, for the ice was in fine condition. That was the last letter home for two weeks.

While Miss Eunice worried, and Philippa haunted the post-office, he was lying ill in his cheerless little bedroom, on the top floor of the cheap lodging-house. He had skated not only Thanksgiving afternoon, but again at night when the ice was illuminated by bonfires and lanterns. There was a danger-signal posted farther down where the ice was thin. He had avoided it all the afternoon, but intent on cutting some fancy figure one of the boys had taught him, he did not notice how near he was to the dangerous spot until he heard a cracking noise all round him, and it was too late to save himself from a plunge into the icy water.

Although he was helped out immediately, and ran every step of the way to his room, he was shaking with a chill when he reached it. All the covering he could pile on the bed did not stop the chattering of his teeth as he lay shivering between the cold sheets. In the morning he was burning with fever. There was such a sharp pain in his lungs that

he could not draw a full breath.

He tried to get up and dress, but the attempt made him so weak and dizzy that he could only stagger back to bed and lie there in a sort of stupor. It was not quite clear to him who brought a doctor, but one came in the course of the morning and left two kinds of little pellets and a glass of water on the chair beside his bed. He was to take two pink pellets every hour and one white one every two hours, he was told.

There was no clock in the room, and he had no watch, but the engine-house bell in the next block clanged the alarm regularly.

The responsibility of giving himself his own medicine kept him from dropping asleep as he longed to do. He would doze for a few minutes and start up, fearing that he had let the time go by, or that he had taken a double dose, or that he had confused directions. Was it two pink ones or two white ones, or one hour or two hours? He said it over and over with every variation possible. The confusion was maddening.

The pain in his lungs grew worse. He was burning with thirst, but there was no more water in the glass. He looked round the room with feverish, aching eyes, that suddenly filled with hot tears. If he could only be back in his own room at home, with Aunt Eunice to care for him, and Flip to make him comfortable, how good it would seem! He was tasting to the dregs the misery of being ill, all alone among strangers.

Toward evening the woman who kept the lodging-house sent a little coloured boy up to ask if he wanted anything. A pitcher of water was all that Alec asked for. That being supplied, the boy shut the door and clattered down the hall, whistling. The night seemed endless. Hour after hour he started up shuddering, as the bell's loud clang awakened him, not knowing what it was that startled him. In his feverish hallucinations he thought he was continually breaking through the ice into a sea of burning water. He kept clutching at the pillows, thinking they were islands that he was for ever drifting past and could never reach.

When morning came at last, and the doctor made his second visit, he found Alec delirious and the medicine still on the chair beside the bed. With one glance round the cheerless room, he shrugged his shoulders and went out for help.

When Alec next noticed his surroundings with eyes that were once

more clear and rational, he saw that the dingy little grate had been opened and a bright fire was burning in it. The clothing he had left on the floor in a heap had been put away. The window shade no longer hung askew. He looked round half-expecting to see his Aunt Eunice or Flip, and wondered if he had been so ill that some one had sent for them. Then his glance fell on a grizzled old man with a wooden leg, dozing in a rocking-chair by the fire.

"Old Jimmy Scott!" Alec said to himself after a moment's puzzled scrutiny, in which he racked his brain to recall where he had seen the face before. Finally he remembered. One of the boys had pointed him out as an old soldier who had taken to nursing when he could no longer fight. He held no diploma from any training-school for nurses, he was uncouth and rough in many ways, but his varied experiences had made him a valuable assistant to the doctor, whom he called his general, and obeyed with military exactness.

As Alec stirred on his pillow, the old soldier looked up, and then hobbled over to the bed as quietly as his wooden leg would allow. He bent over him, felt his pulse, and then said, cheerfully, "All right, buddy, guess it's time now for rations." Taking a covered cup from the hob on the grate, he deftly put a spoonful of hot beef tea to Alec's lips.

"You had a pretty close call, young man," he said, in response to Alec's attempt to question him. "A leetle more and it would have been double pneumonia. But you're about out of the woods now. We'll soon have you on your feet." Giving his patient a few more spoonfuls, he drew the covers gently in place, saying, "Now don't you talk any more. Turn over and go to sleep."

Weak, yet thrilled with a delightful sense of comfort and freedom from pain, Alec obeyed unquestioningly. True, a thought did trail teasingly across his mind for a moment, a dim wonder as to where the money was to come from to pay for the expensive luxuries of nurse and doctor and medicines and fire, but it faded presently, and instead his Aunt Eunice's old song took its place:

"I know not where His islands lift
Their fronded palms in air;
I only know I cannot drift
Beyond—beyond—beyond—"

He groped languidly for the final words, but could not recall them. "Never mind," he thought, drowsily; "I've got as far as old Jimmy Scott, and that's a big enough island for this trip."

A most comfortable stopping-place old Jimmy proved to be.

Considerate as a woman of his patient's comfort, cheerful, tireless, and prompt as a minute-gun in carrying out the doctor's instructions, it was not long before he had Alec sitting up for a little while each day. With such an old philosopher to keep him company, and entertained by the old veteran's endless fund of anecdote, Alec enjoyed those few days of convalescence more than he could have believed possible.

"It isn't such a bad sort of world, after all," he remarked one morning, the day after the minister had called. "It is strange what a difference knowing persons makes in the way you feel toward them. The minister was as cordial and friendly as Doctor Meldrum used to be in Ridgeville. Wonder how he found out about me? I didn't know he'd ever heard of me or noticed me in the congregation."

Old Jimmy made no reply, although he longed to say: "He came because I sent for him, buddy, as people ought to do. They are quick enough to send for a doctor when their bodies are sick, but when they are out of sorts either physically or mentally they never think of letting their minister know. They hang back and feel hurt if he doesn't come, just as if he could tell by intuition or a sort of sixth sense that he's needed. How can a D. D. be expected to know when you want him, any more than an M. D.?"

That afternoon as Alec sat propped up by the window for a little while, looking down on the snowy street, there was a knock at the door. Old Jimmy, answering it, came back with a florist's box addressed, "Mr. Alec Stoker, with best wishes and sympathy of the Grace Church Christian Endeavour Society." Inside was a fragrant bunch of hothouse roses.

Alec held them up in amazement. "Why should they have sent them to me?" he cried. There was no Endeavour society in Ridgeville, and he did not understand its methods.

"The flower committee sends 'em to all the sick people in the congregation," explained Jimmy. "Posies and piety always sorter go together, seems like. Pretty, ain't they? But they ain't half so pretty as the young ladies that brought 'em."

"Young ladies!" gasped Alec, looking toward the door.

"Yes, the flower committee itself, I suppose. I didn't know two of them. But one of them you ought to know, buddy, seeing as it's the daughter of your boss. Thomas Windom's daughter—Avery, I believe

they call her."

Alec's heart gave a thump. Avery Windom was the pretty girl he had written to Flip about; the one whom he had wanted of all others to know; and she had climbed to his door, had left the roses; it seemed too strange to be true.

He leaned toward the window and looked down. Yes, there she went with her friends, fluttering along the snowy street. He could see the gleam of her soft, light hair under her velvet hat. Her cheeks were flushed with her walk in the cold. He leaned eagerly nearer the window as she fluttered along, farther and farther down the street, until she was lost in the crowd. Then he lay back in the chair with a sigh. It seemed so long since he had lived in a world where there were bright, friendly girls like Flip. The sight of these who had been so near made him homesick for the old friends of his school days, and he began to talk to old Jimmy about his sister and the good times they used to have together.

"I wonder which one wrote this card," he thought, as he slipped it out of the box. "I am sure she did. The handwriting is so light and graceful, just like her. So her name is Avery. I might have known it would be different from other girls'. Avery! Avery!" he repeated softly, while old Jimmy stumped out into the hall for some water in which to put the roses. "It's a pretty name. I wonder if I'll ever know her well enough to call her that."

"Time to get back into bed now," said old Jimmy, coming in with the pitcher. He placed the roses in it on a stand beside the bed. "Mustn't overdo matters."

"No, indeed," said Alec, with a new note of determination in his voice which did not escape old Jimmy. "I've got to get well in a hurry now, and go back to work." Then he settled himself on his pillow, and lay smiling happily at the roses.

# CHAPTER IV.

If the calendar over Alec's mantel could have told the history of the next few weeks, it would have been the record of a hard struggle with homesickness and discouragement. There was a heavy black cross drawn through the date of his return to work. He had come in that night when it was over weighed down with the fact that his wages had been stopped in his absence, and that it would take a long time to pay the debts incurred during his illness.

There was a zigzag line struck twice across the calendar below that date. "That much goes for the doctor!" he exclaimed, fiercely checking off the time with a stubby pencil. "And that much to old Jimmy, and that much for fire and extras. It'll take way into the new year to get straightened out. Luckily I am nearly through with my debt to Aunt Eunice."

Later there was a tiny star drawn in the corner of one date. It marked the Sabbath evening he had gone to the Christian Endeavour praise service and heard Avery Windom sing. He had been introduced to half a dozen of the boys and girls, and been invited to come again, and had gone back to his calendar to count the nights until the next meeting. Ever since he had left home, he had longed with a longing that was like hunger for the companionship of young people such as he had known at home. There was a blur over one of the dates, the little square that marked the twenty-fifth of December. It was a red-letter day on the calendar, but in Alec's bare little room a holiday that dragged its dismal length out toward dark, like a dull ache.

The box that had been sent him from home failed to reach him till the next day. Standing with his hands in his pockets, looking out over the snowy roofs of the city, he recalled all the merry Christmas days at home, since the first time he and Flip had hung up their stockings beside their grandfather's wide chimney-seat. This was the first time he had ever missed following the old custom. The city seemed overflowing with the joy and good-will of the Yuletide, yet none of it was for him. He had never felt so utterly left out and alone in all his life.

Despite his seventeen years, there was an ache in his throat that he could not drive back, and when he laid down the calendar he had been mechanically examining, although he whistled bravely, there was

a telltale blur on the page.

But there came a day when he tore off the leaf that was crossed with the double black lines meaning debt and worry, and began a fresh sheet which seemed to promise better days. A change of work came the first of February, and a slight advance in wages. The manager, who had kept a keen eye on him, was beginning to think that at last he had found a boy who was worth training, and that if he proved as efficient in every stage of his apprenticeship as he had in the first, he would soon have the capable assistant that he had long been in search of.

Alec's notification of his promotion was in the envelope which held his check for the last week in January. He did not see it until he stepped into the bank to have the check cashed, and in his delight and surprise he could scarcely refrain from turning a handspring.

So many people were ahead of him that he had to stand several minutes awaiting his turn at the little barred window. In that time he made several rapid calculations on the back of the envelope.


**"HE MADE SEVERAL RAPID CALCULATIONS ON THE BACK OF THE ENVELOPE."**

"Can you give me five dollars of that in gold?" he asked of the cashier when his turn finally came. With a nod of assent, the cashier counted out several small bills, and laid a shining five-dollar gold piece on top. Alec seized it eagerly and, thrusting the bills into his pocket, walked out with the coin in his hand.

Long ago he had decided how to spend his first surplus five dollars if it came in time. It should go as a happy surprise to Flip on her sixteenth birthday. It had come in time. Her birthday was on the twenty-first of the month. At first he thought he could not wait three

long weeks before sending it. He wanted her to have the pleasure and surprise of receiving it at once; and he wanted the thrill of feeling that he was man enough not only to be self-supporting, but to help care for his sister.

He wrapped the coin in a bit of tissue-paper, torn from the shaving-case Flip had sent him in the delayed Christmas box. Then he carefully put it in the inner pocket of the old wallet he carried. But scarcely a night passed between that time and the twentieth that he did not take a peep at the coin, and then count the days on his calendar.

Ever since the night of the praise service, when he first heard Avery Windom sing, he had been a regular attendant at the Christian Endeavour meetings. It was like a bit of home to sit there in the midst of the young people, singing the familiar old hymns, and he sang them so heartily and entered into the exercises of the meeting with such zest that he soon lost the feeling that he was only a stranger within the gates.

There were some, it is true, who were only coolly polite to him, thinking of his position, an unknown boy working in the shoe factory as a common labourer. He felt the chill of their manner keenly, and he knew why he was so pointedly ignored. It was not a deeply spiritual society. Only a few of the members were really consecrated Christians. There were more socials and concerts and literary evenings than devotional meetings. Most of the members belonged to old, wealthy families, and had always been accustomed to leisure and pocket-money. Alec soon realized the bounds that were set to his social privileges. He might take a prominent part in the meetings, even be asked to lead on occasions, be put on committees, be assigned many tasks in connection with suppers and festivals, but outside of his church relationship he was never noticed. No hospitable home swung open its doors for him.

Only one who has lived in a country place, which knows no class distinctions, where character is all that counts, and where the butcher and baker may be bidden any day, in simple village fashion, to banquet with the judge, only such an one can understand the feeling of a boy in Alec's position. He wondered sometimes, with a sudden sinking of the heart, what would be the result if they knew about his father.

He never looked at Avery Windom without thinking of it. He used to watch her in church, sitting up between her aristocratic father and

mother, sweet and refined, like a dainty white flower. He wondered if her slim-gloved hand would ever be held out to him again in greeting, as it had been on several occasions, if she knew that he was the son of a criminal.

Then he wondered what she would think if she knew that the touch of that little hand in his had been like the saving touch of a guardian angel. Once, urged on by one of the factory boys, an almost overwhelming temptation had seized him, but the remembrance that if he yielded he would never again be fit to take her hand made him thrust his into his pockets and turn away toward home with a shrug of the shoulders.

Avery, as ignorant of the influence she was exerting as a lily is of the fragrance it sheds, went serenely on in her gentle, high-bred way. Alec held no larger place in her thoughts than any other of the employees in her father's factory.

"Flip would call her one of my islands," he said to himself one night, as he parted on the corner from a crowd of boys who were begging him to go with them for a little game of cards and a lark afterward. "No telling where I would have drifted if it hadn't been for her. It's no easy matter to keep straight when you're all alone in a city as big and tough as this."

On his way home, he stopped at the library for a book he had heard her mention. He had overheard her quoting a line from Sir Galahad, and although he knew the story well of the maiden knight "whose strength was as the strength of ten because his heart was pure," it took on a new meaning because she had praised it. He learned the entire poem by heart, and the inspiration of the lines as he bent over his work in the factory gave him many an uplift that left him more nearly the man whom he imagined Avery's ideal to be.

One other date was marked on the calendar with a star before Flip's birthday came round. It was the night of the literary contest at the high school, when Avery's essay took the prize. Alec had manœuvred for a week to get a ticket, and finally procured one from the head bookkeeper at the factory, whose sister taught in the high school.

He lingered a little while after the contest in the outskirts of the crowd that flocked up to congratulate Avery. She came out to the carriage on her father's arm, with a fleecy evening cloak wrapped round her, and he saw the prize. She held it out a moment in her bare,

white hand to some one who stood near Alec. It was a bright five-dollar gold piece.

**"'"IT'S THE FIRST MONEY I EVER EARNED IN MY LIFE,' SHE SAID, GLEEFULLY."**

"It's the first money I ever earned in my life," she said, gleefully, including Alec in her smile, so that he felt that the remark was addressed to him. "It is so precious I shall have to put it under a glass case. Maybe I can never earn another one."

In his room once more, Alec took out his little gold coin, and,

looking at it, thought he could understand just how proud Avery must feel of hers.

The next time he saw her it was at a Christian Endeavour meeting. Ralph Bently was with her, a gentlemanly, elegant boy in appearance, but Alec knew the reputation he had among the young fellows who knew him best, and it made him set his teeth together hard to see him with a girl as pure and refined as Avery.

"He isn't fit," he thought. "He shouldn't speak to Flip if I could prevent it, and even if he is Avery's cousin and such a young boy, Mr. Windom oughtn't to let him into the house."

For several weeks, at every meeting, the president had made an especial appeal for larger contributions. A large, expensive organ was being built for the church. The Christian Endeavour Society had pledged themselves to pay five hundred dollars of the amount due on it, but part of the sum was still lacking, even after all the socials and fairs that had been given to raise the amount. The president urged each member to add a little to his previous subscription, even at the cost of much self-denial.

Alec had been asked to assume the duty of regularly passing one of the collection boxes at the Sunday night services. He had done this so often in the Sunday school at home that he felt no embarrassment in doing so now, except when he reached the row of chairs where Avery and her cousin sat. He sneezed just as he extended the long-handled collection box toward them, and flushed hotly for having called every one's attention to himself by the loud noise.

The other collector, having finished first, placed his box on the secretary's little stand and went back to his seat. As Alec came forward, the president asked him in a low tone to count the money, and be ready to report the amount after the singing of the last hymn.

Turning his back to the audience, Alec emptied both boxes into the seat of the big pulpit chair standing next to the president's. The two chairs were old Gothic ones, recently retired from the church pulpit to make room for new furniture. There were a number of pennies in the lot, and during the singing he counted them carefully several times, in order to be sure that he had made no mistake.

The hymn was a short one. It came to an end as Alec laid several little piles of coin on the table at the secretary's elbow.

"Four dollars and ninety-six cents, did you say?" repeated the

president, leaning over to catch the report Alec gave in an undertone. "Four dollars and ninety-six cents," he announced aloud. "Really we must do better than that."

Alec saw Avery and Ralph exchange surprised glances. The president went on repeating his former explanations of their financial difficulties. Alec, still watching, saw Ralph Bently make a move to rise, and Avery's hand was laid detainingly on his arm. She was whispering and shaking her head; but Ralph was not to be deterred by any remonstrance. He was on his feet, exclaiming:

"Mr. President, pardon the interruption. There is some mistake in that report! The collection should amount to far more than four dollars and ninety-six cents. Miss Windom alone gave more than that. I saw her drop a five-dollar gold piece into the box."

Avery blushed furiously at being called into public notice in such a manner by her impetuous young cousin. Every drop of blood seemed to leave Alec's face for an instant, and then rushed back until it burned a fiery crimson. He was indignant that Ralph Bently should have been so wanting in courtesy as to proclaim in public the amount of his cousin's donation, the cherished gold piece she had won at the prize contest. And he was deeply mortified to think that he could have made a mistake in counting it. He wondered if he could have been such a fool as to have mistaken the coin for a new penny. What would Avery think of him?

He turned toward the table, evidently disturbed, and counted the money again. Then he shook his head.

"You can see for yourself," he said; "four dollars and ninety-six cents!"

The president picked up both boxes, and, turning them upside down over the table, shook them energetically. The secretary shoved back the chair in which the money had been counted, gave it a tip that would have dislodged any coin left on its smooth plush seat, and peered anxiously round on the floor.

"Don't give it another thought, Mr. Stoker, please don't!" exclaimed Avery, going up to him when her attention was called to his worried expression. "I'm sure it has rolled off into some corner and the janitor will find it when he sweeps. I'll speak to him about it. Anyhow, it is too small a matter to make such a fuss over. I never should have told Ralph what it was if he hadn't teased me about what I had tied up in the corner of my handkerchief." Then she passed on with a smile.

Alec lingered to help collect the hymn-books, and when he passed into the vestibule he heard voices on the outer steps. One of them sounded like Ralph Bently's.

"Oh, maybe so!" it exclaimed, with a disagreeable little laugh; "but it's queer how money will stick to some people's fingers."

Alec, who was in the act of opening the door to go from the prayer-meeting room into the auditorium of the church for the evening service, paused an instant. He was overwhelmed by the sudden conviction that he was the person meant.

# CHAPTER V.

The next day at noon, after a hurried lunch at the restaurant, Alec stopped at the post-office on his way back to the factory. He wanted to add a few lines to the birthday letter which he had written Philippa the night before. He wrote them standing at the public desk; then, drawing the old wallet from his pocket, he took out the long-cherished gold coin from its wrapping of tissue-paper and dropped it into the envelope.

"I'm afraid it isn't safe to send it that way," he said to himself, balancing the letter on two fingers. "It is so heavy that any one could guess what's in it, and it might wear through. I did want her to have it in gold, but I suppose it will be more sensible to send a postal order."

After a moment's deliberation, he turned to the window beside the desk, and asked for a money-order blank. Some one came in while he was filling it out, but he was so absorbed in his occupation that he did not look up until he turned to push the slip and the money through the window bars toward the clerk. Then he saw that it was Ralph Bently who stood behind him, flipping a postal order in his fingers, impatient to have it cashed. They exchanged careless nods, and Alec, sealing his letter, dropped it into the box and hurried back to his work. As the outer door swung shut, Bently leaned his arms on the window ledge and spoke to the clerk, who was an intimate friend of his.

"Say, Billy," he exclaimed, "let me see that coin that Stoker paid you just now, will you? Push it out here a minute."

"What's up?" inquired the clerk, as he complied with the request.

"Oh, nothing much. I just wanted to look at the date." As he examined it, he gave a long whistle. "Whe-ew! It's the same. Curious coincidence, I must say! This young brother takes up a collection Sunday night. Avery drops in her five-dollar gold piece that she got as a prize, you know. Collector turns his back on the meeting to count the money, hands in a report of only four dollars and ninety-six cents. Vows he never saw the gold in the box. A thorough search of the room fails to bring it to light. Nobody can imagine how it disappeared. The next morning he has a coin of the same date to dispose of."

"Who is the fellow, anyway?" asked the clerk.

"That's just it! Who is he? Nobody knows. He came here from some little place back in the country several months ago, and went to work in the Downs & Company shoe factory."

"If that's the case, why don't you ask your uncle about him? He's both the company and the manager in the firm, isn't he? He'd know whether the fellow was to be trusted or not."

"I intend to," was the answer; "and say, Billy, if you don't mind, I'll take that coin. Here's its equivalent."

He pushed a rustling new bank-note toward his friend. "See me play Sherlock Holmes now. I always did think I'd make a good detective."

"Look out," was the warning reply. "You have only a slim bit of circumstantial evidence, and it would be hard on the boy to start such a tale if there were no truth in it."

With the coin in his pocket, Ralph sauntered down to his uncle's office. It was some time before the busy man could spare time to listen to him.

"Well," he said at last, looking up, pen in hand, "what can I do for you this morning, Ralph?" He had always taken a special interest in his sister's only son, and now smiled kindly as he approached.

"Oh, nothing, thank you, uncle. I just dropped in to ask you about one of the employees in the factory. Who is this Alec Stoker, and where did he come from?"

The manager's brow contracted an instant in thought. The factory was a large one, and the roll of employees long.

"Stoker! Stoker!" he repeated. Then his face cleared. "Ah! He is the nephew of the best salesman we have on the road. Came well recommended from a little town called Ridgeville, I believe. He seems to be a faithful, energetic boy, and has already pushed up to one promotion."

"Did any one recommend him besides his uncle?" asked Ralph, meaningly.

"No, that was sufficient. But you evidently have a reason for these inquiries. Do you know anything about him?"

"No, only—" he shrugged his shoulders. "Something happened last night that put me on my guard. Didn't Avery tell you?"

At the mention of his daughter's name in connection with Ralph's insinuations, Mr. Windom was instantly alert. He laid down his pen. "No, tell me!" he demanded.

In as few words as possible, Ralph told of the disappearance of Avery's money from the collection box, and the discovery he had made at the post-office. When he had finished, Mr. Windom shook his head gravely.

"You are making a very serious charge, Ralph," he said, "and on very slight provocation. At sixteen one is apt to jump at hasty conclusions. Take the advice of sober sixty, my boy. It is a remarkable coincidence, I admit, but even the common law regards a man as innocent until he is proved guilty, and surely a society that stands for all that the Christian Endeavour does would not fall below the common law in its sense of justice. I'm surprised that its members should be so quick to whisper suspicion and point the accusing finger."

"Oh, I'm not a member!" Ralph exclaimed, hastily. "I am perfectly free to say what I think. Somehow I've never liked the fellow from the start. He takes so much on himself, and seems to want to push himself in where he doesn't belong."

Mr. Windom, swinging round in his revolving chair toward his desk, picked up his pen again. "Stoker is all right so far as I know," he said. "It would be a very small thing to let a personal dislike influence you in this."

He spoke sternly. Adjusting his eyeglasses, he pulled some papers toward him, and Ralph, feeling that he desired the conversation to close, backed out of the office with a hasty good day. His face flushed at his uncle's implied rebuke, and he resolved that if there was any possible way, he would prove that his suspicion was right. He stopped at the post-office on his way home, to speak to the clerk again.

"Billy," he said, in a confidential tone, "do a favour for me. Just drop a line to the postmaster at that address, will you, and ask him to tell you what he knows about a former resident of that place—one Alec Stoker? I'm hot on his track now, and I'm going to trace this thing out if it takes all the year."

"Found out anything?" asked the clerk.

"Ask me later," Ralph answered, with a knowing look. "It's a detective's policy to keep mum."

So the poison of suspicion began its work. In a few days, the answer came to the clerk's letter. Alec Stoker was O. K. so far as the postmaster of Ridgeville knew. His grandfather had been one of the most highly respected citizens of the place, but—then followed an account of Alec's father. This the self-appointed young detective seized eagerly.

"Humph! Thought there was bad blood somewhere!" he exclaimed. He took the report to his uncle, who read it gravely, and dismissed him with a short lecture on the cruelty of repeating such stories to the intentional hurt of a fellow creature. Stung to anger by this additional reproof, Ralph was more determined than before to prove that his suspicions were correct. He carried the letter to the president of the society, urging investigation.

"No!" was the determined answer; "better lose a thousand times that amount than accuse him falsely. Because his father was dishonest is no proof that he is a thief. Drop it, Bently. Don't put a stumbling-block in the poor fellow's way by spreading such insinuations as that. He seems one of the most earnest and sincere members we ever had in the society."

With a muttered reply about wolves in sheep's clothing, Ralph took his letter to the treasurer and secretary. Meeting the same response from them, he talked the matter over with some of the members, who were more willing to listen than the others, and less conscientious about repeating their surmises. So the poison spread and the story grew. It came to Alec's ears at last. There is always some thoughtless talebearer ready to gather up the arrows of gossip and thrust them into the quivering heart of the victim.

Then the matter dropped so far as the society was concerned. Alec simply stayed away. Some there were who never noticed his absence. Some were confirmed in their suspicions by it. Ralph Bently declared that it was proof enough for him that Stoker felt guilty. If nothing was the matter, why should he have dropped out so suddenly when he had pretended all along to be so interested in the services and had taken such an active part in them?

The president, noting his absence, promised himself to look him up sometime, but such promises, never finding definite dates, are never

fulfilled. The member of the visiting committee who had called on Alec during his illness, and was really interested in him, started to call again. Something interrupted him, however, and he eased his conscience, which kept whispering that it was his duty to go, by sending him one of the printed invitations they always sent to strangers, cordially urging a regular attendance at the meetings.

Then the society went selfishly on in its old channels, unmindful of the young life set adrift again in a sea of doubt and discouragement, with no hand held out to draw it back from the peril of shipwreck. The despairing mood that had settled down on Alec during the summer seized him again. He would work doggedly on during the day, thinking of Flip and his Aunt Eunice, and feeling that for their sakes he must stick bravely at it. There was no other position open to him. But it was almost intolerable staying in a town where people not only knew of his father's disgrace, but pointed accusing fingers at him. His sensitiveness on the subject made him grow more and more morbid. He brooded over it until he imagined that every one who happened to glance steadily in his direction must be saying, inwardly, "Like father, like son."

He knew that Ralph Bently had gone to Mr. Windom with his information. The talebearer had given him an exaggerated account of the interview. He felt that there was no longer any use for him to hope the manager would ever raise him to the position of his trusted assistant, no matter how thoroughly he might learn the details of the business. For that reason he studied the newspapers for the advertisements of help wanted. He intended to make a change at the first opportunity.

Once, crossing a street, he met the Windom carriage coming toward him. Avery, fair and gracious beside her mother, was bowing to an acquaintance. He started forward eagerly. He had not seen her since the last night he attended church, but the picture of her pure, sweet face, upturned like a white flower as she listened to the service, had been with him ever since. It had come before him many an evening when, with head bowed on his hands, he had leaned over the little table in his room, gazing intently into vacancy; it had laid a detaining hand on him when he would have flung out of the house in his desperation, in search of some diversion to keep him from brooding over his fate.

Now they were almost face to face. Forgetting everything but his pleasure in seeing her once more, and remembering her smiling greetings in the past, his hand went up involuntarily toward his hat; but

he stopped half-way, for, turning toward her mother just then, she called her attention to something on the other side of the street.

**"HIS HAND WENT UP INVOLUNTARILY TOWARD HIS HAT."**

"Just what I might have expected!" muttered Alec, thinking she purposely avoided him. His teeth were set and his face white with mortification. But in

his heart he had not expected it. He had taken a vague comfort in the thought that she would believe in his innocence, no matter who else doubted. She had insisted so kindly on his never giving the lost

money another thought.

If there had been only one accusation to deny, he could have gone to her with that, he thought. He would have compelled her to believe his innocence by the very force of his earnestness. But the knowledge of the accusation against his father silenced him.

"Hello! You nearly knocked me down, Stoker. Where are you going?" It was one of the factory boys who asked the question, and Alec, hurrying down the street with unseeing eyes, became suddenly aware that he had run against some one who had caught him by the arm, and was laughingly shaking him to make him answer. "Where are you going?"

"Oh, I don't know, and I don't care," was the reckless answer.

"All right, come along if you want good company," was the joking reply, and the other boy, slipping his arm in Alec's, turned his steps to a corner where a jolly crowd were waiting for him to join them.

After that there were no more lonely evenings for Alec, when he sat with bowed head beside his table, staring into vacancy. He should have had another promotion in March. Alec felt that he was proficient enough to be advanced, and he told himself bitterly that the reason he was not was because the manager mistrusted him.

It was true that the manager did distrust him. Not on account of the suspicions which Ralph Bently had sowed broadcast, but because, made doubly watchful by the hint, he discovered how Alec was spending his evenings. Although the work in the factory was done as well as ever, he knew that no one could keep the company and late hours that Alec did and not fall short of the high standard he had set for the one who was ultimately to become his assistant.

The months slipped slowly by. Philippa wrote that the garden was gay with spring crocuses and snowdrops; then that Ridgeville had never been such a bower of roses as it was that June. But to Alec the months were marked only by his little winnings and little losings.

There came a time in the early autumn when Alec crept up the creaking stairs to his room, haggard and pale in the gray light of the breaking dawn. He had been out all night and lost not only all the money he had put away in the bank, the savings of seven endless months, but he was in debt for a greater sum than all his next month's salary would amount to.

Heavy-eyed and dizzy from the long hours spent in the close little

gambling den, reeking with stifling tobacco smoke, Alec dragged himself to his room. After he had closed the door, he stood leaning with his back against it for a moment. He was facing two pictures that gazed at him from the mantel: One was the patient, wistful face of his Aunt Eunice; the other was Philippa's, looking straight out at him with such honest, sincere eyes, such eager questioning, that he could not meet their clear gaze. He strode across the room and turned both faces to the wall. Then, without undressing, he threw himself on the bed with a groan.

He was late reaching the factory that morning, for he fell asleep at once into a sleep of exhaustion, so deep that the usual sounds did not arouse him. As it was his first offence, the foreman passed it by in silence; but, faint from lack of food (there had been no time for breakfast), worn by the excitement and high nervous tension of the night before, he was in no condition to do his work. He made one mistake after another, until, made more nervous by repeated accidents both to the material and machinery he was handling, he made a blunder too serious to pass without a report to the manager. It involved the loss of considerable money to the company.

"You'll be lucky if that mistake doesn't give you your walking papers," said the foreman. "You'll hear from it at the end of the month."

If there had been only himself to consider, Alec would have welcomed his dismissal, but there was Flip and his Aunt Eunice. How they believed in him! How proud they were of him! Not for worlds would he have them know how far he had fallen short of their ideal of him. So for their sakes he waited in feverish anxiety to know the result.

# CHAPTER VI.

It was a rainy Sunday afternoon. A few lumps of coal burned in the dingy grate in Alec's room. He had slept for several hours, had finished reading his last library book, and now, as he clasped his hands behind his head, yawning lazily, he remembered that he had not written home for two weeks. Letter-writing had become a dreaded task now. What was there to tell them of himself that he cared for them to know? Only that he worked from seven until six, ate, slept, and rose to work again with the dreary monotony of a machine.

For seven months he had not been inside a church door. The only people he met now were the workmen at the factory and the boys with whom he spent his evenings. He could not mention them. Long ago he had exhausted his descriptions of the city. There was nothing for him to write but that he was well and busy, and to fill up the pages with questions about the people at home. It taxed his ingenuity sometimes to evade Flip's straightforward questions, and he often thought that his letters had an insincere ring.

"I wonder what they are doing at home now!" he exclaimed, looking thoughtfully into the coals. "It's just a year ago to-day that I left. I can't imagine them living in the new house. It's always the old sitting-room I see when I think of them. Mack is probably down on the hearth-rug, popping corn or roasting apples, and Flip's curled up in the chimney-seat, telling him stories. And Aunt Eunice—I know what she's doing; what she always does Sunday evening just at this time, when the twilight begins to fall. She has gone into her room and shut the door and knelt down by the big red rocking-chair that we used to be rocked to sleep in. And she's praying for us this very minute, and doesn't know that the dust is half an inch thick on my Bible, and that a prayer hasn't passed my lips since last February. Dear old Aunt Eunice!"

An ache clutched his throat as he thought of her, and a tender mood, such as he had not known for weeks, rushed warm across him. One after another the old scenes rose up before him, until an overwhelming longing to see the well-known faces made the homesick tears start to his eyes.

The twilight shadows deepened in the room, but, lost in the rush of tender memories, he forgot everything save the pictures that seemed to rise before him out of the glowing embers in the grate. In the midst

of his reverie, there was a noise on the stairs—a familiar noise, although he had not heard it for months, a tread and a double tap, as if a foot and two canes were coming up the steps.

"Old Jimmy Scott!" thought Alec, looking round as if awakening from a dream and discovering that the room was nearly dark; he stirred the fire until it burst into cheerful flames.

"Well!" he exclaimed, cordially, throwing open the door in answer to old Jimmy's knock, "of all people! Did you rain down? Here I sat in the dumps, feeling that I hadn't a friend in the town. Come in! Come in!"

He pulled a chair hospitably toward the grate for his guest, and put another lump of coal on the fire.

"Knew you'd be surprised to see me a day like this," said the old soldier, thrusting his foot toward the blaze; but I've been intending to look you up for some time. Kind o' had a drawing in this direction. Thinks I, when I felt it, wonder if he's sick and needs me. When I have feelings like that, I usually pay attention to 'em."

They talked of various things for the next quarter of an hour; of the weather, the new city hall, the approaching elections; but they were both ill at ease. It seemed to Alec that the old man's heart was not in the conversation; that he was only trying to pave the way to some other topic. Finally a pause fell between them. Alec rose to put another lump of coal on the fire, and old Jimmy, looking round the room, noticed the two photographs on the mantel with their faces turned to the wall. He knew well enough whose pictures they were. During Alec's convalescence he had studied them many a time while he listened to the homesick boy's enthusiastic description of his sister and the aunt who had been like a mother to him.

As Alec took his chair again, he saw the old man's surprised glance at the pictures. Then their eyes met. Alec flushed guiltily.

"Something's wrong, boy," said old Jimmy, tenderly. "I knew it. That's why I felt moved to come. Seemed as if the Lord put it in my heart that I must. There's special services going on at Grace Church this week. Something in the evangelist's sermon this morning made me feel that I'd got to speak to somebody before nightfall—stir up somebody to a better life—or I'd be held accountable. Then all of a sudden I began to think of you, so I came up to ask if you wouldn't go to hear him to-night. But I see now that it's more than an invitation to church you need. You're in trouble, or you never would have done that." He nodded toward the pictures. "What is it?"

Alec hesitated a minute, and old Jimmy, reaching over, laid a sympathetic hand on his shoulder. Something in the friendly touch brought a swift rush of tears to Alec's eyes. He was so homesick and lonely, and it seemed so good to have some one to talk with who was really interested in him. Dropping his face in his hands and leaning forward with his elbows on his knees, he blurted out his trouble in broken sentences.

**"HE BLURTED OUT HIS TROUBLE IN BROKEN SENTENCES."**

He told the whole story, beginning with the missing coin; Ralph Bently's insinuations and subsequent endeavour to fasten suspicion

on him; the disclosure of his father's disgrace; the gossip that had caused him to drop out of the society and church, where he felt that he was no longer wanted. Finally the habits he had fallen into, and the money he had lost, and the foreman's prophecy of his discharge from the factory at the end of the month.

"I tried to do right," he said in conclusion. "I had tried all my life. I joined the church when I was no older than Mack, and I lived just as straight as I knew how. But after that—when every one cut me—it didn't seem as if it was any use. I just lost faith in everything and gave up trying. I used to believe in Aunt Eunice's idea of the eternal goodness. It made me feel so safe, somehow, to think that, no matter what happened, we could never—

"'Drift beyond His love and care.'

That He had set islands for us to come across at every turn. You know. You remember that little map I made when I was getting well. One of the islands was named for you, and one was the Isle of Roses, because those flowers the Christian Endeavour society sent seemed to put new courage into me, and led to the acquaintances and friendships that helped me so much while I had them.

"But I've lost that feeling now. I'm cut loose from everything, and you don't know how terribly adrift I feel. I'm just whirled along from day to day, till I've almost come to the place it tells about in Job, where there's nothing left to do but 'curse God and die.'"

As he paused, old Jimmy's voice broke in with hearty cheerfulness, "Why, bless you, my boy, you're all in a fog. And do you know the reason? You haven't the right Pilot aboard any more.

"The 'islands' are all round you, just the same, put there on purpose for you, but you let the devil get his hand at the wheel, and he keeps you steered away from 'em. You say you stopped praying? That very moment he got aboard and took possession. You quit trusting the Lord the instant you got into deep water.

"You made a mistake when you let anybody's gossip run you out of the church or the society. You ought to have stayed and lived it down! That's the only thing for you to do now; go back and begin again and make people believe in your innocence. It will be hard for you, and powerfully awkward, for you have more than your share of pride and sensitiveness, but it's the only manly thing to do."

"Oh, I *couldn't* go back!" groaned Alec. "I believe I'd rather die first.

If it had only been what they said about me, I might have done it, but I couldn't face what they'd continually be thinking about my father. I could never live that down."

"Yes, you can! If you'll only put yourself entirely in the Lord's hands, He'll furnish the strength for you to do whatever is right. You've come to a crisis, Alec Stoker. You've got to fight it out right now, which is to have control of the rest of your life, God or the devil."

There was a long silence. Presently, in a voice choked with emotion, the old man said, "Kneel down, son; I want to pray with you." Together they knelt in the darkening room.

For a long time after old Jimmy took his leave, Alec sat gazing into the flickering fire, as the room grew dimmer and dimmer. Then, urged on by some impulse almost beyond his control, he slipped on his overcoat and hurried out into the street. When he reached the vestibule at the side door of the church, he stood a moment with his hand on the latch. His courage had suddenly failed him. He would go back home and wait until another time, he told himself. The service must be nearly over.

But just then some one struck a few soft chords on the piano, and a full, clear voice began to sing. It was Avery's voice, and she sang with all the pleading earnestness of a prayer:

"Jesus, Saviour, pilot me
Over life's tempestuous sea!
Unknown waves before me roll,
Hiding rock and treacherous shoal;
Chart and compass come from thee:
Jesus, Saviour, pilot me."

Out in the darkness, the storm-tossed, homesick boy stood listening, till his whole soul seemed to go out in that one cry, "Jesus, Saviour, pilot me!" It was a complete surrender of self, and as he whispered the words a peace that he had never known before, a great peace he could not understand, seemed to fold him safe in its keeping.

As the last words of the song died away, he opened the door and walked in. If there was surprise on the faces of many, he did not see it. If it was a departure from the usual custom, he never stopped to consider it. The evangelist who had charge of the service stood for a final word of exhortation, asking if there were not many who could make that song their own, and offer it as a prayer of consecration.

It was never quite clear to Alec afterward just what he said then. But as he told of the struggle he had just been through, and in broken sentences made a public confession of his faith, eyes grew dim, and hearts already touched by the song were strangely thrilled and stirred. Afterward the members came crowding round him with a warm welcome, and he carried away with him the remembrance of many a hearty hand-clasp. One of them was Mr. Windom's. He rarely attended the young people's meetings, and to-night had come only to hear his daughter sing. If he had had any misgivings as to the boy's sincerity of purpose before, every doubt was cleared away as he listened to his manly confession of faith, and looked into his happy face, almost transformed with the hope that illuminated it.

It was Thanksgiving Day. Alec, home on his first vacation, stood in front of the open fire, watching Philippa set the table for their little feast. He had talked late the night before, and told of the many changes that had taken place during the last two months. He was in the office now, and his salary had been raised sufficiently to enable him to take a room in a comfortable boarding-house. Since his conversion, Mr. Windom had taken several occasions to show Alec that he trusted him implicitly.

Radiant in her joy at having her brother home again, Philippa kept breaking into little snatches of song whenever there was a pause in the conversation. She thought she had never known such a happy Thanksgiving.

"How nice and homelike it all is!" Alec exclaimed, sniffing the savoury odours that rushed in from the kitchen, of turkey and mince turnovers, whenever Aunt Eunice opened the oven door. "And how good it seems to hear you singing like that, Flip!"

"Do you remember the day you told me that it set your teeth on edge to hear me singing that hymn?" asked Philippa, laughingly.

"Yes, but that was because I was all out of tune myself. Everything is different now. Since I've given up trying to do my own piloting, it seems to me that I come across one of His 'islands' nearly every day." As he spoke, Macklin came running up on the porch, stamping the snow from his feet, and burst into the house, his cheeks as red as winter apples.

"Here's a letter for you, Alec!" he cried. "Where's my hammer, Flip? I want to crack some of those nuts we gathered on purpose for to-day."

She brought him the hammer, and he hurried away. Alec was turning the dainty blue envelope over in his hands.

The address was written in the same hand as the card which had come nearly a year ago with the Christian Endeavour roses. He tore open the envelope, glanced at the monogram, then down the page, and turned to Philippa with a long-drawn whistle. "I wish you'd listen to this!" he exclaimed.

"Dear Mr. Stoker:—I am writing this in the hope that it will reach you on Thanksgiving Day. You have suffered so much on account of that miserable gold piece of mine, it is only fair that you should have this explanation at once.

"This afternoon Miss Cornish and I went to the church to practise a new song that I am to sing at the Thanksgiving service. She was to play my accompaniments. The side door of the church was open, for the florist was decorating the altar, so we did not need to use the minister's latch-key, which we had borrowed for the occasion. We practised for some time, and then sat and talked until it was almost dark. When we started home, we found to our dismay that the janitor, thinking we had gone, had double-locked the door for the night with his big key. Our little latch-key was then of no use.

"We called and pounded until we were desperate. I had an engagement for dinner, and could not afford to lose any time. Finally we went into the prayer-meeting room, and found that we could open one of the panes in the great stained-glass window at the side. Miss Cornish climbed up on one of those old pulpit chairs that the officers use, and said that if she could lean out through the pane, she would call to the first one who passed, and ask him to bring the janitor to our release.

"But some way, in climbing, Miss Cornish caught her high heel in the plush with which the seat is upholstered. The goods is frayed and old. The chair tipped, and they both came to the floor with a bang. Just as I sprang to catch her, something bright and round rolled out of the chair toward me and dropped right at my feet.

"It was that unlucky gold coin, which must have slipped under the plush in some way when you counted the money on it that night.

"It was so late when we were finally rescued that I could not keep my dinner engagement. I am glad for one reason; it gives me time to write this now. I know that it will make your Thanksgiving brighter to know this, and I am sure that it is needless for me to say that I never for an instant connected the disappearance of the coin with you in any way. I regret extremely the silly gossip that wounded you so sorely, and want to tell you how much I respect the manly way in which you have since met and answered it.

"Wishing you a happy Thanksgiving with your family, I am

"Sincerely your friend,
"Avery Windom."

**"IT WAS THAT UNLUCKY GOLD COIN."**

Philippa, watching his face as he read, came up to him when he had finished, and put a hand on each shoulder.

"Alec," she said, with the straightforwardness of sixteen, "that means a lot to you, doesn't it, that she should write that she is 'sincerely your friend'?"

"Yes," he answered, honestly; "a very great deal."

"Do you suppose it would stand in the way, sometime, when you are older, you know, and have made a place for yourself in the world, her knowing about—about father?"

"I don't know, Flip," he answered, slowly; "I've often wondered about that."

Through the open door came Aunt Eunice's voice, singing jubilantly:

"I know not what the future hath
Of marvel or surprise,
Assured alone that life and death
His mercy underlies."

"How that old hymn answers everything!" Alec said, softly. "No matter what lies ahead, it's all right now. God's at the helm, little sister! I shall find all the 'islands' he has set for me."

THE END.

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