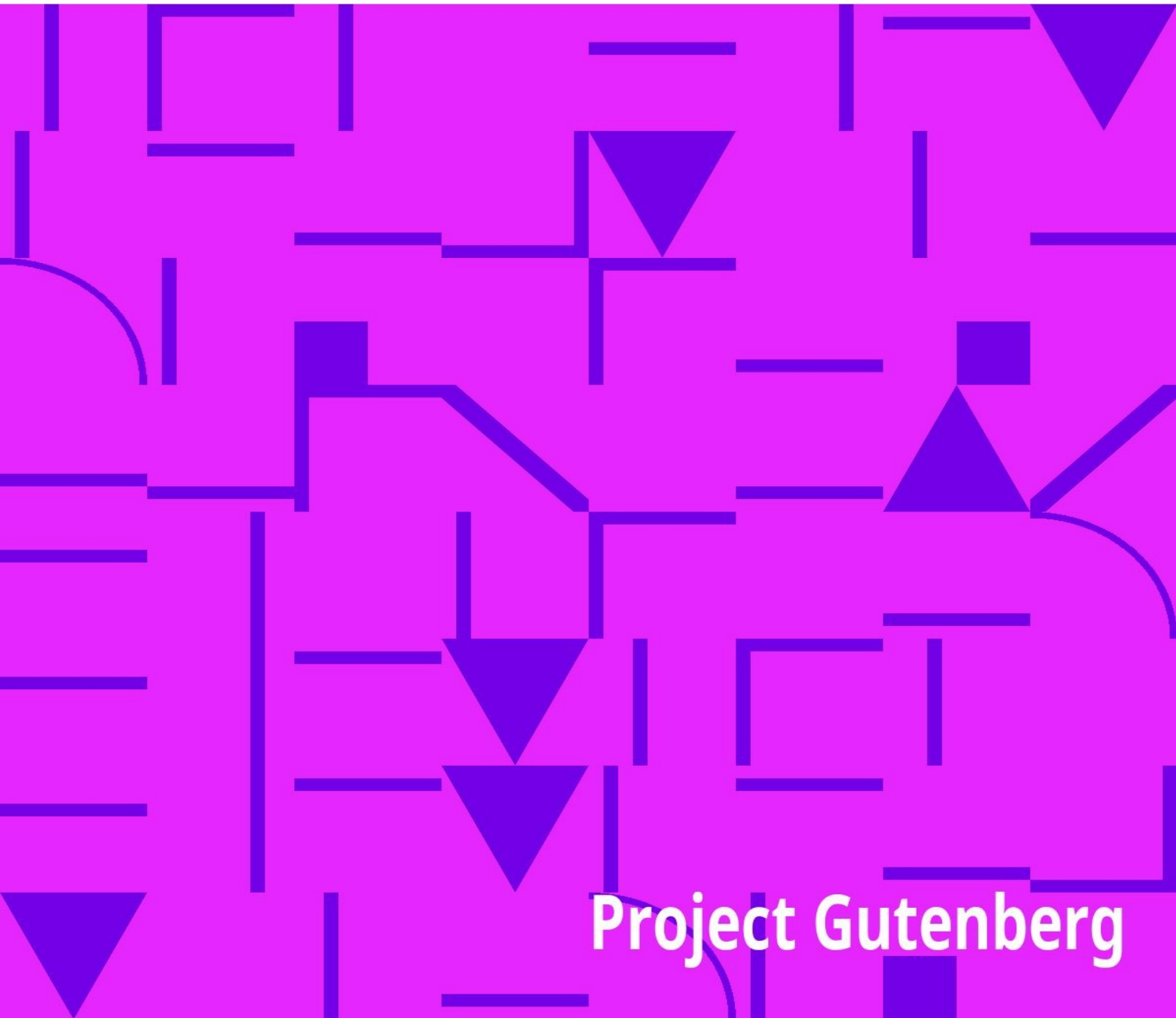
Bob Chester's Grit; Or, From Ranch to Riches

Frank V. Webster



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Bob Chester's Grit

Or

From Ranch to Riches

BY

FRANK V. WEBSTER

AUTHOR OF "THE NEWSBOY PARTNERS," "ONLY A FARM BOY," "BOB THE CASTAWAY," ETC.

ILLUSTRATED

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Cupples & Leon Co., Publishers, New York

BOB CHESTER'S GRIT

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Bob Chester's Grit

CHAPTER I

UNDER A CLOUD

"Hey, boy! What's your name?"

"Bob Chester."

"Where are you going with that basket of groceries?"

"To deliver an order to one of my guardian's customers."

"Are you honest?"

"I hope so, sir," replied Bob, his face expressing surprise that his probity should be questioned.

The man who had hailed Bob Chester appeared to be about twenty-five years old, and his clothes were well-fitting, giving him the air of a man of means. With him were two other men; one of whom, several years older, was also well dressed. The third member of the group was entirely different from the others. His clothes were grotesque, and bore every trace of having been purchased in some country store. His derby hat was green-black, and apparently a size too small, judging from the manner in which it rested on his head. Had not his appearance bespoken that he was a stranger come from the country to see the sights of New York, his face, sunburned and honest, would have proclaimed him as one unaccustomed and unfamiliar with the wiles of a great city.

Prior to his having been addressed, the boy who had given his name as Bob Chester had noticed the difference between the three men as they stood in earnest conversation on the sidewalk, and instinctively he had been attracted by the frankness of the countryman's face. He had been wondering why the two New Yorkers were so interested in the other man, but the unexpectedness of his being accosted had driven all thought from his mind, and he had given his answers as though compelled by the searching glance the younger of the two men had directed at him.

All three watched him intently, and as he made his answer that he hoped he was honest, the elder of the New Yorkers exclaimed:

"I think he will do, Harry."

"Well, if you say so, all right," returned the other, and then turning to Bob, he asked:

"Would your guardian object seriously if you did not deliver your order for about half an hour?"

"I don't know. Saturday is always a busy day at the store, and Mr. Dardus always scolds me if I don't get right back. It doesn't make any difference to him how far I have to go, he always thinks I should be back within fifteen minutes after I have started. So I'd rather not delay—because I don't like to be scolded," added the boy, as though by way of apologizing for his refusal.

"Well, if we gave you a dollar, don't you think you could stand the old man's scolding, if you were half an hour late?" asked the elder of the New Yorkers, at the same time putting his hand in his pocket and drawing forth a large roll of bills, which he opened ostentatiously. The figures were so large that Bob's eyes seemed as though they would pop out of his head, so eagerly did they scan them. The man extracted a dollar bill.

The sight of so much money in the possession of one man fairly hypnotized the boy, and he replied:

"Do you mean you will give me a whole dollar if I will wait here half an hour?"

"That's what!" exclaimed the man with the roll of bills. "But there is a little more to it. Our friend, Mr. Anthony Simpkins, and we, have an important business transaction in hand, involving fifteen hundred dollars. My friend and I don't happen to have more than five hundred dollars with us, while Mr. Simpkins has seven hundred and fifty, and so we want you to hold this money while my friend and I go to our bank and get the two hundred and fifty dollars more, which is our share in the deal."

"What, me hold twelve hundred and fifty dollars!" exclaimed Bob, as though unable to believe his ears. "Why, you don't know anything about me. I might run off with it."

"You look honest," replied the man who had hailed him, "and that's why we stopped you. Besides, you wouldn't be able to run away if you wanted to, because Mr. Simpkins is going to wait here with you until we return."

"And you will give me a dollar just for keeping the money until you come back?" demanded Bob.

"Exactly."

"All right. That's half as much as I get for working a week."

"That's the boy. I am glad to see that you have the sense of thrift so strongly developed. Now we will just put Mr. Simpkins' seven hundred and fifty dollars and our five hundred dollars in this envelope, which you will keep until we return."

As he spoke, the elder of the New Yorkers counted out five hundred dollars, put it in the envelope, and then asked the countryman for his share. After verifying the amount, he placed it with the other money, then handed an envelope to Bob, exclaiming:

"Now you two stay right here, and we will be back within fifteen minutes."

"All right, sir," said Bob, as he grasped the envelope. And as his fingers closed about it, he unconsciously threw back his head, and squared his shoulders, proud of the thought that he had been selected as the custodian of such a large sum of money.

Again repeating their promise to return within a quarter of an hour, the two New Yorkers hastened away, and were soon lost among the people who thronged the thoroughfare.

Oblivious as the people who live in New York are to the presence of their fellowmen, the sight of the man so obviously from the country and the bright-eyed, alert boy, closely clasping the envelope in one hand, while at his feet rested the basket packed with groceries, attracted many a passing glance.

Between Simpkins and Bob, however, no words were exchanged; though each, while apparently gazing at the passersby, kept a sharp lookout upon the other.

Minute after minute went by, without the return of the two men, who had said they were going to the bank for money, and as the time wore on without their re-appearance, Simpkins exclaimed:

"I wonder what's keeping them? I don't want to stand here all day."

"And I can't," said Bob. "I will be more than half an hour late in getting back to the store, and I know Mr. Dardus will be very angry. I most wish I hadn't said I'd wait. It just shows that Mr. Dardus is right when he says there is no pleasure in having money that isn't earned honestly, and getting a dollar for just holding this money isn't really honest work."

"Well, if you think you ought to be delivering your groceries, why not give the envelope to me? I'll stay here and wait, though I must say I am getting tired."

"Oh, no," said Bob. "I gave my word that I would stay, and I will."

The countryman's suggestion that he be intrusted with the money aroused Bob's suspicion, for he remembered that the others had placed five hundred dollars in the envelope, and he thought it was a scheme on the part of Simpkins to get possession of this money. So that after this interchange of words, both lapsed into silence.

As the quarter hour lengthened into a half, then to three-quarters, and finally to an hour, without the re-appearance of the two well-dressed New Yorkers, Bob's dread of his guardian's anger outweighed his desire to earn the dollar, and he finally exclaimed:

"I can't wait any longer; honest I can't." And then, chancing to catch sight of a policeman standing on the corner about a hundred feet away, a way out of the difficulty suggested itself, and he said to the countryman:

"I tell you how we can fix it. We will go over to that policeman and explain the matter to him, and I'll ask him to hold the envelope until those men come back."

And without giving Simpkins time to protest, Bob picked up his basket, and led the way to where the guardian of the law was standing, indolently surveying the crowd.

Casting a contemptuous glance at the two ludicrous figures that approached him, the policeman first listened to the excited explanation of the boy indifferently, then with incredulity, and finally with amusement.

"I have heard of such easy marks, but I never expected to see them in flesh and blood," exclaimed the officer, when Bob stopped speaking. "So you think you are holding some money in that envelope, do you, kid? Well, I'll bet a year's pay that there is nothing in it but old paper."

And while the countryman and the boy gazed at him in speechless dismay, the policeman took the envelope from Bob's hand, opened it, and drew forth to their startled gaze a roll of tissue-paper.

"I told you so," grunted the policeman, but further comment was interrupted by the actions of Simpkins.

No sooner had he discovered that he had been swindled than he shouted at the top of his lungs:

"I've been robbed! I've been robbed! They've stolen seven hundred and fifty dollars from me!"

The loud, excited words and the gesticulations of the grotesquely-garbed man quickly drew the attention of the passersby, and in a trice the victims of the swindlers and the policeman were the center of a curious throng of people.

"I want my money! I want my money!" bellowed Simpkins.

"You stand a fine chance of getting it," returned the policeman, "but I will do what I can for you. I'll take you around to the police station, and you can make a complaint to the sergeant and give him a description of the 'con' men."

As word of the swindle was passed among the crowd, various were the comments and bits of advice offered.

At first Bob had been too stunned by the discovery that he had been made an innocent party to the swindle even to think, but as he gradually recovered from the unpleasant surprise, his one thought was to get away from Simpkins, to deliver his groceries and get back to the store as quickly as possible. In order to carry out this plan, he began to worm his way through the constantly increasing crowd.

One of the men who were offering advice chanced to see him, and cried:

"There goes the boy! He was probably standing in with the swindlers. Why don't you arrest him, Mr. Officer?"

"That's the thing to do," agreed several others, and the policeman, evidently thinking that it would be a wise procedure for him to seize some one in connection with the swindle, leaped after Bob, grasped him roughly by the shoulder, and started for the station-house, followed by Simpkins and those of

the crowd who had nothing better to do.

Arrived at the police station, the countryman and the patrolman both talked at once, while Bob stood in silence, overcome by the disgrace of his arrest.

Taking his pencil, the sergeant stopped the countryman's torrent of words, and began to ask him questions as to his meeting with the strangers, eliciting the information that he had met them coming over on the ferry-boat from Jersey City, and that the business deal they had proposed was the betting of fifteen hundred dollars on a race horse that was sure to win.

"It's a pity there isn't a law to keep you country people out of the cities," grunted the sergeant, when the details of the story had been told him, and then, turning to the policeman, he said:

"You did right in bringing along the boy, McCarty. He is evidently one of the gang, or he wouldn't have been passing along the street just as he was. We may be able to learn from him who the 'con' men are, and where they hang out. Search him, and then take him back to a cell. I'll send a couple of plain-clothes men in to talk with him."

And grabbing Bob by the arm, the policeman dragged him toward the door which led to a cell.

CHAPTER II

BOB FINDS AN UNEXPECTED CHAMPION

Among those who had heard the story of the swindling of the countryman were several reporters for the great metropolitan afternoon papers, and as the burly policeman dragged the pathetic figure of the grocer's boy to the cell, one of these, a particularly clean-cut, wide-awake young fellow, exclaimed:

"Sergeant, that's the rawest thing I ever saw you do. I don't believe that boy knows anything more about those 'con' men, and probably not as much, as you do. It's a shame to lock him up, and I am going to give you the hottest roast for doing so that the paper will stand for."

"You do, and you'll never set foot inside this station while I'm in charge," retorted the officer. "If you knew as much about old Dardus as I do, you wouldn't be so keen to champion this boy. The old man has been mixed up in many a questionable transaction, and I shouldn't be surprised if it turned out that he was in league with these fellows who got that country bumpkin's seven hundred and fifty dollars, and that he put the boy up to playing the part he did."

"I don't know anything about Dardus," announced the reporter who had taken up the cudgel in Bob's behalf, "and I don't care. If he is mixed up in questionable dealings, that doesn't mean that the boy is necessarily a party to them. You can't tell me that a chap, with a face as honest as that boy has, is a criminal."

"When you've been doing police stations longer, Foster, you will learn that you can't judge criminals by their faces," snarled the sergeant, and as the other reporters heard this caustic comment, they laughed uproariously.

"Laugh if you want to," returned Bob's champion, "but I am going to prove the boy's innocence of any complicity in the swindle."

And without more ado, the reporter left the police station.

Although the representatives of the other papers had sided in with the police official who announced his belief in Bob's guilt, they nevertheless experienced a feeling of uneasiness, lest Foster might after all be right, and they were holding

consultation as to the advisability of investigating the story more thoroughly, when the sergeant exclaimed:

"Don't let that fellow worry you. I've known Len Dardus for years. He's as crooked as they make them, and he never had an honest man work for him that I know of."

As the acceptance of the police official's theory would save them the necessity of investigating the story further, the reporters agreed to accept his version, and to accord with it they wrote their stories.

As Jack Foster left the police station, his anger at the system which made it impossible for a person without influence or money to obtain justice, was strong, and his heart went out to the boy, as he thought how he would feel, were he himself in his place.

"If that boy isn't honest from the soles of his feet to the top of his head, I shall be the most surprised man in New York," he said to himself, "and if my paper has any influence, I am going to get him out of his trouble."

Occupied with considering various plans for aiding Bob, Foster quickly reached the store of Len Dardus, but as he entered and caught sight of an old, gray-haired man, with a face in which craftiness was the chief characteristic, he wondered if, after all, the police sergeant could have been right.

"Is this Mr. Len Dardus?" asked Foster, walking up to the counter, behind which this repelling creature stood.

"That's my name," snapped the proprietor of the store, adding as he scrutinized his questioner closely:

"What do *you* want?"

"I want to know if you have a boy working for you by the name of Bob Chester."

"I have, but I won't have after to-night, I can tell you. I have no use for lazy boys, and for laziness he can't be beaten. Here I sent him to deliver some goods more than two hours ago, and he hasn't got back yet, and this is my busiest day."

So disagreeable was the tone in which the old man spoke that Foster could not refrain from remarking:

"Well, you do not seem to be overrushed with trade just now. However, that is neither here nor there. How long have you had Bob in your employ?"

"Ever since he was big enough to be of any service to me."

"He's a good boy, isn't he?"

"No, he's not. Didn't I just tell you he has been gone over two hours, delivering an order that should not have taken him more than fifteen minutes at the most? No good boy would dawdle so about his business. But why do you ask?"

Foster, however, was not ready to tell Bob's employer of his predicament until he had obtained more information about the boy, and instead of answering the question, said:

"You misunderstood my meaning. I want to know whether or not he is honest or has any bad habits."

"He has the habit of taking a long time to deliver his orders, and he always has some plausible excuse for the delay—although I never accept his excuses. It isn't the way to bring up a boy. But he doesn't steal, and I don't let him go out nights, so he can't have any companions. But why do you ask? What business of yours is it?"

"Just one more question before I answer you."

"You seem mighty long on questions, but I'll not answer another one until you tell me why you are taking such pains to find out about Bob. He hasn't any friend but me. I'm his guardian."

So hostile was the grocer's manner becoming, and with such increasing suspicion did he view his inquisitor, that Foster realized it would be necessary to explain Bob's predicament were he to be able to help him, and briefly he told the story that had been repeated in the police station.

"That just goes to show my theory is right," declared the grocer, when he had been given the particulars of his ward's arrest. "If Bob had gone about his business and delivered the order, instead of being tempted by the offer of a dollar, he wouldn't have got into this trouble. It will be a good lesson for him, and I shall be able to get along some way, I suppose, until he comes back."

"But surely you don't mean to say that you are not going to do anything to help him out of his trouble?" exclaimed Foster in amazement, as he heard the heartless words.

With a depreciating shrug of his shoulders, Len Dardus responded:

"But what can I do? It will cost money to hire a lawyer, or even to bail him out. Besides, as I said, it will be a good lesson for him."

"But hasn't he any money of his own?" queried the reporter.

"What do you want to know for? Are you a lawyer? No, sir! if you are, and have come to tell me about Bob in the hope that I will hire you, you might as well go back to your place of business. I won't spend a cent on him. The lesson will do him good."

The heartlessness of the grocer incensed Foster, and he retorted:

"It happens that I am not a lawyer, so it isn't any money that I am after. I am acting simply from a desire to see the boy get fair treatment, and if I were his guardian, whether he had any money or not, I would do everything in my power to help him out of his trouble."

"But what can I do? There is no one to stay in the store here, and I don't see how I could help any way."

"You could go down to the police station and speak a word for the lad. If you have had the care of him for so long, what you could say in regard to his honesty ought to be sufficient to cause his release."

As he mentioned the grocer's going to the police station, Foster thought he noticed the old man tremble, as though in fear, and what the sergeant had said about Dardus recurred to him, and while he hesitated as to whether or not he should press the point, Bob's guardian exclaimed:

"I can't go now. There is no one to look after the store. But perhaps I can go down this evening."

"That would be too late. His case will come up in court this afternoon."

"Well, if it does, the boy'll have to take the consequences. I always told him he shouldn't linger over delivering his orders. It will be a good lesson to him."

The incessant repetition of the last words grated on Foster's ears, and, realizing that he was only wasting time in trying to persuade the hard-hearted guardian to help his ward, he exclaimed:

"Then you refuse to do anything to assist Bob, do you?"

"Well, I don't know as I would put it exactly that way. I'll see if I can't do something this evening."

"Well, you may be obliged to leave your store, whether you want to or not," retorted Foster, and with this enigmatical remark, the very suggestiveness of which caused an expression of fear to settle on the face of the grocer, the reporter turned on his heel and left the shop.

CHAPTER III

FREE AGAIN

While Bob's champion, unknown to the boy, was interesting himself in his cause, Bob was sitting on a little iron bunk his cell contained, staring about him as though unable to comprehend the situation.

After a few minutes he heard footsteps approaching down the corridor, and then he was suddenly aroused from his reverie by a voice exclaiming:

"Well, kid, you came near making a good-sized bit of money."

"I don't call a dollar a very large sum," retorted Bob.

"A dollar? What do you mean?" exclaimed one of the two men whom Bob beheld standing outside the cell door, staring at him through the bars. "You had seven hundred and fifty dollars of that countryman's money, didn't you?"

"I saw seven hundred and fifty dollars of his money put in the envelope, but all I was to get for holding the envelope until those bad men returned was to be one dollar—and they didn't even come back to pay me, and now I haven't delivered the groceries, and Mr. Dardus will be very angry."

"Oh, ho! So you are Len Dardus' kid, are you?" queried the other of Bob's inquisitors.

"I'm not his kid, but he is my guardian," corrected the lad in a voice so full of reproach that the two men could not refrain from smiling.

"Then you don't like Dardus?" smiled the one who had addressed him first.

"I think he is unreasonable," returned Bob.

"Yes, and none too honest," commented the other.

With the various methods known only to the police detectives of the large metropolitan police forces, the two men put Bob through a grilling examination, trying in every possible way to scare him into admitting either a knowledge of who the swindlers were, or of direct complicity in the confidence game, but

without being able to shake his story, even in the slightest detail.

Loath as the police officials were to admit Bob's innocence, his straightforward answers and manly manner finally convinced them that he was, as he had said, entirely guiltless, and they withdrew.

As they returned to the outer room of the police station, the sergeant looked at them questioningly.

"That boy had nothing to do with the swindle," announced one of the men who had been examining Bob.

"That's what," confirmed the other. "If there ever was an honest boy in New York, that poor little chap back in the cell is one. If you take my advice, sergeant, you will let him go, and you will change the entry on your police book from 'Arrested and Held for Complicity,' to 'Held for Examination'."

"What's the matter with all you guys, anyway?" snarled the sergeant, as he saw that the weight of opinion was against him. "Has the boy hypnotized you? It's enough to convict him that he should be working for Len Dardus."

"That isn't his fault," returned the officer who had advised the sergeant to change the entry in his book. "His mother and father died when he was three years old, and his father provided in his will that Dardus should be his guardian, though from what the boy has told us, he hasn't had any too happy a time of it, poor little shaver."

"Now don't go turning on the sympathy," growled the sergeant. "I don't care whether the boy is guilty or not. All I know is that we have got to make a case against him. It would never do to have it said that two sharpers could rob a countryman in broad daylight in our precinct. Haven't our reports to headquarters said, and haven't the papers said, that our precinct has been free from all such crimes for more than six months, and this is one of the rawest swindles that has been worked for a long time. So you two get busy and fix up your case if you want to stay in this precinct. If you don't, I'll tell the captain and the inspector, and you will be sorry."

Without response, the two officers, who believed in Bob's innocence, turned on their heels, and started toward the door of the police station.

"Hey, you two! Go down to the court. I am going to send this boy right down, and mind you remember what I told you," shouted the sergeant. And, suiting his

action to his words, he gave orders for Bob to be brought from his cell and taken to the police court.

Just as Bob appeared in the outer room of the station house, Foster entered.

As he saw the boy whose cause he had espoused, the reporter exclaimed:

"So you have decided to release him, have you, sergeant?"

"Release nothing," growled the official. "He's on his way to court," and then, as he had read from the expression on Foster's face that his mission to interview Len Dardus had not been altogether satisfactory, he continued: "You found I was pretty near right about old Dardus, didn't you?"

"He surely isn't a very agreeable person," answered the reporter, "and I quite agree with you that if there was money enough in the undertaking, he would never stop to question whether or not it was against the law. But I tell you one thing, sergeant, you are dead wrong about the boy. The old man actually hates him."

"Then it would be an easy way for him to get rid of the kid by getting him into just this kind of a mess."

"Maybe you're right," assented Foster, as this theory was announced, "still I don't believe you are. I am more convinced than ever that the boy had nothing to do with the swindle, and I don't think old Dardus did, either."

"Well, it won't help matters to keep arguing about it here. We'll let the judge decide. McCarty, call a patrol wagon, and take the kid to court."

"Oh, I say! you are surely not going to make that kid ride in the patrol wagon?" protested one of the other newspaper men. "That would be rubbing it in too hard."

Emphatically the others added their protest, and in the face of such opposition, the sergeant countermanded his order for the police wagon, and instead instructed Patrolman McCarty to take the boy to court, which was less than two blocks away.

Surrounded by the reporters, Bob and the patrolman walked down the street, closely followed by the countryman, whose desire to make money without working for it had led to the loss of the seven hundred and fifty dollars.

Arrived at the building in which the court was located, Bob was led away to the detention room, to await the calling of his case, while the reporters and Simpkins made their way direct to the court room.

In due course the case was reached.

When the presiding magistrate caught sight of Bob's sad face, the stern expression on his own countenance relaxed, and he bestowed upon the trembling boy a glance full of encouragement.

Noting this, Foster, who had been watching the judge intently, was inspired with the hope that the boy would be quickly discharged. But his pleasure was only momentary, for, as the magistrate read the charge, his face became even more austere than usual.

"Well, Chester, what have you to say for yourself?" demanded the judge, directing a glance at the boy, as though he would pierce his very soul. "Are you guilty, or not guilty?"

"WELL CHESTER, WHAT HAVE YOU TO SAY FOR YOURSELF?"
"WELL CHESTER, WHAT HAVE YOU TO SAY FOR YOURSELF?"
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The strangeness of the scene and lack of familiarity with the procedure of a court caused Bob to remain silent.

Again the magistrate repeated his question, but still Bob made no reply.

"I think he wants to plead guilty," interposed one of the plain-clothes men whom the sergeant had ordered to make a case against the boy. "Perhaps if you offered to give him a light sentence if he would tell us who the two men are who got away with the money, he would do so."

"How about that?" demanded the magistrate, again directing his gaze at the boy.

But before Bob had a chance to reply, Foster exclaimed:

"He does not want to plead guilty, your honor. This whole business in dragging this boy to court is an outrage. He had no more knowledge of the fact that those men intended to, or were, swindling this man from the country, than you have."

The tone in which the reporter spoke was one that could not fail to be impressive, and after a moment's hesitation, the magistrate, who knew Foster as a reporter and admired him for his manly fearlessness, asked:

"What do you know about the case?"

"I protest, your honor, that this man should not be allowed to interfere with the case," said one of the plain-clothes officers. "He was not a witness of the transaction. I think it would be more proper to hear Simpkins' version of the affair."

"When I wish your advice, officer, I will ask for it," snapped the magistrate, and turning again to Foster, he said:

"Tell me all you know about this business."

"Thank you, your honor, I will:

"I happened to be in the police station when the boy was brought in. He told a straightforward story about having been on the way to deliver some groceries, when he was hailed by one of three men, who asked him a few questions, and then offered him a dollar if he would hold an envelope, which was supposed to contain twelve hundred and fifty dollars, for a few minutes. The thought of earning such a sum of money so easily evidently caused the boy to forget all discretion. But as the minutes went by and the two men did not reappear, the boy grew restless, and finally suggested that he hand the envelope to Officer McCarty here, and that he be allowed to go about his errand of delivering the groceries. Then——"

Interrupting, the magistrate turned to Simpkins, and demanded suddenly:

"Is that true?"

The question was so unexpected that the countryman was surprised into answering truthfully, and replied:

"Yes, sir."

Realizing that the turn of affairs was making them appear ridiculous, the officer who had suggested that Bob be allowed to plead guilty, and receive a light sentence, if he would divulge the name of the two swindlers, hurriedly exclaimed:

"But the boy has a bad record, your honor."

"That is not so, your honor," retorted Foster hotly. "When I found that the sergeant was determined to hold the boy, I went to the man for whom he works—his name is Len Dardus—and made inquiries about him. Mr. Dardus is his guardian, and though it was evident that he had no love for the boy, the worst he could say about him was that he took a half hour to deliver an order that should have been delivered in twenty minutes. As to his associating with bad companions, that is not so, for his guardian said he was never out at night, always preferring to read."

"If the boy is such a paragon of virtue, why didn't his guardian come to court himself and try to help the boy, instead of leaving it to a reporter?" sneered the officer who was trying so hard to make a case against Bob.

"I tried to get him to come," exclaimed Foster, "but he refused on the ground that he could not leave his store."

"You reporters are certainly good ones at putting up a plausible story," retorted the officer contemptuously.

Striking his desk a sharp rap with his gavel, the magistrate exclaimed:

"When I want to hear from you, sir, I will let you know. You would make a far better impression if you and the sergeant and every other available man connected with the precinct were out searching for the two swindlers, instead of trying to send a poor, almost friendless, lad to prison. If you arrested half as many criminals as you do innocent men, it wouldn't take long to rid this city of crime."

So stinging was this rebuke that the reporters were busy writing down the words of the judge, and before they had finished, the magistrate said:

"Does your guardian treat you well, Bob?"

"Why, sir, I suppose so, sir; but he scolds me a lot. He seems to think that every time he sends me out to deliver an order, that I should come back within a quarter of an hour, no matter whether I have to go one block or twenty."

"How much does he pay you?"

"Two dollars a week, sir."

"What do you read at night?"

"About farming and ranching out West, sir."

"Then you want to go out West?"

"Yes, sir. I'm going just as soon as I have money enough. I have saved ten dollars already towards going."

"Huh! What becomes of your charge that the boy has evil associates, Mr. Officer?" snapped the magistrate, as he heard Bob's reply. "Any boy who earns two dollars a week, and has managed to save ten, surely can't have any bad habits.

"Bob, you are discharged. The disgrace to which you have been subjected of being arrested and brought to court is an outrage, and I wish there was some way that you could obtain redress from the officers who subjected you to it, but unfortunately there is not."

Reaching into his pocket, the magistrate drew forth some bills, from which he selected one of the denomination of five dollars, and handed it to Bob.

"Put this with your ten dollars," he continued. "It will help some toward getting you out West, and now you go back to Mr. Dardus, and tell him that Judge Bristol said that your arrest was an outrage. Clerk, call the next case."

If Bob had been bewildered by the circumstances that had led to his being brought to court, he was still more so with the sudden turn in events that had resulted in his release, and it was not until one of the court attachés good-naturedly advised him to leave the court room as soon as he could, that he realized he was again free.

But in his haste to obey, he suddenly remembered the reporter whose interest in him had been of such assistance, and he stopped and looked about the courtroom for him. But Foster and the other reporters were busy telephoning the story to their papers, and repeating the magistrate's scathing rebuke to the police of the precinct and the city, so that Bob could not see them. And, after lingering a moment or so, he finally decided to return to his guardian without more delay, promising himself that he would search out his champion and thank him another time.

CHAPTER IV

BOB DETERMINES TO BE HIS OWN MASTER

Fearing that if he hurried too fast through the dismal corridors of the court building he might arouse suspicion and get into more trouble, Bob restrained his impulse to break into a run, and endeavored to walk as unconcernedly as possible. But it was with a feeling of vast relief that he stepped forth from the stone portal and again breathed the free air of the street.

Once he had reached the sidewalk, not long did it take him to mingle with the throng of passersby.

Like a bad dream did the trying experiences through which he had passed seem, and he actually pinched himself to see if, after all, it might not have been some sleep delusion. But the pain of the sharp nip he gave himself satisfied him that he was indeed awake, and further evidence of the fact that his experiences had been all too real was given by the presence of the five-dollar bill in his pocket.

His pace had been rapid, and he was within two blocks of his guardian's store, when he suddenly remembered that the basket full of groceries, which he had started out to deliver, had been left in the police station.

That his employer would berate him sharply for their loss, he was aware, yet he dared not go for them in the fear that he might be subjected to further unpleasantness.

His steps, however, grew slower and slower as he approached the store, which had been the only home he had known for years. That his guardian knew of his arrest, the words of his champion to the magistrate had told him. How his guardian would take the double blow of the loss of the groceries and his arrest, he did not know, but past experience told him that he could expect no sympathy, and perhaps a beating, and he was sorely tempted not to return at all, but to strike out for the great West of his hopes and ambitions. In this moment of indecision, however, the admonition of the magistrate to return to his guardian recurred to him, and he felt that he would not be entitled to keep the five dollars did he not obey.

To Bob's surprise, as he entered the store, not a soul was visible, but at the sound of his footsteps on the hard floor his guardian suddenly appeared from his private office, his shrewd face suffused by the ingratiating smirk he always put on when going to meet a prospective customer. At the sight of his ward standing in the middle of the floor, however, he started, and then his face assumed a look of forbidding severity.

"What, you here!" the grocer exclaimed, as he regained control of himself. "I thought—that is, I was told—I mean, I heard that you had been arrested, and I didn't expect to see you again for some time; that is—I mean not here in the store. If you had been sent to prison I should, of course, have gone to see you."

Never before had Bob seen his guardian so ill at ease, and from his knowledge of the man, he decided that his entrance must have interrupted him when he was engaged at some unusual task. But how to meet the situation, Bob did not know, and he was vainly striving to think of the right thing to say when their relations were brought back to their normal plane by his guardian snarling:

"What did you do with my delivery basket? Did you leave it with the groceries, or didn't you even deliver them?"

The subtle cruelty of this remark stung Bob to the quick. It was the straw that broke his endurance of the long term of abuse and harsh words to which he had been subjected.

"No, I didn't deliver the groceries," he flashed back. "I had to leave the basket at the police station when they took me to court, and after the judge told me I could go, I didn't want to go back to the place for it."

"But there were three dollars worth of groceries in it," wailed his guardian, wringing his hands. "Here, just because you didn't mind what I told you about stopping to play on the way when you are delivering orders, you get arrested and leave me here alone for almost four hours, without any one to deliver goods, and my customers all complaining because they don't get their orders. And as though that weren't enough, you deliberately abandon three dollars' worth of groceries. But you'll pay for them, young man! You'll pay for them! Never fear. I shall take the two dollars you would have had coming to you to-night in part payment, and then one dollar from your wages next Saturday night."

For an instant, Bob was tempted to produce the five dollars the kindly magistrate had given him and pay for the groceries then and there. But there

swept through his mind an idea fascinating in its boldness.

As he stood contemplating the thought which had occurred to him, his guardian snarled:

"Don't stand there like a gawk! You've delayed my deliveries long enough. Take those two baskets," and he pointed to two bulging packages resting on the counter, "and deliver them. On your way back, as you will pass the police station, you can stop in and get the basket you left. But I'll make you pay for the groceries just the same. It will be a good lesson for you."

If anything were needed to determine Bob to put his idea into action, it was this command to go to the station, and he exclaimed:

"I won't go there to get your old basket! I won't pay for the groceries, and I won't deliver your old orders! I am going to leave you. I won't work for you another minute," and without giving his amazed guardian time to say anything, Bob darted away to the room at the back of the store, in which he had been accustomed to sleep.

The plan he had decided upon was to get his ten dollars and enough more of the money his father had left him to pay his fare to some town in Oklahoma, where he could begin his long-dreamed-of life on a ranch. He would not be bothered with the packing of any clothes, for his guardian had never allowed him any extra clothing, and he had nothing but the suit upon his back; but he did have his money, and two letters which he had hidden under a board in the floor that he had fixed so that he could take it up and put it back whenever he wished.

In the fear that his guardian might follow him to the room and discover him as he was procuring his money, Bob worked with feverish haste to lift the board, and so excited was he that it seemed as though he could never raise it. But at last he did so, secured possession of his treasures, and then put the board back, just as the grocer called to him from the doorway:

"What are you doing? What do you mean by saying you won't deliver my groceries and do what I tell you?"

Panting with excitement, Bob stood like some animal at bay, his eyes flashing defiance, one hand tightly doubled up, the other clasping his treasures in the pocket where he had thrust them.

"I mean I am going West. I won't be treated as you have treated me any

longer."

For a moment, as he heard the amazing announcement of his ward, Mr. Dardus stood staring at him in silence, and then broke into a mocking laugh.

"So you're going West, are you? That is a good one. Why, you couldn't even get across the river to Jersey City. It takes money, money, my boy, to travel, and you haven't a cent. And yet you're going West! That *is* a good one. Do you think the trains will carry you for nothing, just for the pleasure of having you travel on them?" and the grocer indulged himself in another burst of laughter at what he considered his keen wit.

But the next words of his ward soon drove all mirth from his soul.

"I expect you to give me enough money to carry me to Oklahoma City from what my father left me. When I get settled out there, I will let you know, and you can send me the rest of the money which was entrusted to you for me. If I took it with me, I might get robbed."

When the merciless old man recovered his breath, he exclaimed:

"What do you mean about the money your father left for you? Don't you know he didn't have a cent? Don't you know that if I hadn't taken pity on you, fool that I was—but your father did me a favor once, and so I thought I could repay it by taking you—that you would have been sent to an orphan asylum? And this is the return I get. Here I've spent my hard-earned money for twelve years to buy you food and clothing, and yet you dare to say that I have money for you which your father left. I never heard of such ingratitude."

"I know that you are not telling the truth," retorted Bob. "I have a letter my father wrote, saying that I was to open it when I was ten years old, in which he said that he had given you five thousand dollars to have me educated."

"What nonsense! What an outrage!" exclaimed the grocer, though Bob's statement had caused his face to become more than usually ashen-hued. "I've a mind to thrash you for saying such a thing. Me have five thousand dollars of yours! I never heard anything so preposterous!"

"I tell you, you have the money. Here's the letter that says so," retorted Bob. And, as he spoke, he drew his hand from his pocket, disclosing to the uneasy gaze of his guardian an envelope yellow with age, worn and soiled from much handling, but upon which was the writing which he recognized, all too well, as

that of Horace Chester, Bob's father.

For an instant the grocer glowered at the boy and the letter, and then his shrewd mind, suggesting a way out of the embarrassing predicament in which the boy had placed him, he exclaimed:

"Poor Horace! I had always hoped to keep from you the fact that he was insane at the time of his death, but this letter makes it impossible. It was while laboring under the delusion that he had money, that he wrote you of this phantom bequest. Poor Horace! The sight of his writing moves me deeply, especially as I have to disabuse you of the delusion that I am holding five thousand dollars in trust for you," and he held out his hand.

Had it not been for the look of cunning that appeared in his guardian's eyes as he uttered these words, which cast such a stigma upon the name of the boy's dead father, Bob might have believed him, but he had been watching his guardian intently. He saw the look of cunning, and instead of surrendering the letter, he hastily thrust it back into his pocket.

Forgetting all discretion, as he saw that his plot for obtaining possession of the letter had failed, Len Dardus rushed upon the boy, with the evident purpose of obtaining it by force, exclaiming:

"You won't give it to me, eh? Well, I will take it, whether you want me to or not."

But Bob, in the flush of his youth, was quick and agile, and it was no task at all for him to dive under the arm stretched forth to seize him, and then to dash through the door and out onto the street.

CHAPTER V

BOB MISSES A FRIEND

Never stopping to notice in what direction he was going, Bob dashed along the street, fearful only lest his guardian would pursue him, and expecting every moment to hear his voice shouting at him to stop. But as the moments wore by without any sign of excitement or alarm, Bob gained confidence, finally slackening his pace to a walk, and began to think of what he should do, now that he had taken matters into his own hands, and severed the ties of years that had bound him to his guardian.

Back in the store the grocer had stood undecided what to do. The knowledge that his ward had been informed of the bequest, a fact which he supposed was known only to himself, had unnerved him. And the failure of his attempt to get the letter and thus destroy all evidence of the trust fund, had caused him to be seized with a great fear lest retribution should be visited upon him.

Instead, therefore, of going in pursuit of Bob, his one idea was to conceal himself. Going to the front door of the shop, he closed it and locked it and then betook himself to his private office, the door of which he also shut, and sitting down in the chair buried his head in his hands and tried to think what was best for him to do.

But his sense of guilt would not let him rest, and in the thought that Bob might seek some lawyer and place the matter in his hands, which would mean a visit to the grocery store and the necessity of making embarrassing explanations, the dishonest guardian determined to go away for a few hours at least. No sooner had he made up his mind upon this course of action than he seized his hat, stole from his room, glided across the floor to the front door, listened a moment for the sound of voices, or any other indication that people were passing, then hurriedly turned the key in the door, stepped outside, locked the door again, and after a furtive glance up and down the street, slunk away, keeping close to the buildings, for all the world like a dog that was hounded, rather than a man.

It was because of this action on the part of Mr. Dardus in closing his store that Foster was unable to gain admittance when he arrived half an hour later, having

come for the purpose of seeing the boy he had championed so effectively, and of assisting in a reconciliation between the ward and the guardian, in case it had not already been accomplished. On his way, his mind had pictured many scenes in which the boy and the grocer were participants, but none of them had contained the possibility of the store being closed. And it was with distinct surprise that he found the door locked, and was unable to arouse any one by his vigorous pounding upon the weather-worn panels.

"I wonder what it means," said the reporter to himself. "Perhaps Bob didn't come back, and the old man, repenting of his refusing to go to his ward's assistance, is on his way either to the police station or to the court."

His occupation, however, necessitated his being resourceful, and, seeing an elderly woman peering at him closely from a window of the neighboring house, Foster hastened toward her.

Bowing politely, he asked:

"Have you seen anything of Mr. Dardus, or Bob Chester?"

"Uhuh! I seen 'em both," replied the woman, nodding her head, as though to confirm her words. But though Foster remained silent in the hope that she would add to this information, he was at length obliged to renew his questions, as she vouchsafed nothing more.

"Were they together?"

"No."

"Which way were they going—in the same direction?"

"No. Bob ran up the street as though the police were after him."

"Then Mr. Dardus was chasing him," suggested Foster, jumping at the conclusion that Bob and his guardian had had angry words, that the boy had run away, and that his guardian had gone in pursuit.

"No, he wasn't. He came out about twenty minutes after Bob had gone, and went in the opposite direction."

This response puzzled the reporter, as he could think of no plausible explanation, but his thoughts were diverted by the old woman, who demanded:

"What's wrong, mister?"

"What makes you think there is anything wrong?" parried Foster, determined, if possible, to keep the knowledge of Bob's arrest from so evident a neighborhood gossip.

"Because Len Dardus closed his store on a Saturday. I've been living here thirty years, and he has never done such a thing before, but once, and that was twelve years ago, the day he brought Bob back with him. So I know that it must be something important, or the old man wouldn't lose the opportunity to make a few cents in his store."

Struck by the coincidence that it was because of Bob the grocer had at both times shut up his store, Foster considered for a few moments what it was best to do, and then said with ever so faint a smile:

"I suppose you will see Bob when he comes back?"

"I reckon I will. I see most everything going on around here that's to be seen."

"Then I will be obliged if you will give him this," and he handed her one of his calling cards. "Tell him, please, that I am at home any evening after seven o'clock, and should like to have him call on me."

"I'll be glad to. I suppose you may be some friend of Bob's who knew his father? I've often wondered why no one came to see the boy and take him from that man Dardus."

These words suggested a new train of thought to the reporter, and, judging from the remark that his informant had some knowledge of the boy's antecedents, he determined to learn what he could about them.

"Then you knew Bob's father?" asked Foster.

"No. I can't say as I knew him, but I do know that I wouldn't treat a dog the way Dardus has treated Bob, and I have often wondered why none of the friends of the lad's father came to find out about him, or to take him away. And I made up my mind, as soon as I saw you, that you were one of them. Anyway, I hope so, for Bob is a real bright boy; too bright to be working for that old miser. He's fond of book reading, and I've told old man Dardus, every time I saw him, that he ought to have the boy educated."

"Well, I *am* Bob's friend," said the reporter, "and if you think it's a wise thing, I'll see what I can do about getting him into a different place. You just tell him to come and see me the first opportunity he has."

And again lifting his hat, Foster bowed and took his departure.

CHAPTER VI

A KIND-HEARTED WAITRESS

After Bob had found that no one was pursuing him, he decided that the first thing to do was to get away from New York, and with this purpose he headed for one of the ferries that would take him to the Jersey shore.

How far his fifteen dollars would carry him, he did not know, but he realized that it could not be any great distance, and he was trying to think of some plan by which he could obtain more funds, when he suddenly remembered the reporter who had taken such an interest in him.

"I'll go and find him," said Bob to himself. "He'll know about how much it costs to travel, and all such things, and perhaps he'll help me to get some work where I can earn more money. Anyway, I will be able to believe what he tells me, and to depend on his advice."

So simple a solution of his difficulties gave Bob new courage, until all at once it flashed upon him that he did not know the name of his benefactor, or where to find him.

As this thought occurred to him, Bob stopped still. However, his having thrown himself upon his own resources was sharpening his wits, and he suddenly exclaimed:

"I can find out at the police station. Perhaps he'll be there."

And though the boy was fully three miles away from the place where he had suffered such outrageous treatment, he turned his steps to retrace the distance.

When at length he was within sight of the grim building, the same fear of entering it that had made him refuse his guardian's command to fetch the basket of groceries, again seized him, and he paused.

"I won't go in," said Bob, shaking his head decidedly, "but I'll wait over by that pile of boxes on the opposite side of the street. Probably he'll be coming out before long."

Though this plan of Bob's would ordinarily have been effective, it happened that Foster had finished his work for the day even before he had paid his visit to the closed store of Len Dardus, and thus the boy was doomed to disappointment, although he stayed at his post of observation until dark began to fall.

With the garish flarings of the street lamps, Bob for the first time realized the true meaning of the step he had taken. Heretofore he had always possessed a home to which to go, unpleasant as it was, but now he had no place, and the contemplation of his loneliness caused him to grow very sober.

As the pangs of hunger were added to his general feeling of helplessness, for a moment he thought of returning to his guardian, but only for a moment. As he left the letter in his pocket and remembered the awful stigma his guardian had tried to cast upon his dead father, his pride arose.

"I will never go back there!" he told himself. "I have money in my pocket, and I can get something to eat. Then I'll go over to one of the stations in Jersey City and find some place to sleep. Perhaps there'll even be a train going out West to-night that will carry me part way to Oklahoma."

Coming forth from the pile of boxes from which he had sought in vain to catch a glimpse of his friend, the reporter, Bob walked up the street until he came to a restaurant, brilliantly lighted, and with a sign standing in the door from which the words: "Pork and Beans, 15 cents a plate," stared at him invitingly.

Dearly did Bob love pork and beans, but only occasionally had his guardian provided them, and then in such small quantities that the boy had never been able to eat all he wanted, and oftentimes had he promised himself that some day he would have his fill. Consequently, as he read the sign, he determined to gratify his desire, and timidly entered the restaurant, where there were stools in front of a high counter and tables along the wall, upon which stood an array of food that amazed him, accustomed, as he had been, to living on almost nothing.

Making his way diffidently to one of the tables, he sat down. In a moment a waitress, in what seemed to him a dazzlingly white and gorgeous dress, approached, and, with a smile, asked:

"What will you have?"

"Beans, please, and lots of them."

"And brown bread, too?" asked the waitress.

The thought of this with his beans had never entered Bob's head, and as it was suggested to him, he felt a great longing for it. Yet as no mention of it had been made on the sign that had attracted him to the restaurant, he feared it might be too expensive. But the more he thought of it, the more he wanted it, and finally he stammered:

"How much does it cost?"

"Five cents a slice."

"Then you may bring me two slices," replied the boy, laying emphasis upon the word "two."

"Coffee or tea?"

"I don't believe I'll have either," said Bob, feeling that his expenditure of twenty-five cents was all that he could afford.

Divining the reason of his refusal, the waitress smiled:

"You get either tea or coffee with the order. It doesn't cost any more."

"Then I'll have coffee," replied Bob.

And as the waitress went to bring his order, he again felt in his pocket to make sure he had the money with which to pay for his meal.

As the heaping plate of beans—for the waitress had not been scrimping in her measure—was set before Bob, together with the rich brown bread and coffee, it seemed to him that never had anything smelled quite so savory, and he began to eat as though he were famished.

Though the plate of beans had been heaping, so good did they taste to Bob, that he could not resist the temptation of ordering more, and calling the waitress to him, he asked:

"If I have a second plate, will it cost less?"

For a moment the girl was on the point of laughing at him, but the wistful seriousness of his face checked the outburst of merriment on her lips, and instead she replied, in a kindly tone:

"What's the matter, kid? Haven't you any money?"

"Oh, yes," Bob hastened to reassure her.

"Well, if you have money enough, what's to prevent your ordering as much as you want?"

For a moment Bob contemplated the question from this new viewpoint, but, unable to decide, observed:

"I don't just know as I ought to spend any more."

"Isn't the money yours?"

"Oh, yes, it's not that," rejoined Bob, and then, after hesitating a moment, he determined to leave the decision to this girl, whose face showed that she was kind and sympathetic, and he said:

"You see, it's this way: I'm going out West, and I haven't got much money, and I'm afraid I'll spend too much, because I don't just know how much it will take."

"Well, if I was you, I'd eat all I wanted while I had the money. If you've got to 'hobo' your way, there'll be times when you'll probably be without both food and money."

This reasoning struck Bob as being eminently practical, and he was on the point of ordering another plate, when the girl made it unnecessary by saying:

"I'll stake you to another plate, if you want the beans very much. It's just about time for me to eat my supper, and I will bring it over to your table and eat with you, and I'll make them think the beans are for me."

Bob wasn't quite sure whether such a plan was all right or not, but he had a healthy boy's appetite for beans, and so he made no objection.

"You are very kind," he said, when the second plate of the savory food was placed before him. "I suppose I shall be hungry sometimes before I get to Oklahoma, but I don't expect to 'hobo' it."

"Then how do you expect to get along? You say you haven't much money."

"I guess I don't just understand what it means to 'hobo' it," admitted Bob.

"No, I guess you don't. It's the name they give out West to travelling when you don't have money enough to pay your railroad fare, and have to beat your

way, riding on freight trains."

As Bob heard this explanation of the term, his eyes sparkled with delight, and he said earnestly:

"I'm glad you told me about it. I'd never thought of trying to steal a ride on a freight train."

"For pity sake! How did you expect to get away out there?"

"Walk, unless I could earn money enough in one town to take me to another."

Bob's conversation, which showed such a remarkable ignorance of the world, especially in view of the fact that he was a New York boy, suggested to the waitress that perhaps he had run away from home.

Determined to find out, she banished the sympathetic smile from her face, and becoming very severe, leaned across the table and gazing straight into Bob's eyes, asked:

"Look a here, kid, you haven't run away from a good home, have you?"

The unexpectedness of this question took Bob by surprise. Under the searching gaze of the girl's eyes, he felt just as he had when the magistrate had glanced at him, and his voice trembled a little as he replied:

"No! Oh, no, indeed!"

But his manner was not convincing, and the girl continued her interrogations, but on a different tack.

"Your folks live in New York?"

"I haven't any."

"Then where have you been living?"

"With my guardian."

"What do you do?"

"I used to deliver groceries for him."

The stress Bob laid upon the word "used," led the girl to inquire:

"Did he fire you? Or what?"

"No. I left him."

"How long ago?"

"Just this afternoon."

The close questioning of the waitress was making Bob very uncomfortable, and he determined to tell her the real reason he had left, especially as she was so kind and seemed to know so much about traveling in the West. Having reached this decision, he told, with many hesitations, the story of his experiences.

With quick sympathy the girl listened, and, as he concluded, exclaimed tenderly:

"You poor kid! I'm sure glad you happened to drop in here. I've got a sister living out in Chicago, whose husband runs as far as Kansas City on a freight train. I'll give you a note to her, and her man will give you a lift, and probably he can arrange with some of the men he knows to carry you west from Kansas City."

"That will be very kind of you," returned Bob. "It seems as though strangers are kinder to me than people I've known all my life."

"That's often the way," exclaimed the girl, as she rose and went up to the desk in the front of the restaurant, where she obtained some paper, an envelope, and pen and ink, which she brought back to Bob's table.

It was evident from the slowness with which her self-imposed task advanced that the girl was more ready with her kind-hearted sympathy than with her pen. But at last the missive was finished, and she gave it to Bob.

"Don't forget that address: 'South 101st Street, on the left-hand corner, in a big, yellow brick building.' It's on the side of the street nearest New York, and the name is Mrs. John Cameron."

Gratefully Bob took the letter, which he placed with the one written by his father, and as he did so he asked:

"I wonder how much it costs to get to Chicago?"

"Depends on how you travel. You can go in a plain car for about ten or eleven

dollars. That is on one of the round-about railways, at cut rates. Or, you can pay between fifty and seventy-five dollars for a state-room."

"Oh, goody! If it only costs ten dollars, I can get out there all right, and still have some money left."

"I'm glad of that. Now, you sit here a few minutes, and I'll put up a lunch for you, and then you won't have to buy any food while you are on the train. They always charge a lot more on trains or in station restaurants than they ought to."

"Hadn't I better pay you now?" inquired Bob.

"No. You wait until I bring the box of lunch. The boss hasn't noticed how much you had to eat, and he'll think it's all on the check I will ring in."

"But that isn't exactly right, is it?" protested Bob.

"Well, I'll make it right with the boss."

So well were things working out for him, that it seemed to Bob that he must be in a dream, but the sight of the people and objects about him told him that it was indeed a reality.

In due course the kind waitress returned, bringing a sizeable box, tightly tied, which she placed on the table before him.

"Here, kiddo, I wish you good luck," she said. "I must leave you now, because I've got some more work to do."

"But you must tell me your name," insisted Bob, looking at her with his eyes filled with gratitude. "I'm coming back from the West a rich man, and I shall want to look you up and repay you for your kindness."

"I hope you strike it fine, kid," laughed the girl, "but I am afraid if you do, you'll never think of looking up Nellie Porter. Oh, by the way, do you know to which station to go?"

"No, I don't," admitted Bob.

"Well, if you want to get a plain car, you want to go over to Weehawken and buy your ticket over the West Shore railroad."

And giving Bob a check for his food, the girl smiled upon him pleasantly, and hurried away to wait upon some other people who had entered the restaurant.

CHAPTER VII

GOOD LUCK FROM BAD

By dint of questioning, Bob reached the Weehawken ferry and was soon on a boat, gliding through the dark waters of the river toward the Jersey shore.

Never had the boy been on a ferryboat at night, and the spectacle presented by the brilliantly lighted buildings filled him with wonder. Fortunate was it for him that he was so enthralled, for the boat had bumped into her slip and the people were rushing ashore before he had time to realize that he was leaving behind all he had ever known of a home.

Indeed, so absorbed was he in gazing about him, that it was not till one of the crew exclaimed: "Hey, kid, get ashore. You can't beat your way back on this boat," that he knew they had reached Weehawken.

"I'm not trying to beat my way," rejoined Bob. "I'm not going back to New York. I'm going to Chicago—and then to Oklahoma," he added in a boyish attempt to impress the boatman with his importance.

"Well, you'd better hurry if you want to make the train for Chicago," returned the other. "This is the last boat before it starts. You'll have to hustle if you've any baggage, or are you travelling 'light'?"

But Bob had not waited to hear the comment upon his lack of equipment, and, before the words had left the mouth of the boatman, was running up the gangway and into the station.

The glare of the lights after the darkness of the river and the many people scurrying to and fro, together with the porters and trainmen calling and shouting, bewildered the lad who had never been so far away from home before, and he stood in the middle of the station as though dazed.

Noticing the woe-begone figure, the station policeman walked over to where Bob was standing.

"What's the matter, kid? Looking for some one?"

"No. I'm going away, to Chicago. I wish you'd tell me where to go to get a chair car."

"Not running away from home, are you?" inquired the official, scanning Bob's face searchingly.

This constant suggestion that he was running away angered the boy, and he determined to put an end to it.

"No, I'm not," he retorted impatiently. "I'm going out West to become a ranchman, though I don't see why it is any of your business. The man on the boat told me I would have to hurry if I was going to catch my train."

"Got any money?" inquired the policeman, ignoring the boy's manner.

"Surely." And Bob drew forth the precious ten dollars he had managed to save from the pittance his guardian had paid him and all that remained from the money the magistrate had given him.

"All right. Come with me. I'll show you," responded the official, assured by the sight of the money that Bob was not trying to steal a ride on the train.

Quickly the two made their way to the ticket office.

"Ticket for this youngster," announced the policeman.

"Where to?" asked the agent.

"Chicago, in a chair car," answered Bob.

"'Leven thirty," returned the man in the ticket office, turning to his rack and taking down a long strip of paper, which he stamped rapidly.

With trembling fingers, Bob counted out the money, and shoved it through the opening in the window.

"Correct," muttered the agent, as he counted the roll of bills. "Now hurry, or you won't get your train."

As Bob received the amazingly long ticket, his breast swelled with pride. Its possession meant the beginning of his long-cherished dream, and he started to study it, when the voice of the officer warned him:

"Come this way, kid. Go through gate No. 3. You can read your ticket when

you get on the train; you'll have time enough before you reach Chicago. Good luck on your ranch," he added in a kindly banter.

But Bob had no time to reply, for the trainmen were already shouting their "All aboard for Chicago," and it was only by running down the platform that he was able to get on a car just as the wheels began to move.

The car in which Bob found himself was upholstered in dark green, and the woodwork was of polished mahogany. Never had he seen anything so magnificent, and as he sank into a high-back seat, he uttered a sigh of contentment.

But he was not allowed to enjoy his luxury long.

While he was gazing with wide-staring eyes at everything about him, a colored porter entered the car and languidly glanced from one to another of the occupants, as though making a mental calculation of the tips he would receive, when his eyes fell on the poorly-clad figure of Bob, holding his box of lunch on his knees.

With an exclamation of surprise, the porter hastened to where the lad was sitting.

"What you-all doin' in hyar?" he demanded harshly.

The tone in which the question was asked now caused the other passengers, who had hitherto been too busy getting themselves comfortably settled to notice Bob, to turn their gaze upon him.

"I'm going to Chicago," returned Bob.

But the hostile look on the porter's face scared him, and he could not help a tremor that crept into his voice as he made his reply.

"Whar's yer ticket?" snarled the negro.

Reaching into his pocket, Bob drew forth the long strip of paper and presented it to the officious porter.

"The ticket's all right," grunted the man. "Now, whar's youah parlah cyar ticket?"

"My what?" asked Bob.

"Youah parlah cyar ticket."

"That's all the ticket I have," returned Bob. "Isn't that enough? I told the man I wanted a chair-car ticket, and that's what he gave me."

"Huh! I thought so. This ain't no chair cyar. This is a parlah cyar. The cyar you-all want is up front, four cyars ahead. Now get out of hyar lively."

"But I can't get out while the train's going," protested Bob. "I might get hurt, and—and besides, I want to go to Chicago, and if I get off I'll lose my train."

And in Bob's voice, as he pictured himself in his mind left beside the railroad tracks in a strange place and at night, there was a plaintive appeal.

"You don't have to git off ther train," snarled the porter. "All you gotta do is to walk right fru ther other cyars, three of 'em, mind you, and you'll find your chair cyar. The idea of you-all getting into a parlah cyar with a chair-cyar ticket."

Reassured by the information that it would be unnecessary for him to leave the train in order to reach the proper car, Bob rose from the soft and luxurious seat slowly.

"Come, hurry," growled the porter, making a move as though to seize Bob by the arm and drag him from the car.

But before he could do so, the stern voice of an elderly and well-dressed man, who was occupying the second seat ahead, exclaimed:

"Porter, can't you see this boy is unaccustomed to travelling? Why don't you show him the way to the chair car?"

"What, *me* take that crittur fru three coaches? It's——"

But the negro was not given the opportunity to finish.

Bumping into the porter so that he knocked him to one side, the man who had taken the negro to task for his treatment of Bob exclaimed:

"Then *I* will show him the way. Come, son."

And he held out his hand, while all anger had disappeared from his face, as he looked at Bob kindly.

"My name is Bob Chester," said the boy, taking the outstretched hand and

shaking it.

"And mine is Horace Perkins," returned the elder man, unable to restrain a smile as he thought of the unceremonious introduction to himself, who practically owned the road. "I am sorry you should have had so unpleasant an experience."

And as the railroad magnate and the poorly-clad boy passed from sight of those in the car, the porter moaned:

"Oh, lawdy, lawdy! Ah sho has done got mahself in a mess."

And the comments of the other passengers, as they prophesied the punishment the railroad president would inflict on his uncivil employee, told him that they agreed with his opinion thoroughly.

As Bob and his distinguished guide reached the chair car, the latter beckoned to the brakeman and said:

"I am Mr. Perkins. I presume you know that I am the president of this road. I want you to keep an eye on this boy. He isn't accustomed to travelling. He'll probably need something to eat to-morrow, so either take him into one of the railroad restaurants, or bring him some lunch into the car. Here's some money for his meals."

But before his benefactor could withdraw his hand from his pocket, Bob exclaimed:

"I have my lunch with me, right here in this box, Mr. Perkins. I'm just as much obliged to you, though."

A moment the railroad president hesitated, then realizing from the look on Bob's face that he would give offense should he press his gift, he smiled and said:

"All right, son. Just as you wish. But I want you to be my guest at breakfast in the morning."

And again shaking hands with Bob, Mr. Perkins left the car.

CHAPTER VIII

BOB'S LUCK CONTINUES

After the railroad president had left the car, the brakeman found a chair for Bob, and showed him how to work its mechanism so that he could drop it back when he wished to go to sleep, all the while eyeing the poorly-dressed lad with evident curiosity, which finally he could no longer restrain, and he asked:

"Have you known Mr. Perkins long?"

"No," replied Bob. "I only met him to-night."

"You must have made a hit with him."

"No. I just think he is very kind."

"Huh! That's a new one. You're the first one that ever called old Perkins kind. If you could hear some of the men talk about how he has treated them, you wouldn't think he was so kind."

"I don't know about that. I only know he was very kind to me," returned Bob, "and I like him. If his men were honest and square with him, I think he would be with them."

The approach of the train to a station, necessitating the member of the train crew going about his duty, prevented him from plying Bob further with questions, much to the latter's relief.

Placing his box of lunch on the floor beside him, Bob leaned back in his chair, partially closed his eyes, and gazed about him at the other passengers. But there was none who interested him, and he soon turned his mind to the contemplation of his position.

It was with difficulty that he could realize that he was actually on his way to the great West. But the steady motion of the train, the whirl of the wheels, and the occasional blast of the engine's whistle, told him that he was not dreaming, and after enjoying for a while the sensation of travelling he began to think about what he should do when he reached Chicago.

He had read much of the enormous area the city covered, and he wondered if he would have any difficulty in finding the home of the woman whose husband was to form such a necessary link in his travelling arrangements.

"Suppose she shouldn't be at home, or suppose Mr. Cameron doesn't feel like helping me? I guess under those circumstances it would be necessary for me to get a job somewhere. But I won't be an errand boy in a grocery store," he promised himself. But with the custom of looking only on the bright side of things, which is a fortunate habit of youth, he began to think of the good times he would have riding the horses on the plains, and of watching the cowboys as they roped the steers and branded them. And his fancy even pictured himself as a successful participant in various nerve-stirring contests.

"I may be from the East, but I won't let them call me a tenderfoot," Bob exclaimed earnestly; "and I'll try and get on the right side of them, so they won't play tricks on me."

Bob's idea of cowboys had been gathered from his reading of many stories of life on the plains, and was, therefore, rather vague. And it was while holding imaginary conversations with ranchmen conjured from his brain, that his body, wearied by the unusual events through which he had passed, grew quiet, and he finally dropped off to sleep.

The motion of the train and frequent stops affected him not at all, and as soundly as though he were in the bed at the rear of the grocer's shop, he slept through the night.

Mindful of Mr. Perkins' request that he look after Bob, the brakeman brought a coat with which he covered the boy, as the chill of night settled on the car, and several times as he passed he tucked it about Bob, when his moving had caused it to slide to the floor.

About seven o'clock in the morning the trainman, after having waited in vain for Bob to wake of his own accord, shook him gently by the shoulder, exclaiming:

"Come, son, it's time you were up and doing, if you are going to have breakfast with the 'old man.' He is liable to send in any time for you now, and after you have known him as long as I have, you'll learn that he doesn't like to be kept waiting."

"But where am I going to wash my face and hands? Doesn't the train stop at the station?"

At this naïve question, the brakeman looked at Bob for a moment, and then chuckling heartily to himself, exclaimed:

"Say, kid, are you trying to jolly me, or have you been kept in a glass cage all your life? Don't you know that they have washrooms on the trains?"

"No. This is the first time I have ever taken a journey on a train in my life."

"Where are you going?"

"To Chicago, first, and then out to Oklahoma."

"Well, that's far enough, so that if you don't know anything about travelling now, you will when you get there. What part of Oklahoma are you going to?"

"I don't just know exactly," and then, his breast swelling with pride, he continued: "I'm going on a ranch, but I haven't decided quite yet where."

"Folks live out there? Going to friends?"

"No."

"Well, I suppose you know your own business, but taking it all in all, if I was you, I think I'd stay East among people I knew, and whose ways I was used to."

"I don't believe you would if you were me," said Bob, and then tiring of the questioning, he said: "I thought you were going to show me the washroom. I want to be ready when Mr. Perkins sends for me."

Smiling at the manner in which Bob changed the conversation, the brakeman led him to the lavatory, and soon Bob had made his very primitive toilet.

In his endeavor to make himself as presentable as possible, he had washed and wiped his face so vigorously that it almost shone. And no sooner had he finished the task than the brakeman put his head in the door, and said:

"All ready, kid? Mr. Perkins has sent for you."

Going out into the car, Bob saw a negro clad in a suit of immaculate linen.

"Is you Mr. Chester?" asked the darky, restraining the smile Bob's appearance

produced.

"My name's Bob Chester, if that's what you mean," returned the boy.

"Then you'se to come with me to the dining-car, where Mr. Perkins is waiting for you."

Without more delay, the negro led the way.

Unmindful of the glances indicative of curiosity that were cast at him, Bob followed his guide into the dining-car.

As the railroad president saw his youthful guest approach, he arose, and with punctilious ceremony shook Bob's hand, murmuring:

"I hope you slept well, Bob?"

"Very, thank you. I don't think I should have been awake now, if the brakeman hadn't called me. He was very kind to me."

"I'm glad of that," smiled the official. "What would you like to eat?"

"Most anything, thank you."

"Then suppose you let me order for you."

This suggestion brought great relief to Bob, and he listened with wide eyes as he heard the order for strawberries, bacon and eggs, buckwheat cakes, maple syrup and coffee.

"Does that selection meet with your approval?" smiled the railroad president.

"Indeed it does, sir! Next to beans, I like buckwheat cakes."

"I guess all boys do. I know my sons at home are very fond of them."

"DOES THAT SELECTION MEET WITH YOUR APPROVAL?" SMILED THE PRESIDENT

"DOES THAT SELECTION MEET WITH YOUR APPROVAL?" SMILED THE PRESIDENT

Bob's enjoyment of his breakfast was so evident that it was almost pathetic. And as Mr. Perkins watched him eat, he wondered what the boy's story could be,

and from having taken merely a passing interest in him, his desire to do something for him became keen.

Under the discreet guidance of the railroad president, Bob was led to tell him of his life and of the experiences of the day before that had resulted in the severing of all ties, and the taking of so radical a step as the trip to the West.

As he listened to the narrative, his mind reverted to his own boys at home, surrounded by every luxury that wealth and affection could give them, and he wondered if, were either of them placed in Bob's circumstances, they would have the courage to do as he had done.

When Bob had finished his story, Mr. Perkins sat in silence for several minutes, evidently in deep thought.

"I think you have chosen the wisest course, Bob," he finally said. "The West is a great country, and you have qualities about you that I think will bring you success. Of course, you will probably be obliged to stand a good many hard knocks, but they won't hurt you, my boy. Hard knocks are good for any man. The only thing to be careful about is that they do not sour you and cause you to feel anger and hatred against your fellows.

"I suppose you know, of course, that the West, just like any other part of the world, contains a lot of bad men as well as good—only out West the bad men are more noticeable because they act more openly, gambling and drinking and fighting.

"You must be very careful whom you choose for your companions. If you make up your mind to treat every one politely and with kindness, you will soon be able to determine who are the ones whose friendship is worth having, and whom to avoid. But if you wish to succeed, you must keep away from the saloons and gambling dives.

"This may seem a good deal of a lecture to you, but if you follow my advice, some day you will thank me for giving it to you. And now, what do you propose to do, in case you don't find Mrs. Cameron? You know in big cities people often move, and it may be some time since her sister saw her. Then again, perhaps her husband won't prove very accommodating."

"I've thought of that, Mr. Perkins. If I can't find them, I shall try to get some work somewhere, so that I can earn money enough to pay my fare from

Chicago."

"You'll succeed all right, Bob," said the railroad president. "You have the right spirit of grit. But I have a plan which will do away with the necessity of depending upon the good nature of Mrs. Cameron or her husband."

And taking one of his cards from his pocket, Mr. Perkins wrote several words on it, and then handed it to Bob.

"If you'll take this card to the offices of the Grand Pacific, which you will find in the building directly across from the station where we arrive in Chicago, they will give you a pass, which will carry you to any part of Oklahoma you desire to go. I want you to accept it as a present from me. You can tell them to what place to make it out, and as it will take many hours to reach your destination, I want you to accept this money, so that you can buy your food." And he handed Bob a twenty-dollar bill. "If you are careful, you will have something left when you reach that part of Oklahoma to which you decide to go."

Before Bob could recover sufficiently from his surprise to express his thanks, Mr. Perkins had arisen, and saying that it was necessary for him to get off the train at the next station, went back to his car, leaving Bob in contemplation of his pass and money.

CHAPTER IX

A TALE OF THE PLAINS

Placing in his pocket the money and the precious piece of pasteboard which possessed the magic power of procuring for him transportation to the land of his dreams, Bob rose from the breakfast-table and made his way back to his chair.

As the train stopped at one station after another, people kept getting aboard, and soon the car in which Bob was riding was filled to its capacity.

Having nothing better to do, the lad amused himself by studying each new passenger, and he was amusing himself in trying to assign them to their proper vocations, when he was attracted to the man who came in and took the seat directly in front of him.

Tall and inordinately thin, the man's clothes seemed simply to hang from his shoulders. His hair, of a curious rusty gray, seemed to stick out from under the faded straw hat, and his whole appearance suggested nothing so much as a scarecrow.

Despite the man's ungainly appearance, however, his face was one that would attract and hold attention. So thin was it that it seemed as though the cheek bones would any minute pierce the bronzed skin, and from under bushy eyebrows two restless black eyes glistened.

Like Bob, this man surveyed his fellow passengers, giving them, however, only a momentary glance, until his eyes rested upon Bob, and upon him they lingered, glancing him over from head to foot, and then dropping to the lunch-box which was on the floor.

During this inspection of himself, Bob had also been examining the man more closely, and had discovered that his forehead was marked with a deep scar.

"You don't happen to have any lunch in that box, do you, that you would be willing to sell me?" asked the stranger. "I didn't have time to get any before I started. In fact, I came mighty near losing the train as it was, and there won't be any station where I can get anything before noon."

"Why, yes," replied Bob; "that is, I have some lunch. But I won't sell it to you. You are welcome to some of it, if you would like it."

How the man had been able to divine that his package contained food, Bob could not understand. But had the boy been as keen an observer as the stranger, he would have noticed that the paper on one end of the box was saturated with grease, causing the obvious inference that some sort of food was wrapped up inside.

"I don't like to take your grub for nothing, son," returned the other, "but I sure am hungry. I have always made it a rule never to accept anything from any one without giving something in return. So I tell you what I'll do. If you're sure you won't accept any money, and will give me a bite, when the train stops for dinner, I'll pay for whatever you want to eat."

"That seems fair," returned Bob, "but I should be just as willing to give you some, even if you didn't return it."

While Bob had been speaking, he had picked up the box, broken the string, unwrapped the paper and opened it, after which he held it out to the stranger, saying:

"Help yourself."

To Bob's surprise, the man accepted the invitation literally—and took the whole box, which he rested on his knee. Though it contained cake and pie, hard-boiled eggs, and several sandwiches, the stranger exercised no choice of selection, but began at one end of the box and ate everything just as it came.

Naturally Bob had supposed that the man would eat possibly only a couple of eggs and one or two sandwiches, with perhaps even a piece of cake or a piece of pie. But as he saw one piece of food disappearing after another, and remembered that the stranger had asked only for a bite, he wondered what he would require to make a full meal.

As the last piece of food was devoured, the man reached down, put the cover on the box, folded the paper, wrapped up the box and set it on the floor, wiping his mouth with the back of his hand, then exclaimed:

"My, but that went to the right spot! I sure was hungry."

"Yes, I guess you were," assented Bob, a bit ruefully, for he had expected to

have at least a portion of the food, put up for him by the kind waitress, to eat during the day.

The stranger, however, ignored the insinuation in Bob's tone, and proceeded to talk with him.

"Going far?" he asked.

"Yes, to Chicago."

"That's good. So am I. I'm glad to have some one to talk to. It makes the time pass quicker. Been visiting in the East?"

"No. I've always lived in New York."

"Going to Chicago on a visit?"

"Not exactly. I'm going to call on some friends, and then go on to Oklahoma."

The mention of Oklahoma roused the stranger to immediate interest.

"You don't say! To what part?"

"I don't know exactly."

"Going to Oklahoma, and you don't know to what part?" repeated the man in surprise.

"I'm going on a ranch somewhere. I was thinking I'd get a map when I got to Chicago, and decide just where."

"Well, if that don't beat anything I ever heard!"

The intonation which the man gave to his words was such that Bob felt that he must give some explanation of his indecision, and he returned:

"You see, I'm going to be a cowboy first, and then a ranch owner, and I didn't want to decide where to go until I could find out where I would have the best chance."

"Well, it certainly is fortunate that fate led me to get into this car of all on the train. I can tell you just the place for you to go."

"Have you ever been to Oklahoma?" inquired Bob.

"Have I ever been there? Well, son, I was there off and on for about ten years, when the government first opened up the land, and you could travel for miles without seeing anything but Injuns."

The knowledge that his companion was familiar with Oklahoma set Bob's heart beating rapidly, and the thought that he could gather much useful information from this peculiar man caused him to forget all annoyance over the loss of his lunch.

"Then you've really seen a live Indian?" asked Bob, his eyes big with excitement.

"I seen too many of the critters. See that scar?"

And he tapped his forehead with one of his long fingers.

"Yes," said Bob eagerly.

"Well, it was an Injun gave me that; Flying Horse, they called him."

At the memory of what had evidently been an exciting adventure, the man lapsed into silence, as though he were re-enacting the events in his mind.

To Bob his silence was tantalizing. He longed to hear of the experience, and yet he hesitated to ask point-blank. His interest was so keen, however, that he could not restrain himself entirely, and he squirmed restively in his chair.

The movement had the effect of recalling the man from his memories, and gazing at the lad's eager face, his own broke into a smile, as he said:

"I suppose you'd like to know how it happened?"

"Indeed I should."

"I was punching cows for an old fellow called Sam Ford; a man so mean you could pull the pith out of a horse-hair and then put his soul inside, and it would rattle.

"But this story don't concern old Sam, except in so far as I was working for him. He'd got together a fine bunch of cattle. Where he got 'em, no one ever knew exactly, and in them days it wasn't what you'd call healthy to ask questions. Indeed, I've seen many a perfectly healthy man took off sudden, just because he got inquisitive about su'thin', that wasn't none of his business in the first place.

But that's neither here nor there. Sam had the cattle, and I was punchin' for him.

"One day Sam come to me and said he wanted me to ride over to a creek near what is now the town of Fairfax, and watch a bunch of about thirty head he told me he just bought. There was a pack of Crow Injuns that we knew was somewhere around there. But in them days it was the same with working for a man as it was about asking questions. If he told you to do anything, it was up to you to do it, or stand the consequences. So I saddled a flea-bitten pinto and set out, though I must say I wasn't particularly keen on going. It had been rumored that Sam had got some of his cattle from the Injuns, and we'd always expected that if Sam ever did die—of which we had our doubts, because he was so mean—that it would be at the hand of a redskin.

"After riding about thirty mile, I come to the cattle all right, and they was sure a fine bunch. The place where Sam had left them was filled with fine grazing grass, and there was a 'drink' near-by, so's I got to feeling a little better, for I'd been afraid I was going to have some trouble in locating water. Sam had said he'd come up in three or four days, and we'd drive 'em back to where we had the main herd.

"The grass was so rich that a baby could have looked after them cattle; they stayed so close, and I was taking things easy most of the time, lying on my back and smoking.

"On the second night it was cloudy, and I had built a little fire, before which I curled up and went to sleep.

"How long I'd been asleep, I don't know. But I do know that I was suddenly wakened by feeling something sharp drawn across my forehead.

"Opening my eyes, I saw a face, hideous in white and yellow paint, peering into mine.

"Fortunately, I still had my six-shooters on me, and being pretty handy with them, it didn't take me long to put an end to Mr. Injun.

"Whether there was more than one buck 'round, I didn't know. But I'd no sooner got to my feet than I found out, for on all sides of me the air was split with their awful yells.

"Dropping to my knees, I crawled into the long grass as fast as I could, and the only thing that saved me was because they had been busy with the cattle, and

didn't know where I was.

"After they'd hunted for me a while, they rounded up the critters, gathered in my pinto, and moved away.

"Just as soon as I heard 'em going I lit out in the opposite direction, and hoofed it back to Sam's."

CHAPTER X

BOB DOES A KIND ACT

As the stranger recounted this exciting adventure, Bob's eyes grew larger and larger, and his mouth gaped in wonder. Many a time had he read in story-books of similar attacks by Indians, but the thought that he was actually gazing at a man who had been through such an ordeal seemed too delightful to be true. And so reverentially admiring was his manner toward his travelling companion that the other couldn't but smile good-naturedly.

"Where did you say that place was?" inquired Bob, after a silence of many minutes, as he retold to himself the story of the scar and pictured the scene before his mind's eye.

"Fairfax."

"What part of the state is that?"

"It's about the middle, as east and west goes, but nearer the northern than the southern border."

"Are there—are there any ranches near Fairfax now, do you suppose?"

"I reckon so, though it's more than seven years since I came East."

"Aren't you ever going back there?" inquired Bob, in a tone which said plainly that it was beyond his understanding how a man could give up life on a ranch and settle down to the very ordinary, prosaic life of the East.

For a moment the man looked at Bob searchingly, and then replied:

"I reckon that it's better for my health here in the East."

But the significance of this remark was lost on Bob. For a few minutes he was silent, the expression on his face, however, indicating that he was thinking earnestly, and at last the cause of his deliberation was explained in his question:

"Do you think there are any Indians around Fairfax now?"

"Not the kind there was in the early days when I was out there. The government has tried to make them like white people, and now the Injuns that you would find are either lazy, or they have deteriorated into half-breeds. Once in a while some of the bucks go on a rampage, but not very often."

"I think I'll go to Fairfax," announced Bob after another period of deliberation. "You don't know any one out there with whom you think I could get in to work, do you?"

"No, I can't say as I do, and besides a recommendation from me wouldn't help you any. But I think so long as you have no particular section of the state in mind, that Fairfax would be as good as any."

Bob lost no time in taking advantage of the opportunity afforded by his companion for asking him about the customs of the cowboys and life on a ranch in general, and many were the valuable pointers the stranger gave him, some of which Bob afterwards remembered, but more of which he forgot.

Between Bob's inquiries and the stories which his travelling companion narrated, the morning passed quickly, and what had loomed before the boy as long and dreary hours, seemed but a minute, so entertaining was the stranger.

True to his word, when the train pulled into the station where the stop was made for those passengers who desired to get lunch, the stranger insisted upon Bob getting out and eating with him. And Bob found that the man's appetite was just as keen when he was paying for his food, as when he was eating that provided by others.

After the return to the car, the interesting stories were resumed, and Bob had little opportunity to notice the region through which he was passing, new and unusual to him as was its scenery, save when his attention was called to some striking feature by his companion.

"It won't be long now before we reach Chicago," remarked the man.

"No, I suppose not," admitted Bob with a sigh. "I only wish you were going out to Fairfax with me."

"Oh, well, you'll find, more likely than not, that some of the passengers on the train you take are bound for Oklahoma, and they will probably be able to afford you more assistance and information than I."

The suggestion made by Bob about returning to Oklahoma seemed to make a deep impression upon the stranger, and he lapsed into silence from which he only roused himself after the train had pulled into the station at Chicago, when he jumped up suddenly, grabbed Bob by the shoulder, shook him with a gentle roughness, and murmured:

"Good luck to you, boy, and whatever you do, be straight," and rushed from the car, leaving Bob bewildered by the abruptness of his departure.

Despite the evident mystery which hung over his travelling companion, Bob had felt more at ease when he was with him, and it was with a sense of loss that he saw him leave the car, for the boy had hoped that he would accompany him to the railway offices while he got his pass, and he had even dared to think he might be able to persuade him to make the visit to Mrs. Cameron with him.

But the man's departure had shattered his hopes, and Bob, with a feeling of great loneliness, mechanically followed the other passengers from the car out upon the wide platform. His feeling of isolation was made even more poignant by the hearty greetings which sounded all around him, as one after another of the people who had arrived on the same train were met by their friends or families.

Following the crowd, he passed through the station out onto the sidewalk. There he stood for a moment, searching the windows of the buildings across the street for the name of the railway offices to which Mr. Perkins had directed him.

With little difficulty he spied great gilt letters which formed the words "Grand Pacific Railway," and picking his way carefully through the throng of carriages, automobiles and trucks, which were passing up and down the street, he soon reached the building, and was on the way to the offices in the elevator.

Entering one of the doors, he beheld several handsomely polished desks, at which busy men were seated.

Who the proper person was to whom to present his card for a pass, Bob did not know, but after scrutinizing the faces of the various men in the office, he selected one who seemed kind and pleasant, and was making his way toward him, when he was confronted by a boy several inches smaller than he was, clad in a green uniform trimmed with gold braid, who demanded insolently:

"Here, you! Where do you think you are going? Who do you want to see?"

"I don't know exactly."

During this interchange of words, the office-boy had been scanning Bob and his threadbare clothes contemptuously. And at the lad's reply, he laughed outright, adding:

"Well, if you don't know who you want to see, you can't come in here."

"But I want to get a pass for Fairfax, Oklahoma," protested Bob.

"*You* get a pass! Say, are you crazy? Only the general managers and the other high officers travel on passes."

"But Mr. Perkins told me to come here," asserted Bob.

To what lengths this determination of the office-boy to get rid of Bob would have gone there is no knowing, for the official whose desk was nearest the railing in front of which Bob stood had been attracted by the unusual occurrence, and as he heard Mr. Perkins' name spoken, he got up, and beckoning to Bob, asked:

"What did you say about Mr. Perkins?"

"I said he told me to come here to get a pass to Fairfax, Oklahoma. That is, he didn't say Fairfax," added Bob truthfully, "he just said I was to get it to any place in Oklahoma where I wanted to go, and I have decided I want to go to Fairfax."

"What is your name?"

"Bob Chester."

"Well, Mr. Perkins has sent us no instructions for issuing you a pass, and until he does, we cannot do anything for you."

And turning on his heel the man walked back to his desk, while the office-boy grinned in delight.

Bob, however, was not to be disposed of so easily, and putting his hand in his pocket, he drew out the card given him by the railroad president, and said:

"But Mr. Perkins gave me instructions to give to you."

The man who had left his desk before paid no attention to Bob's remark, however, and the boy was wondering if, after all, the card would be of no service to him when suddenly the door opened and in walked the porter who had drawn upon himself the anger of the railroad president, the night before, by his

treatment of Bob.

As the darky entered, one of the clerks happened to be passing the rail, and he exclaimed:

"Well, Thomas Jefferson, what do you want here?"

"Ah come to get my pay. Ah done been discharged."

"You discharged?" repeated the other incredulously.

"That's what, and by the 'old man' hisself."

"Why?"

"For not treating this hyar gemmen wid de respec' Mr. Perkins thought I ought to when he set hisself down in my parlah cyar, when his ticket done call for the chair cyar."

The tone in which the porter made his reply was so loud that no one in the office could fail to hear it, and as the officials had already received instructions by wire to pay off the darky in full upon his arrival, when they learned that the shabbily-clad boy standing before the rail was the cause of the discharge, they evinced a very lively interest in him.

"The kid was just up here trying to get a pass he said Mr. Perkins had told him to call for," returned the man who had dismissed Bob so abruptly.

"If the gemmen says so, den you'd better give it to him, if you-all don't want to get what Ah got."

Deeming the time had come for again calling attention to his card, Bob exclaimed:

"Mr. Perkins told me I was to present this, when I asked for the pass."

Reaching out his hand for the piece of pasteboard, the man who had refused him before, scanned it hurriedly, and said:

"You should have given me this in the first place. You see, we don't issue many passes now, and we are obliged to be very careful." And, calling to one of his clerks, he gave him instructions for making out the pass to Fairfax, after having learned from Bob that that was the destination to which he wished to go.

"You'd better sit down," said the official, "because it will take a few minutes to get it ready."

Bob was not thinking of himself, however. The idea troubled him of the porter's being discharged on his account, and after a few moments' deliberation, he called to the man who had given the instructions for the writing of his pass, and asked:

"Do you think if I should write a note to Mr. Perkins, that he would change his mind about discharging this man? I don't like to think he should have got into trouble on my account. You see, I don't know much about travelling, and I didn't know a parlor car from a chair car."

Surprised at this consideration for a fellow in a boy so young, the official smiled as he replied:

"I shouldn't be surprised if Mr. Perkins would think about it, if you asked him. He seems to have taken a great fancy to you."

"Then if you will give me a piece of paper, I will write to him."

And when the writing material was provided, Bob, in his crude, boyish hand, wrote:

"MR. PERKINS: You have been very kind to me, but I am sorry you discharged the porter. I wish you would take him back. Please, Mr. Perkins. From your friend, BOB CHESTER."

In open-mouthed wonder, the porter listened to the conversation between Bob and the official of the railway, and when the note had been written, and was read aloud by the latter, the darky exclaimed:

"Mistah Bob, you sho'ly am kind. Ah'll take that note and go to see Mistah Perkins mahself, and now if you-all would like to see Chicago a little before you take your train, Ah'll surely be most glad to take you 'round."

CHAPTER XI

BOB FAILS TO FIND MRS. CAMERON

For a moment after the porter's offer to act as his guide in seeing Chicago, Bob thought he would accept it, and accordingly they left the office together, the pass having been made out and delivered to the boy.

When they appeared upon the street, however, the passersby stopped and stared at the curious pair—Bob, in his worn, ill-fitting suit, and the darky, very black, clad in the latest fashion—with amazement.

One woman, whose hair was tinged with gray, and whose aquiline features, severe clothes and general mien bespoke the spinster who always had time to meddle in other people's affairs, exclaimed to the person nearest her:

"There is certainly something wrong here. I feel it in my bones. That colored person is taking this boy somewhere for no good purpose. I think it is my duty to interfere."

"Oh, I wouldn't bother," returned the member of the throng whom she had addressed. "The boy seems to be going along willingly enough."

"But I think it is my duty to make sure," persisted the officious spinster. "My conscience will never be easy in the thought that perhaps if I had spoken, I might have saved the boy from some terrible fate."

During this conversation, Bob and the porter had walked almost half a block. But both of them had heard the first remarks, and as the would-be rescuer set out in pursuit of them, Bob chanced to look back, and saw her coming, followed by several of the crowd who had first stopped to watch them in the hopes that they might be afforded some amusement from the woman's interference.

Unwilling to become the cause of a street scene, Bob turned to his companion, and said:

"I—I guess, after all, it won't be necessary for me to trouble you to go about with me."

"It will be no trouble, and Ah sho' am willing to do most anything for you 'count o' that note you gave me for Massa Perkins."

"Oh, that's all right," hastily returned Bob. "I was glad to do it. I only hope that it will be successful in letting you get back your job."

"Ah think it will, but Chicago's a pretty big place, and Ah'm afraid something may happen to you so that you will miss your train. It goes in about four hours. Is there any place particular you want to go?"

"Yes, I was going out to South 101st Street."

And Bob described the location of the apartment house where he expected to find Mrs. Cameron, the sister of the waitress who had been so kind to him.

"Then you want to take this cyar. It runs right by the corner, and when you come back, you keep on it until you get to the Northwestern station, where you get your train."

"All right, thank you!" exclaimed Bob, going out into the street to hail the car that had been pointed out to him.

The porter stood on the curb, evidently with the intention of seeing that Bob got aboard without mishap, until turning his head he caught sight of the sharp-featured woman, whose comment he had overheard.

"Ma soul, Ah sure don't want to get in any argument with such a woman," he muttered to himself, and bolted precipitately, soon losing himself in the crowd of pedestrians.

The flight of the porter seemed to confirm the woman's suspicions, but she instantly realized that she could not hope to overtake the darky, and quickly determined to hail Bob.

Rushing into the street, she cried in a shrill voice:

"Little boy! Little boy!"

Bob, however, had no relish for an interview with her, and quickly mounted the steps of the car and entered.

Again the woman repeated her cry, but Bob paid no attention, and it was with great relief that he heard the conductor pull the signal-bell for the car to start.

Determined not to be thwarted, the woman cried:

"Mr. Conductor! Mr. Conductor! Stop that car!"

But that individual had developed a deafness as sudden as Bob's and the car continued on its way.

For a moment the woman, her philanthropic intentions balked, stood on the car track, but realizing that she was making a spectacle of herself, she returned to the sidewalk, where the gibing comments of those who had witnessed the scene caused her to blush with anger, and she was glad to escape the words of advice that were called out to her by entering the doors of a convenient store.

As soon as Bob found that his escape had been effected, he returned to the platform.

"I'm glad you didn't stop the car for that woman," said he to the conductor.

"What's the matter, are you running away from her?"

"No. I never saw her before."

"Then why did she call you to stop?" asked the conductor, his tone indicating that he thought perhaps Bob might have picked her pocket.

"I don't know. When I was walking along with that colored man, I heard her say she thought he was trying to take me somewhere I shouldn't go."

Bob's evident lack of familiarity with Chicago and the circumstances under which he had boarded the car, aroused the conductor's curiosity, and he inquired:

"Well, was he?"

"No, he had just offered to show me about Chicago."

And then Bob told enough of the story to convince the street-car man that there was nothing improper about the occurrence, and that he succeeded was evidenced by the comment of the conductor, as he said:

"That's just like some women, always meddling in things they don't know anything about. I'll tell you when you get to 101st street."

Bob was deeply interested in the scenes through which he was passing, and it seemed to him that he had scarcely been on the car ten minutes when the

conductor told him he had reached the street he desired.

Leaving the car, Bob walked to the sidewalk, and then looked about him to get his bearings.

Across the street stood the yellow brick apartment house the waitress had mentioned, and as it was the only building of its kind thereabout, he made his way to it.

Entering the vestibule, Bob scanned the names on the letter boxes for that of Mrs. John Cameron, but though he looked them over three times, he could not see it.

As he stood wondering what to do, a woman opened the door to come out.

Deciding that she was probably one of the people who lived in the building, Bob asked, taking off his hat, and bowing politely:

"Can you tell me if Mrs. John Cameron lives here?"

"No, she doesn't."

"Well, she used to, didn't she?"

"Yes, right across the hall from me, on the third floor, but she moved about six weeks ago."

"Do you know where she's gone?" cried Bob.

"She's moved to Kansas City, but I don't know her address. Is there anything particular you wanted of her?"

"No—that is, I just had a message to deliver to her from her sister in New York."

"Well, I'm sorry that I can't give you the address in Kansas City. You might find it out, though, from the janitor, possibly," added the woman, and smiling at Bob, she continued on her way.

For a moment Bob was undecided whether or not to ring for the janitor in order that he might inquire about the address of the waitress' sister, and then realizing that there was no necessity for his so doing, he concluded to go to the station and wait for his train.

"It's a mighty good thing I met Mr. Perkins," said Bob to himself, as he rode back downtown on the street-car. "If I hadn't, I suppose I would have been obliged to go to work until I could get enough money to take me to Oklahoma, and it would have been an awful disappointment not to find Mrs. Cameron. But it's all right now; besides, I'm better off than I would have been if she had been here, because I have a pass clear to Fairfax, and her sister said her husband could only help me as far as Kansas City."

CHAPTER XII

ALONE IN A STRANGE CITY

Arrived at the Northwestern railway station, for a time Bob wandered about, enjoying the novelty of the people rushing hither and thither in their search of either friends or relatives, purchasing tickets, and tending to the baggage, and he wondered how they could accomplish anything, so great was the hustle and bustle.

In the course of his wanderings, he chanced upon the station restaurant, and though in his excitement and the novelty of the scenes about him, he had not thought of eating, the sight of food suddenly roused his hunger, and he went up to one of the counters.

The prices of the food, however, amazed him, and it was several minutes before he had picked out anything that he wanted that did not cost too much.

So long did Bob linger over the consumption of the modest repast he had ordered, that the waitress began to eye him with suspicion. And finally she exclaimed:

"Say! how long do you think you can stay here eating, or are you hoping that you will get a chance to sneak off without paying me? But that game won't work. I'm too wise to get caught by any trick like that. So just come across with the price of your feed."

This caustic comment upon the length of time he was lingering over the meal, and the open charge that he was trying to defraud the waitress, hurt Bob, and his embarrassment was evident in the flush that mounted to his face, as he stammered:

"I'm sorry if I've taken too long over my food. I didn't know I was expected to eat it all at once. But I don't think you have any right to say that I was trying to cheat you out of the pay. If I hadn't had the money in my pocket to pay for what I ordered, I shouldn't have ordered anything. How much is it, please?"

"Thirty cents," snapped the waitress.

Quickly Bob thrust his hand in his pocket, and drew forth a dollar bill and gave it to her.

So deeply had Bob been stirred by the unjust reflection upon his honesty, that his misery was plainly visible on his face, and the waitress, returning, could not but notice it.

"I'm sorry if I made you feel bad, kid," she apologized, "but you see, when people buy things in here, they generally pay for them right off, and we have so many tricks worked on us that we have to be pretty sly not to get nailed by some of them. But you're all right. You're only just green."

Leaving the restaurant, Bob returned to the waiting-room, where he picked out a seat nearest the place where the train announcer always stood when he called out the trains that were ready for the passengers. But as he sat there, he could not get the words of the girl in the restaurant out of his mind, and kept repeating to himself: "Only just green."

The constant brooding over this remark suggested the thought to him: "If people here in the cities like New York and Chicago think that I don't know anything, and am not used to the ways of doing things, what will they think of me out in Fairfax? I said I wouldn't let them take me for a tenderfoot, and I won't. I'll just pretend I know all about things and watch how the other people do."

This new resolve fascinated the boy, and he fell into a day dream, in which bronchos, cowboys, and herds of cattle figured prominently, and so engrossed did he become in it, that it was with a start he heard the train announcer call out the train for Kansas City and the West, which he was to take.

Following the others who were going on the same train, Bob made his way to the cars.

Mindful of his recent resolution and the unpleasant experience with the porter of the parlor car, Bob scrutinized each coach of the train carefully as he walked along until he came to one that was obviously a chair car, and this he entered, selecting a seat well in the middle.

Eager as Bob was to reach his destination, it seemed to him that they would never start, but when at last the wheels began to squeak as the train got in motion, he gave vent to a sigh of delight.

Of the people about him, he took only passing notice, and busied himself with trying to map out a plan of action after he reached Fairfax.

When the conductor came along collecting the tickets, Bob proudly drew forth his pass and presented it. As though unable to reconcile the bit of paper with the poorly-clad boy, the conductor scrutinized the official transportation closely, from time to time glancing at Bob.

Unable satisfactorily to solve the incongruity, the official muttered:

"The pass is all right, but it doesn't seem right for this boy to have it."

This voicing of the thoughts, which were evidently passing through the conductor's mind, scared Bob, and he asked, assuming an air of confidence that he did not feel:

"What's the matter with that pass?"

"Nothing, provided you are Bob Chester. But I don't see why you should be given one."

"Well, if it's all right, and properly made out, I don't know that it's any concern of yours why it was given to me. If you have any doubt about it, why don't you find out from the people who issued it?"

"That's a good idea. It's just what I was going to do. I will just keep it until I know it's all O.K."

And, putting the piece of official transportation in his pocket, the conductor moved along through the car.

With dismay and a feeling of foreboding, Bob watched the conductor go from his car with the precious pass. He dared not protest; indeed, the thought of the proper way to make an objection did not occur to him. In fact, he did not know that he could do so, and his own temerity in calling attention to the fact that it was made out had startled him. But bitterly did he rue his suggestion that the conductor keep the all-important paper until he was satisfied as to its genuineness.

In a few minutes Bob noticed the brakeman come into the car and stare at him. But he did not know that the man had done so in obedience to the order of the conductor, who had told the trainman to take a look at Bob, and then to take

care that the boy did not try to leave the train until the matter of the pass had been properly cleared up.

As the train whirled through the darkness of the night, Bob occasionally caught a glimpse of light in the scattered houses or towns through which it passed, but so dark was it that he could see nothing of the country.

Dropping his chair back, the boy tried to go to sleep, but his anxiety over the safety of his pass made it impossible, though he dropped into a doze several times only to awake with a start.

In the meantime, the conductor had sent a telegram to the offices in Chicago where Bob had obtained the transportation, asking if a pass had been issued to Bob Chester, and requesting a description of that individual.

Whenever the conductor walked through the car, Bob inquired anxiously as to when he should receive the important piece of paper back again, but the man in charge of the train only answered gruffly:

"You'll get it back soon enough, if it's all right."

"But if it isn't?" asked Bob, in a boyish eagerness to know the exact conditions he was facing.

"You'll be put off the train, anyhow, and perhaps you will have to go to jail."

As the conductor announced this alternative, he watched Bob closely, and the start the latter gave at the mention of the possibility of arrest, only confirmed the man in his suspicion that there was something irregular about the boy's having the free transportation. But as the reader knows, it was no thought of the pass being spurious that disturbed Bob. The word "jail" had brought to his mind his unpleasant experience in New York.

From thinking about his arrest and the men who had been its cause, Bob went over in his mind all the events that had transpired since that momentous happening, yet he had no regret at the course he had chosen.

Not long after daylight, as the train entered what Bob could see was a good-sized city, and stopped at the station, the boy decided he would get out and walk up and down the platform in order to stretch his legs.

Evidently never thinking the lad would be astir so early, the brakeman had

neglected to obey his instructions and keep close watch on Bob, so that his leaving the car was unnoticed.

Seeing a place where he could get a drink of water, Bob walked toward it.

Just as he was in the midst of drinking from the cup, he was stupefied to hear the snorting of an engine, and, upon turning his head, to see the train on which he had been riding disappearing from the station.

With a cry of alarm, Bob dashed after it, shouting:

"Wait! Stop the train! The conductor's got my pass!"

But the few officials about paid no heed to the lad's frantic cries, and the train continued on its way, while Bob was left in a strange place, bereft of his pass, and without knowing what to do in order to regain possession of the precious piece of paper which was to carry him to Fairfax.

CHAPTER XIII

BOB STARTS AGAIN

Bob's lusty shouts, as he vainly tried to stop the train, drew the attention of the few employees in the station at so early an hour, and they gathered about him, taking mental stock of his worn clothes and his honest face, as they approached.

"What's the matter? Nobody here to meet you?" asked one of the men, on whose hat were the words, "Station Master."

"This isn't a very convenient hour to meet any one. Where do your people live? We can direct you how to get to them."

Not having heard the words uttered by Bob, the agent's inference that the boy was disappointed at finding no one to meet him, was natural. But Bob soon disillusioned him.

"The train's gone and left me," said he, with ever so slight a shakiness in his voice, as he thought of the train speeding on its way and with it his precious pass.

"Well, there are other trains," declared a second man. "You can take the next one."

The quaver in Bob's voice, however, had reached the ears of the station master, and he asked kindly:

"How far were you going?"

"To Fairfax, Oklahoma."

With the evident purpose of reassuring Bob, the station master said:

"Oh, well, it will only make the difference of twelve hours or so in reaching Fairfax. There's another train goes through at four o'clock this afternoon."

"It isn't the delay I mind," returned Bob, "but the conductor has my pass!"

"*You* travelling on a pass?" exclaimed another incredulously, as though unable to reconcile Bob's shabby apparel with the possession of such a privileged means of transportation.

"My, that is bad," mused the station master. "But don't worry. I'll have word telegraphed to the conductor to leave your pass with the agent at Kansas City, and you can get it there. Come with me, and we'll see about sending the message."

"But how shall I get to Kansas City without any ticket?" asked Bob, as he accompanied his new-found friend into the station. "I only have a few dollars, which I shall need when I get to Fairfax. I suppose it would cost a lot to buy a ticket?"

"If you had a pass, it won't be necessary for you to pay. I'll arrange that all right."

Randolph, the city in which Bob was marooned, being a division headquarters of the railway, there was a train despatcher's office in the station, and thither the agent led Bob.

Going over to one of the telegraphers, the station master explained the situation briefly.

"What do you want me to wire? Jenkins is the conductor, isn't he?"

"Yes. Say, 'Jenkins, Aboard No. 6: Leave'," and then he turned to the boy, asked his name, and continued: "'Bob Chester's pass with the ticket agent at Kansas City. Will send Bob on the next train. ROBINSON,

"'Station Master, Randolph.'"

Scarcely had the operator forwarded the message than he suddenly leaned over his instrument, listened intently, and then exclaimed:

"I'll bet Jenkins will be glad to get your wire about the boy. Was there any trouble about the pass?" and he looked at Bob.

"Yes," responded the youth, and told them about the conductor's suspicions. "But why did you ask?"

"Because I caught a message going to Jenkins from Chicago."

"It said the pass was all right, didn't it?" queried Bob anxiously.

"It did," replied the operator, with emphasis, "and more, too. Said you were a particular friend of 'Old Man' Perkins, and advised Jenkins to treat you well, as one man had got into trouble through being uncivil to you."

"But I made that all right; at least, I wrote a note asking Mr. Perkins to take the porter back again," answered Bob innocently.

The overheard message had a salutary effect upon both the operator and agent, and they took a new interest in the boy who was a protégé of the railroad president.

After asking Bob about the incident of the parlor car, they told him to make himself comfortable, and when he felt hungry to let them know.

"I could eat now," smiled Bob, his troubles vanished.

"Then I'll have one of my men go with you to a restaurant just up the street a little way."

"You're very kind, but I can go alone," replied Bob.

"I don't doubt it," laughed the station master. "But, after that wire from Chicago to Jenkins, I don't want anything to happen to you while I am responsible.

"Hey, Tom," he called to one of the trainmen, "take this boy up to Sweeney's, and see that he has a good feed."

In that mysterious manner in which news travels, word had been passed of the instructions to Jenkins, and the man hailed as Tom gladly accepted his task, saying:

"Come on, Bob. When you've tasted Sweeney's wheat cakes, you'll always remember Randolph."

"I think I'll remember it, anyway," smiled Bob, as he set out for the restaurant with his guide.

Bob's appetite had not been in the least impaired by the unpleasant experience through which he had passed, and he ate three plates of griddle cakes.

"My, but those cakes sure were good," he observed, smacking his lips with

relish.

His companion, with good-natured patience, had watched the boy eat, and, as Bob expressed his approval of Sweeney's food, he said:

"Better have another plate. You'll never get any cakes quite as good as Sweeney's till you get back to Randolph."

Though with evident reluctance, Bob declined, and, after paying for the meal, they returned to the station.

By the time of their arrival, more trainmen were on duty, and to each the story of Bob's getting left had been told.

As a result, when they saw the boy, they smiled at him, and proffered good-natured comments.

"Feel less hungry, now?" asked the station master, as Tom and Bob entered his office.

"Yes, thank you," replied the latter. "Sweeney surely can cook griddle cakes! I wish he lived out in Fairfax."

"Take him along," laughed Tom, "and start in business. All Sweeney needs is a flame to cook on, and the fixin's."

While they were talking, one of the telegraph operators came in, with a despatch for the agent.

"Here's Jenkins' answer," said he, holding out the sheet of yellow paper.

Taking it, the station master read aloud:

> "ROBINSON, Randolph: Will leave pass as instructed. Square me with the boy, if you can. Buy him all he wants to eat, and I'll settle.
>
> "JENKINS."

At the words proclaiming the conductor's evident anxiety over how Bob felt toward him, they all laughed.

"It'll do Jenkins good to worry a little," commented Tom. Then, as an idea occurred to him, he struck his thigh, and exclaimed: "I say, Jenkins is an awful miser. Let's put up a joke on him. We'll take a dozen of the boys, have a feed at

Sweeney's, and charge it to Jenkins."

"That's the idea! Great! Fine!" were some of the remarks that greeted the suggestion.

But on Bob's face there was a look of doubt, as he said:

"I don't think that would be exactly fair, would it?"

"Why not?" asked several.

"Because Mr. Jenkins would know I couldn't eat so much."

Tom, however, was loath to abandon his joke, and argued:

"But he said for Robinson to square him with you, didn't he?"

"Why, yes."

"Then, Robinson can tell him the feed for the dozen of us was the only way he could do it."

Though he did not wish to be a spoil-sport, Bob, however, did not approve of the plan. Consequently, it was with relief he beheld a large, red-faced man, in overalls and jumper, enter the station master's office, exclaiming as he caught sight of the boy:

"Are you the kid Conductor Jenkins left here?"

"Yes, sir."

"How'd you like to go over to Kansas City on my freight train?"

"First-rate. I never rode on a freight, and I'd like to."

"You'll never want to again," commented Tom. "What'll become of our feed if you go?"

"Oh, we can have it, just the same," returned another.

Bob, however, was too engrossed with the prospect of riding on a freight train, to overhear the remark.

At first, the station master had thought to protest against letting his charge go, but, as he noticed the boy's eagerness, he said:

"Hosmer, shake hands with Bob Chester. Don't let anything happen to him. He's a special friend of 'Old Man' Perkins. When you get to Kansas City, take him to the ticket agent, and be sure he gets the pass all right."

"Never fear; I'll stay with him till his train's in, and then introduce him to the conductor. Come on, Bob. Train's waiting."

Quickly saying good-bye to the station master and the others, and thanking them for their kindness, Bob followed the big conductor, and was soon started on his way to Fairfax again, aboard the freight train.

CHAPTER XIV

AT THE THROTTLE OF A FREIGHT ENGINE

Taking Bob to the caboose, the freight conductor made him known to the brakemen who were lolling about, smoking.

"So you're the kid Miser Jenkins thought stole your pass?" exclaimed one of the trainmen, after a searching scrutiny of the boy. "He must be losing his eyesight. That face of yours ought to vouch for you, if nothing else. Crooks don't have such honest faces."

"Oh, the miser was probably trying to pull off one of his grand-stand plays," commented another. "Passes are pretty rare birds, nowadays, and I suppose he thought he could make a hit with the company by inquiring about this one."

"And instead of that, he got hit himself. Brown, in the despatcher's office, told me the message Jenkins received from Chicago was red hot."

From the remarks, Bob could see plainly that the officious conductor was not popular, and he was wondering whether or not he was expected to make any comment, when Hosmer said, his face suffused with a look of glee:

"Well, the boys are going to put one over on the 'miser'."

And, pausing aggravatingly, the freight conductor filled his pipe and lighted it.

His action produced the desired effect of tantalizing the brakemen, and they exclaimed eagerly:

"Out with it, Hos'! Tell us! Let us in on it!"

Waiting a moment, to give his words greater emphasis, the conductor removed his pipe from his mouth, and said:

"All the boys are going up to Sweeney's, order the swellest meal he can put up, and send the bill to Jenkins!"

"Whoopee! Great! I wish we were in on it!" exclaimed the brakemen in

unison.

"Is that quite fair?" asked Bob, having hoped that his departure would put an end to Tom's plan.

"Fair? Sure, it's fair!" laughed Hosmer. "Anyhow, I don't see why you should care. He treated you mighty mean, taking your pass away from you."

As the other trainmen agreed with the opinion of their conductor, Bob made no further objection, contenting himself with the thought that he could hardly be held responsible.

During the conversation, the long freight train had got under way, and while the boy found many novel things to hold his attention, the brakemen amused themselves speculating on the effect the joke would have upon Jenkins.

As the engine whistled for a station, Hosmer said to Bob:

"How'd you like to ride on the engine till the next stop?"

"My, but it would be fun!" replied Bob, his eyes sparkling with delight.

"Then come on! I'll take you up and fix it with Barney, the engineer."

As the train stopped, with a loud creaking of brakes and groaning of wheels, Bob jumped from the caboose and accompanied the burly conductor to the head of the train.

"Hey, Barney!" he hailed the engineer.

The man thus addressed poked a coal-begrimed face from the window of his cab, asking:

"What is it—wait orders?"

"Not this time. I've got a boy here—Bob Chester—who wants to ride with you to the next station."

For a moment the engineer scowled, and Bob feared he would refuse. But quickly the grimy face broke into a smile, as Barney asked:

"Is that the kid with a pass Jenkins left?"

"Yes."

"Sure he can ride with me. Help him up."

Bob, however, needed no assistance, and no sooner had the permission been granted than he was climbing into the engine cab.

Before he had succeeded, Hosmer whispered:

"Barney's all right—and he doesn't like Jenkins. Tell him about the joke the boys are going to play." And then he continued aloud: "I'll either come for you, myself, or send some one when we reach Hastings. Orders give us the right of way to Hastings, Barney."

"O.K.," grunted the engineer, as he turned to scrutinize Bob, at the same time standing so that he could glance up the track toward the station to catch the signal to start.

Acting on the conductor's advice, Bob narrated the plan Tom had devised for having fun at Jenkins' expense, and was rewarded by seeing the engineer's face break into a broad grin, and then to hear him roar with laughter.

"That'll make 'Old Miser's' hair turn gray," he gasped between laughs. "He'll never get over it, never!

"Oh, Ned," he called to his fireman, who had been out oiling some part of the engine, "the boys are going to put one over on 'Miser' Jenkins."

But before the engineer had an opportunity to tell of the contemplated joke, he caught the signal from the conductor to start.

"Get up on that seat on the left-hand side, and hang on," warned Barney, and, as Bob obeyed, he pulled open the throttle.

As the iron monster began to move, puffing and smoking at the task of starting the long train, it seemed to the boy that the noise would deafen him. But he soon forgot it in the absorption of watching the fireman open the doors of the firebox, throw in shovels-full of coals, and then inspect the water and steam gauges.

With the gradual increasing of the speed, the din subsided. Yet a new discomfort took its place. So violently did the engine sway, that Bob was obliged to hang on to the window on his side of the cab to keep from bouncing to the floor.

Watching out the corner of his eye, as he scanned the track ahead, the engineer smiled at the boy's trouble in staying on the seat.

Bob, however, soon adapted himself to the engine's motion, and was finally able to sit without clutching the window-frame.

Noting this, Barney got down, crossed the cab, and putting his mouth close to the boy's ear, asked:

"Like to run the engine awhile?"

"Would I? I should say so!" returned Bob in delight.

Though his reply was inaudible, the expression on his face was eloquent.

"Then, take hold of my arm, so you won't get thrown out. That's the way. Steady, now. Climb on to the seat. Good. Now, put your left hand on that lever. That's what they call the throttle. When you pull it toward you, it increases the speed; to slow down, you push it away from you."

Proud, indeed, did Bob feel as his hand clasped the smooth handle of the lever. Never had he expected to run a real, snorting locomotive, dragging a long line of cars, and the realization that he was actually controlling the speed, set him a-tingle with delight.

Crowding in behind Bob, the engineer kept watch of the track, but not so closely that he could not observe and enjoy the boy's pleasure.

After several minutes, Bob turned and shouted:

"Can I pull on the throttle a little?"

"Sure. Open her to the next notch. We've got plenty of steam."

But Bob found it was not so easy to get the notch as it seemed. He kept gamely at it, however, and at last succeeded.

Till they reached the yard limit of Hastings, the engineer allowed him to hold the throttle, and when he at last took it and began to ease down the speed, Bob sighed wistfully.

As the big machine finally came to a stop with a grunt, Barney exclaimed:

"You ought to be an engineer, boy. You've got the nerve to drive hard. We did

ten miles in twenty minutes—which is going some with this load."

Just then, however, the conductor came up.

"Like it, Bob?" he asked.

"Indeed, I did! Mr. Barney let me drive, and I made ten miles in twenty minutes."

"Good boy! We'll make a railroad man out of you yet. Think you could follow me back to the caboose over the cars?"

"I can try," returned Bob.

But before the attempt could be made, the conductor was called to the station office to receive orders.

Swelled with pride at his success in driving the engine, Bob determined to surprise the conductor by going back to the caboose alone.

And with a hearty good-bye to the engineer, he clambered over the coal-stacked tender and up on to the top of a car.

The orders were to take a siding to allow a passenger train to pass, and, as the time was short, the conductor was too busy sending his brakemen to turn the switches and communicating the instructions to the engineer, to think of Bob.

HE CLUTCHED FRANTICALLY AT ONE OF THE HAND BARS

HE CLUTCHED FRANTICALLY AT ONE OF THE HAND BARS

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The boy, however, was making his way back slowly, but without mishap, until the sudden start of the train. He had just climbed down from a high car, and was swinging from it to an empty coal car, when the jerk of starting ran through the line of cars.

So unexpected was this action, that Bob's feet slipped off the bumpers.

Crying out in alarm, he clutched frantically at one of the hand-bars on the end of the coal car, caught it, and managed to draw himself up till he found foothold on the extension of the floor where he stood, hanging on for dear life, until the train stopped with another jerk.

CHAPTER XV

BOB EARNS HIS PASSAGE

All of a tremble at his narrow escape from falling under the car, Bob was trying to recover his self-control before getting down from his precarious position, when he was startled to hear a voice exclaim:

"I'll get even with that 'con' for putting me off the blind baggage, see if I don't!"

The tone in which the words were uttered was so venomous, that Bob realized the speaker meant mischief, though he was ignorant of the fact that in the slang of tramps who beat their way on railroads, "con" betokened conductor, and "blind baggage" the platform of the coach in a passenger train nearest the engine.

Looking about to find out where the angry man was, Bob could see no one.

But the next instant another voice asking, "How you goin' to do it?" decided him that the speakers must be crouching against the end of the empty coal car to which he was holding.

How he had failed to discover them from the top of the other car, he could not understand, but he soon ceased to wonder, in his eagerness to catch every word uttered by the unseen tramps.

"That's easy," replied the voice the boy recognized as having made the threat to "get even."

"Cut out that talk, and get down to business," growled a third voice.

"All right, 'Bo. We can put all sorts of crimps into this road by 'holding up' the night express! The officials of this road, whose men are too stingy to let a fellow ride on the blind baggage, are boasting they haven't had a 'hold-up' for years."

The various exclamations with which this wicked plan was greeted, told Bob not only that it met the approval of the tramps, but that there were more than two of them.

The full danger of a "hold-up" the boy did not realize. He remembered, however, having read of such occurrences out West where passengers were terrorized and robbed of money and jewelry.

But his speculation was again interrupted by the renewal of the conversation.

"That will sure set us even, but when can we do it?" inquired a voice eagerly.

"And get away safely?" added another.

"There's only one place," responded the voice of the man who had suggested the plot.

"Where?" chorused the others.

"On this end of the long bridge across the river."

"Right you are, 'Bo. We can make our 'get-away' down the bank and find some of the 'shanty men' to take us across."

"And into the arms of the police," sneered the ringleader. "We'll use the bank to escape, but we won't ask any favors of a 'shanty man'."

"Will there be enough money aboard to make it worth while?" inquired one of the schemers, with an evidently practical turn of mind.

"Sure; Number 4 always carries a bunch of gold for Western towns."

"But how'll we board her?" asked still another.

"Get a lantern and wave it."

"Will they stop?"

"Say, why do you suppose I chose the approach to the bridge?" snapped the man who had proposed the scheme.

And then, without giving his companions a chance to speak, he answered his question himself:

"Because the engineer'll think there is something wrong on the bridge and stop. It'll be dead easy."

Bob's eyes were almost popping out of his head, as, afraid to peep over the top of the car, he stared at the boards as though striving to see through them.

Straining his ears to catch every word, he heard another of the plotters begin to speak, when a train thundered past, effectually cutting off all conversation with its roar.

Though Bob did not know it, so absorbed was he in listening, less than five minutes had passed since he had started back for the caboose.

With the necessity of making a quick shift to the siding, the conductor of the freight train had momentarily forgotten the presence of his youthful charge, and when at last he did remember, it was with the supposition that he had remained in the cab with the engineer.

Accordingly, upon receipt of orders to proceed, Hosmer decided to let Bob ride longer in the cab, and shouted to his men to get aboard, waving his arm in the "go ahead" signal to the engineer.

But Bob had heard the shouts, and divining their meaning, jumped to the track, having no relish for riding farther in his dangerous position between the cars.

Fortunately, both the engineer and conductor saw the boy, as he leaped to the ground, and the signal to start was not obeyed.

Recovering his balance, Bob ran toward Hosmer.

As he drew near enough for the conductor to see his white, excited face, he exclaimed:

"Where have you been? I thought you were in the cab with Barney."

"I—I tried to go back over the cars," stammered Bob.

"Barney shouldn't have let you. It's too dangerous for a greenhorn."

Wincing at the words, which slipped out unconsciously as the conductor thought of what might have happened to the boy, Bob hastened to defend the engineer by saying:

"Mr. Barney didn't know I was going. I wanted to surprise you by showing you I could go back without your help. And—and then the train started, and I had to hang on to a coal car."

"Well, so long as you didn't get hurt, it's all right. But don't try it again. Now,

run back and climb into the caboose. Let's see how quick you can do it."

The last was a diplomatic means to make the boy hurry, for the conductor was anxious to start the train, yet would not until he saw his charge safe in the caboose.

And his ruse was successful, for Bob, eager to show his speed, raced down the track and quickly swung aboard.

Smiling, Hosmer again signalled to Barney, the train started, and as the last car reached him, the conductor climbed on.

"Have any trouble when we started?" one of the brakemen was asking Bob as Hosmer entered the car.

"Pretty near. I was just crossing from a high to a low car, when the jerk came. But I managed to hang on."

"Good boy," chorused the train crew, all of whom realized too well the danger to which the boy had been subjected.

"But when we stopped on the siding, why didn't you get down?" asked the conductor.

"Because I was listening," announced Bob with a manner of mystery that would have been droll were his face not so serious.

"Listening?" exclaimed the others, instantly alert.

"Yes. I was just going to get down, when I heard some one speak, and then I waited."

"Hoboes," growled a brakeman, jumping up and seizing a short club. "What car were they on, kid?"

"The first coal car from the engine. But you mustn't go up there. They are bad men."

This warning was greeted with laughter by the brakemen, the others of whom had also picked up clubs.

The conductor, however, having a son of his own, realized from Bob's manner that the lad had something he wanted to tell but did not know how to begin, and accordingly asked him:

"What did you hear, son?"

"I heard them plan to hold up Number 4 to get even!"

"What?" demanded all the trainmen, their faces instantly growing serious.

"Yes; the man said he was going to get even for being put off the 'blind baggage'."

For a moment the members of the train crew looked at one another in amazement, then fell to plying Bob with questions, making him repeat the conversation over and over.

"Well, you've earned your passage to Fairfax, all right, Bob!" ejaculated the conductor. "It would break our record for being free from holdups, to say nothing of the loss to passengers. The company ought to do something handsome by you, my boy."

"Then you can prevent it?" queried Bob anxiously.

"Sure thing. We'll capture them at the next station. Better get ready, boys," added Hosmer significantly to his brakemen. "They may prove hard to handle."

Turning their backs, so Bob could not see exactly what they were doing, the brakemen opened a cupboard and took out some things which they slipped into the pockets of their jumpers.

But their preparations to capture the would-be train robbers went for naught.

When, led by Bob to the coal car, the brakemen surrounded and, at a word from the conductor, mounted it, they found the car empty.

"They have given us the slip!" growled a brakeman.

"Examine every car and truck on the train," commanded Hosmer. "I'll go to the station and send in the alarm. Come, Bob."

And together the conductor and the boy hastened to the station, where the full story was quickly flashed to headquarters at Omaha.

When the officials first received it, they were incredulous, asking if it could not have been a fancy of Bob's brain. But Hosmer quickly vouched for the boy's honesty, and word came back to have Bob put off to meet the road's officers at

one of the stations.

During the run to that city, the brakemen speculated upon the chances of capturing the miscreants, lamenting the fact that the glory had been denied them.

Arrived at the city, Bob was taken to a room and closely questioned by the officers, who were soon convinced of the truth of his story.

"Could you identify them if caught?" he was asked.

"If I could hear them speak, I could recognize the voice of the man who proposed the plan. I did not get a look at them," replied Bob.

Satisfied with this answer, the officers sent instructions to have the tracks patrolled from Hastings to the long bridge, to search all trains, and to arrest any tramps found.

This done, arrangements were made to have other detectives at the bridge in case the men eluded capture.

The waiting was tedious. But at last, about three in the afternoon, word was received that four tramps, heavily armed, had been captured about ten miles from the Mississippi river.

Putting Bob into the cab of an engine, six officers climbed aboard, and a record run was made to the scene of the arrest.

"You sit where you can watch and hear them talk," whispered a detective in Bob's ear.

At first the prisoners were silent, but under the taunts of the officers, their reserve weakened, and they began to rail at the men who had captured them.

Eagerly, Bob listened, then cried, pointing to the smallest of the four:

"That's the man who said he'd get even. I recognize his voice!"

CHAPTER XVI

FAIRFAX AT LAST

Elated by the capture and identification of the would-be train-robbers, the officers made much of Bob, praising him for remaining to listen until he had heard the dastardly plot, and commenting on the good fortune which had placed him just where the tramps were.

Modestly Bob bore the words of commendation, for his mind was on other matters, as the question he asked evidenced:

"How long before the train arrives that will take me to Fairfax?"

"I'm afraid it will be several days before you can go, Bob," answered one of the officers.

"Why?" demanded the boy, disappointment evident in his voice and on his face.

"Because it will be necessary for you to appear in court in order to convict the prisoners."

"But I don't see why you need me," protested Bob. "I told what I had heard and then pointed out the man who said he wanted to get even."

"That's just it, son. You are the only one who overheard the conversation and can identify the ringleader."

"Don't look so unhappy," chimed in another officer. "Kansas City is a pretty good town, and we'll give you the time of your life. Theatres and picture-shows, you know. The road will probably do something handsome for you. Anyhow, you'll have good living until it is necessary to come back here to testify."

But even the prospect of going to a theatre—a treat Bob had never enjoyed while with his guardian—failed to appease him, and his usually cheerful expression gave way to one of resigned gloom.

Noting this, and desirous of restoring the boy's good spirits, an officer

suggested:

"Let's go over to Kansas City. How'd you like that, Bob?"

"First rate. Then I can get my pass again." And at the prospect of regaining possession of the precious piece of paper, he grew more cheerful.

While the detectives were making ready to start, two of their fellows, who had accompanied the prisoners to the jail, rushed in, exclaiming almost at the same time:

"We've got the case clinched! One of the four has confessed!"

Just what this meant, Bob did not know, but the news seemed to please the officers so greatly that their good spirits infected him.

"How'd you work it? Where's the confession? Let's read it!" exclaimed the detectives who had remained at the station.

"One at a time," laughed the chief of the force. "The confession is here," and he tapped his coat pocket. "It bears out exactly what our friend Bob told us."

"But how did you get it?" persisted the others.

"Promised the fellow who was most scared by his arrest a light sentence if he'd turn witness against his pals. And say, he jumped at the chance."

"Well, you are in luck, Bob!" declared the officer who had striven to cheer him up.

"Why?" inquired the boy.

"Because now you won't be obliged to wait for the trial. This confession and the evidence of the man will do the trick for us."

"Whoopee!" cried Bob, dancing about in delight. "Then I can start for Fairfax to-night?"

"Just as soon as a through train comes."

This information restored Bob's good spirits, and eagerly he boarded the special car which was waiting to take the detectives back to Kansas City.

As the officers discussed the incidents of the capture, one of them turned to

the boy and said:

"Say, you surely are a regular bunch of luck, kid! I'd like to take you out to the gold regions. I bet you'd tumble into some abandoned mine that would be worth millions!"

Every one laughed at this comment upon Bob's good fortune, and the chief added:

"I hope it sticks by him. He'll need all the luck he has if any of those Oklahoma cowboys start in to have fun with him."

"I guess I will," smiled Bob. "Anyhow, a few knocks won't hurt me. Mr. Perkins told me all I must look out for was to keep away from the saloon and gambling dens and not to make friends too quickly."

"Well, if you follow his advice, you'll get along all right."

Upon the arrival of the special car at Kansas City, the officers were met by a messenger with instructions to have Bob taken to the offices of the railroad company, as the vice-president wished to talk with him.

"There's more of your luck," commented the chief. "Mr. Nichols will probably give you a reward."

Bob, however, was more concerned about regaining possession of his pass and ascertaining when his train would leave than in speculation as to whether or not he would be rewarded, and he made no bones about saying so.

"Never mind the pass, now," returned the messenger, who was to escort him to the vice-president's office. "We'll get that in plenty of time so you won't miss your train."

Thus reassured, Bob turned to the detectives, saying:

"Good-bye, if I don't see you again."

"Oh, you'll see me," replied the chief. "I shall have you make a deposition to support the confession."

And amid wishes for the best of success, Bob and the messenger set out for the company's offices.

Direct to the vice-president's rooms Bob was taken.

As the messenger entered with him, a tall, gray-haired man arose from a desk and came forward with outstretched hand, announcing:

"I am Mr. Nichols, and I'm glad to know you, Bob."

For a moment the official gazed earnestly at the honest face before him, then continued:

"There's no use telling you that I and every man who works for our railroad is grateful to you for enabling us to catch the would-be train-robbers. You know that. I want you to tell me how we can reward you."

"I wasn't thinking of any reward, Mr. Nichols," answered Bob. "Mr. Perkins has been so kind to me that when I heard those bad men planning to stop the train, I only thought of repaying his kindness by preventing them if I could."

At these manly words, which showed that Bob was possessed with gratitude, in addition to his other good qualities, the vice-president again shook his hand cordially, exclaiming:

"You've got the right stuff in you, Bob. I'll let Perkins hear what you said. And now, sit down, and tell me all about your trip, beginning at New York."

Amazed that so important a man should evince interest enough in him to devote the time necessary to relate his story, Bob sank into the comfortable chair indicated by Mr. Nichols and began.

At first he was embarrassed, but with the kindly words now and then uttered by the vice-president, he regained his composure.

When the recital was ended, Mr. Nichols thrummed upon his desk for several minutes, and then asked:

"What would you like most in the world, Bob?"

Scarcely hesitating an instant, the boy replied:

"To prove that Len Dardus did not tell the truth when he said my father was crazy because father wrote me he had entrusted five thousand dollars to him for my education."

The expression that spread over Mr. Nichols' face as he heard this wish clearly showed surprise, for he had expected that, boy-like, Bob would have

requested money, a rifle, or the like, and again he thrummed the table before saying:

"We will prove it, if we can, my boy. What was your father's name?"

"Horace Chester."

"Where was your letter written from—I mean the one telling you of the money?"

"Red Top, Oklahoma."

Swinging in his chair, the vice-president drew out a slide from his desk on which was a map and scanned it eagerly.

All at once, with an ejaculation of surprise, he murmured:

"This is remarkable—remarkable!"

Unable to restrain his curiosity, Bob rose from his chair and approached till he could see the map. But this afforded him no reason for his friend's observation, and he asked:

"What is remarkable, sir?"

"Why, that you should have chosen to go to Fairfax. Red Top is the next town, thirty miles west!"

"O—oh! Then I may find out something about father!" exclaimed Bob excitedly.

"Exactly. But you must be careful. If he really had the money, he may have possessed other property which is being withheld from you. In that case, should the interested persons learn that Horace Chester's son was in Fairfax something might happen to you."

The last words were uttered so significantly that Bob could not fail to understand Mr. Nichols' meaning, and when the latter continued, "I want you to promise me you will call yourself Bob Nichols till I have learned the truth of this matter," the boy solemnly consented.

"Good! Not only is it for your own safety, but it will enable you to investigate quietly without arousing suspicion.

"This will be our secret, Bob. You must not tell a soul, not even Mr. Perkins."

"I won't, sir."

Realizing from Bob's expression that he had aroused sad thoughts and memories, the vice-president stood up and said:

"Now that we have made this agreement, we will dismiss it from our minds for the present. I want you to come to dinner and the theatre with me."

"But my pass and the train?" exclaimed Bob.

"Your train, or rather the limited, on which I shall send you, does not leave until eleven. I'll send for your pass now." And, pressing a button, he ordered the clerk who responded to fetch Bob's pass.

This done, Mr. Nichols was signing some papers when word was brought that the chief of detectives wished to take Bob's deposition.

"Have them come in here," replied the official, and in due course the lawyer, notary and detective arrived.

Briefly Bob told his story, signed it, and solemnly swore to its truth.

"And now we'll forget all trouble and have a good time," announced Mr. Nichols. "Give this note to the cashier, chief. Take Bob's pass from the messenger and meet us at the limited at eleven. Bob and I are going to the theatre."

To the boy, it seemed as though he were in fairy-land. First Mr. Nichols took him to a store, bought him a new suit and a complete outfit of shirts and clothes, had Bob don some of them, then purchased a trunk, ordered the things packed in it and sent to the station, finally taking Bob for a drive about the city.

At first Bob had protested, but the vice-president silenced him by saying that the service he had rendered the railroad was worth much more than the clothes.

Dinner and theatre were one whirl of pleasure to the boy. And after he had been put in care of the conductor of the limited, had bidden good-bye to Mr. Nichols and the detectives, who all gathered to see him off, bringing various little presents, and the train was in motion, he sat and pondered over the series of events.

But his surprises were not ended, for when he opened the envelope containing his pass, he found two crisp fifty-dollar bills pinned to a card, which said:

"For Bob Chester, with the compliments of the Great Western Railroad."

Nature, however, asserted herself at last, and Bob went to sleep.

Interesting because of its novelty, the journey proceeded without further incidents, and in due course Bob reached Fairfax.

CHAPTER XVII

SEEKING A JOB

The stopping of the Limited at the little settlement of Fairfax was sufficient to arouse the curiosity of the dozen or so men who were lounging about the station, and when they saw that such an unusual proceeding was to allow a mere boy to alight, they stared at him with unfeigned interest.

"Must be the son of some big bug," hazarded one of the idlers.

"Or else he was put off for trying to beat his way," declared another, whose surly disposition was evident in his words.

"Can't a person get off here without starting a guessing match?" commented a third.

"Of course," replied the surly man. "But it don't seem natural."

During these remarks Bob was engrossed in gazing at the place he had chosen in which to build his fortune, and the prospect was not reassuring.

About half a mile from the station he could see a score or more of houses built in all sorts of shapes, and possessing anything but an attractive appearance. Beyond the settlement and on all sides, the prairies stretched in awesome vastness.

As he surveyed the surroundings, Bob could not restrain a sigh, but quickly checked it as a pleasant-faced, powerfully built man stepped briskly from the cabin which served as station and said cheerily:

"You're Bob Nichols, I suppose. My name is Henry Thomas. Your father wired me to be on the lookout for you. I had to report the train or I'd have come out sooner. What can I do for you?"

Hearing himself addressed as Nichols was a distinct shock to the boy, but to be taken for the son of the vice-president of the railroad completely dumfounded him, and for a moment he was on the point of denying the assumption. Then his promise to adopt the name recurred to him and he decided that Mr. Nichols'

failure to disclaim relationship was probably with a purpose, so he just muttered something as though in answer to the first question and said aloud:

"I should be obliged if you would direct me to the hotel. I suppose they will send for my trunk."

"I'll direct you, of course," returned the agent, "and you can't very well miss it because it's the only one in town. But if you don't mind, I'd like to have you put up here with me." Then he added in a low voice: "The Red Indian isn't the sort of place you're used to and I'd feel safer to have you here."

"Oh, all right," laughed Bob. "I shan't be in town very long; that is, if I can find a ranch where they'll take me."

"So you're bound to ranch it, eh? You'll find it pretty tough," commented Thomas.

"That's what I'm here for," answered the boy, smiling. "I guess I can stand it."

"Mebbe you can and mebbe you can't," observed the surly-looking man, who had edged his way to where the agent and Bob were talking and had heard the boy's last remark.

"It all depends on whose ranch you strike. Most cowpunchers don't cotton to tenderfeet. The last one that hit Fairfax stayed just three days and was mighty glad to light out on a freight train."

"Now, Higgins, don't try to scare Mr. Nichols," exclaimed Thomas. "His father's vice-president of the Great Western."

"So you are Si Nichols' son, eh?" inquired Higgins.

"I thought out-West people weren't supposed to ask questions," returned Bob.

"Good boy! That's one on you, Higgins!" chuckled the other loungers gleefully, and the station agent added: "Now leave the boy alone. He's my guest while he's in Fairfax and any trick played on him I shall consider a personal affront to myself."

As the agent uttered these words, he drew himself to his full height and Bob could see that he was a splendid specimen of manhood. And that the others had a wholesome respect for his prowess was evident in the more deferential manner which they adopted toward Bob.

"Oh, if he's *your* special friend, all right," growled Higgins, but he added under his breath, "I'll have some fun with you, Mr. Tenderfoot, see if I don't."

As he walked with the agent to where his trunk lay beside the track, Bob could not but wonder what his reception would have been had he not made the chance acquaintance of such powerful friends, and he thanked his good fortune that he had done so, for he felt out of place and very lonely in a strange country and among such rough-mannered men.

Divining what was passing through the boy's mind from the seriousness of his face, Thomas said:

"You mustn't take to heart what these men out here say to you, Mr. Nichols. Wresting a livelihood from the prairies has accustomed them to giving and receiving hard knocks, and they don't stop to think how what they say will sound. Just take it good-naturedly and give them back better than they send—if you can."

"I'll try," said the boy. "But please don't call me Mr. Nichols. Just Bob. I like it better."

At this request, Bob rose a hundred per cent. in the estimation of the agent.

"All right. But if I do, you must call me Hal," he replied.

When they had carried the trunk into a little room off the station, Thomas said:

"Can you ride horseback at all, Bob?"

"No."

"That's too bad. You'll have to learn. Everybody rides out here. I've orders to get you the best pony possible and I wanted to know just what kind to get. Most of 'em have some mean trick. But there's one, Firefly they call him, that is as gentle as a lamb. Whether Shorty Simmons will sell him or not, I don't know, but I'll find out."

"Is he fast?" asked Bob, fearing that the pony might be slow and old because he was gentle.

"There's not a horse in Fairfax that can keep up with him. Now this will be your room. It's mine too, but I'll move if you wish."

"If you do, I'll go to the hotel."

"All right, I won't. While you are changing your clothes, I'll ride over to town and see if I can buy Firefly."

The group of loungers was still on the platform when the agent went to the little lean-to beside the station where he kept his horse, saddled and mounted it, and as they saw him ride forth a wicked gleam appeared in Higgins' eyes.

He calculated that Bob would soon emerge from the seclusion of the station, and in such event he recognized his opportunity for carrying out his vow to have some fun with the boy.

Eager to begin Western life, Bob quickly took off his new suit and put on a pair of the corduroy trousers and one of the blue flannel shirts Mr. Nichols had bought him and then proudly placed on his head a sombrero.

Standing before the looking glass, he surveyed the effect, saying to himself as he noted the change the costume made in his appearance:

"I don't believe Mr. Dardus or anyone back in New York would know me now."

But not long did he linger gazing at himself.

The voices of the men on the platform were audible and he decided to join the group in the hope that from some chance remark he might learn of a ranch where he could obtain a job as cowboy. For though he was grateful to the agent, Bob wanted to be independent.

CHAPTER XVIII

ON THE TRACK

"Now you look more as though you belonged in Fairfax," declared one of the loungers as Bob joined them.

"All except the clothes and hat," grunted Higgins. "Say, you won't have any trouble getting a job if you go just as you are. Any rancher would hire you to scare coyotes away from the home ranch."

This sally at his expense sent a hot flush to Bob's cheeks, but, remembering the agent's advice to give back better than he received, he retorted:

"If there were any such jobs around, I should think they'd pay you double wages!"

"*Now* will you try to get fresh with a tenderfoot?" asked one of the others when their laughter at Bob's sharp rejoinder had subsided.

"I ain't trying to get fresh," returned Higgins. "I'm just feeling the boy out. The sooner he gets used to Fairfax ways, the better."

But Bob's retort evidently inspired in him a greater respect for the boy and he refrained from making any more comments on his personal appearance.

After the interchange of a few general remarks, Bob said:

"I should be very grateful if some of you *gentlemen* would tell me of a ranch where I can apply for a job. I'd rather like to get one without Mr. Thomas' assistance."

In this request Higgins saw his chance. About ten miles from the settlement there lived a ranchman who was a man of mystery. Though his grazing ground was good and well-watered, and his pay prompt, he had such a temper that few cowboys would stay with him longer than a month or less, and to him Higgins decided to send Bob.

With this purpose, while the others were evidently trying to think of a suitable

place for the boy, he said:

"There's only one I can think of and that's John Ford."

"Ford?" repeated Bob, his memory instantly recalling what the strange man with the scar had said about Sam and John Ford. "Where does he live?"

"Ten miles due west."

"Now, Higgins, you know better than to send this boy out there. Remember what Hal said about playing tricks on him."

Evidently this reminder had an effect upon the schemer, for he answered apologetically:

"Well, he asked about a place and I told him. You know as well as I do that John Ford always wants help."

"Sure we know it. But it ain't no fit place for such a boy."

Something suggested to Bob, however, that he should go to this ranchman, and accordingly he said:

"You needn't think I am so tender. Just because other men can't get along with Mr. Ford is no sign I can't. What is the nearest way to get there?"

"So long as you've got to walk, go straight down the track till you see a building with a red roof, on the left hand side," directed Higgins.

And before the others could protest, Bob uttered a hasty "thank you," and set off along the track at a dog trot.

"You'll get yours, Higgins, when Hal gets back," asserted the man who protested against Bob's being sent to Ford's.

"And you didn't even warn him about the dog," chided another.

At this reminder of the savage wolfhound that John Ford kept to guard his cabin, the idlers grew serious and exchanged uneasy glances.

"Oh, well! Ford'll probably see the boy so long as he comes from the direction of the railroad. Yellow Tom told me he sits by the hour looking toward the track—and he'll call off the brute."

"Providing the beast don't chew the boy up before John sees him," interposed another.

"Now, Tracy, don't always be looking for trouble," growled Higgins. "Life out West ain't no kindergarten. We had to take our knocks. Let the kid get his. Just because his father is rich ain't no reason why we should carry pillows around for him to fall on."

This crude viewpoint, if not satisfying to the consciences of Higgins' companions at least afforded relief, and they fell to wondering what Bob would say to them on his return—for return they expected he would.

In the meantime, the object of their thoughts was hurrying as rapidly as he could over the rough roadbed.

The crisp, bracing air seemed a stimulant to his lungs which had never breathed any but the contaminated air of New York, and he gloried in the fact that he was at last in a land where success did not depend on influence and riches, but where a man "made good" or failed, according to whether he was made of the right stuff or not.

For a time, his mind dwelt upon the insinuations Higgins and the others had made against Ranchman Ford, but the same power that had urged him to seek a job of this man whispered to him that he had nothing to fear. Dismissing all forebodings, therefore, Bob began to wonder if there could be any connection between Ford, the man with the scar and his father. The subject suggested so many possibilities and was, altogether, so vague, that, healthy-minded boy as he was, he decided not to ponder over it longer.

"There's no use building air castles," he told himself. "If Mr. Ford hires me and knows anything about father, I'll find it out in due time. There's one good thing, if I do land the job, Red Top will be ten miles nearer—and I can get away without exciting so much comment as from Fairfax."

From time to time as Bob trudged along, he scanned the plains on both sides of the track.

Thanks to the milestones placed at the side of the roadbed he was able to keep count of the miles he walked. Just after he had passed the eighth stone from Fairfax, Bob was electrified to see a herd of cattle in the distance. Pausing, he gazed at them interestedly, noticing that they were moving steadily instead of

grazing. What this meant, he was at a loss to understand until of a sudden he saw three men on horseback emerge from the herd and, with arms waving, ride like mad to the head of the line and gradually change the direction of the cattle away from the track.

No need was there to tell him the riders were cowboys, and Bob thrilled with excitement as he watched their wonderful riding. But he did not wait till they were out of sight. Instead, he quickened his pace, murmuring:

"The sooner I get to Mr. Ford's, the sooner I'll be a cowboy."

The walk on the track was tiresome, however, unaccustomed to such rough traveling as he was, and it was with a sigh of relief that he finally caught sight of a group of buildings, one of which had a red-top roof.

"That must be the place," he exclaimed and, quickly leaving the track, started across the prairie. But Bob found that walking on the ties was easy compared to forcing his way through waist-high grass and stubborn sage-brush.

CHAPTER XIX

AN AMAZING RECEPTION

At last, however, Bob emerged into a clearing and stopped to survey the group of buildings. The one with the red roof faced the track and was built of logs. It was only one story high and about twenty feet long. The other two stood one on each side and were about twice as long but no higher. Back of the building, toward the west, was an enclosure surrounded by a high fence.

Had any one familiar with ranches been with Bob, they could have told him that enclosure was the corral, into which the cowboys turned their ponies when at the ranch, that the long building nearest the corral was the bunkhouse for the cowboys, and that the other long structure was the eating-house and storeroom of the ranch. But it was not long before Bob learned these facts for himself.

To all appearances, there was not a soul in any of the three houses and, as Bob stood gazing at them, trying to discover some sign of life, for he was loath to take the long tramp back to Fairfax without at least having asked Ranchman Ford for a job, he was suddenly startled to see a huge dog bounding toward him, its lips drawn back disclosing wickedly-long fangs.

Bob's first impulse was to flee, but such tremendous leaps did the creature take that he realized it would be only a few minutes before the dog would overtake him. Then it flashed through his mind that this might be the ranchman's way of "trying out" strangers who came to his door, and the boy determined to stand his ground.

"I'll show them that a 'tenderfoot' has some courage," Bob said, as he braced himself for the impact when the dog should leap upon him.

All the while, he had been steadily looking into the dog's eyes, and just as the creature was upon him the same power that had urged him to come to the Ford ranch seemed to tell him to speak to the animal.

"Steady, boy! Steady! I'm not going to do any harm here," he exclaimed.

Whether in surprise at the boy's unusual procedure in facing him—most

callers at the ranch either hastened away or yelled to Ford to call off his dog—or what, the beast hesitated before his last leap that would have brought him on top of Bob and then, beginning to prance playfully, he approached fawningly.

"Good boy! That's the way. We ought to be good friends, you and I. Come here," exclaimed Bob, and as the dog came up, he patted his head caressingly.

The boy's relief was so great at finding the savage beast did not attempt to tear him limb from limb that he failed to notice the door of the red-roofed cabin open and a grizzled head emerge.

But the next instant the presence of the man was called to his attention by a terrific roar:

"Chester!"

Amazed at hearing his name, Bob gazed open-mouthed toward the house.

By this time, the man had come out onto the ground and the boy beheld a tall, spare-boned man, with weather-tanned face, a scrubby beard, and a mass of tousled hair.

The dog, however, paid no heed to the voice, rubbing against Bob and licking his hands.

Again came the bellow.

"Chester! Come here!"

Too alarmed by the imperiousness of the tone to wonder how the secret of his identity could be known by this man of the plains, Bob called:

"Yes, sir. Right away, sir."

But if the hearing of his name had caused Bob surprise, his response created more in the man.

"Oh! It's not you I want!" he yelled. "It's that fool dog! Come here, sir!"

But the dog obeyed no better than before.

A moment the ranchman glared at it, his face terrible in its anger, then dropped his hand to his hip and drew forth a revolver.

Divining his intention, Bob leaped in front of the dog, exclaiming:

"Don't shoot, sir! The dog has done nothing!"

"Done nothing, eh? I suppose you call making friends with a stranger nothing. Stand aside!"

But Bob did not move.

"Just because a dog makes friends with me is no reason for shooting him," he retorted.

A moment the man glowered sullenly from the dog to the boy, then, attracted by something about the latter, came closer and peered eagerly into Bob's face.

"Who are you?" he demanded.

"Bob Nichols."

"Nichols, eh? Then I must have been mistaken," he added in a voice too low for the boy to hear, and a look of disappointment settled on his face as he continued aloud: "Well, what do you want?"

"You are Mr. Ford, I presume?" asked Bob.

"I am; John Ford, owing no man a cent and afraid of nothing, or no one on earth."

Smiling at this unusual introduction, Bob said:

"I came out to ask if you'd give me a job on your ranch, Mr. Ford."

"Know anything about ranching?"

"No, sir. But I can learn."

"Who sent you to me?"

"A Mr. Higgins."

"Ned Higgins, eh? Trying another of his jokes, I suppose. Probably thought the dog would chew you up."

Then for a moment that seemed hours to the anxious boy, the ranchman pondered, finally exclaiming:

"Well, we'll fool Higgins this time. I'll take you on for a try. You're sure game or you wouldn't have stood before that fool dog, the way you did. Come in and we'll talk about wages."

And, as Bob entered the cabin, Ford turned to look at the dog, muttering to himself:

"Strange, mighty strange. I never knew him to make friends with any one before."

CHAPTER XX

BOB BECOMES OWNER OF A DOG

Interestedly Bob gazed about him as he entered, for the first time in his life, the home of a ranchman. At the left of the door, a bunk, covered with brilliant-colored blankets—which, had the boy known they were the handiwork of Indians, would have interested him greatly—extended from the wall. Above this crude bed was a rack holding three rifles and several revolvers. On the opposite side of the room were a cupboard and table, while in the rear was another cupboard, and a stove. A rocking and two straight-backed chairs completed the furnishings.

Just what Bob had expected to find in the cabin he could not have told, but its severity and barrenness disappointed him.

"Sit down," grunted the ranchman, motioning Bob to one of the straight-backed chairs while he himself sank into the rocker.

As Bob obeyed, the dog stretched himself at his feet.

Searchingly the ranchman scanned the boy's face, and the silence was becoming embarrassing when Ford broke it by demanding suddenly:

"What did you say your name was?"

"Bob Nichols."

"Where do you come from?"

"New York."

This answer caused the ranchman to sit up straight and again scrutinize the boy's features, as he asked:

"Got any folks?"

"No, sir."

"Live alone in New York?"

"No, sir. With my guardian."

"What made you come out here?"

"I wanted to be a cowboy and make my fortune."

"Cow punching ain't a paved highway to riches."

"But you are rich, aren't you?"

At this leading question, the grizzled man of the plains scowled, a suspicion of Bob's purpose in seeking a job with him flashing into his mind as he replied:

"Mebbe I am and mebbe I ain't. What made you think I was?"

"Mr. Higgins and the other men said you were."

"Huh! them fellows had better mind their own business," grunted the ranchman; but the ingenuous reply and the open honesty of the boy's face banished his suspicions, and he continued his questioning.

The length to which the catechising extended amazed Bob, in view of what he had been told and had read in regard to not asking questions, and he made his replies as brief as possible, taking good care to give only the most general information about himself.

Perceiving this, Ford finally asked:

"How much wages do you want?"

"I'll leave that to you, Mr. Ford. As I don't know anything about ranching, I don't expect much and I'm willing to trust you to do what is right."

This confidence in his squareness appealed more to the ranchman than anything else Bob could have said or done.

Leading the life of a recluse as he did and assuming a manner of forbidding austerity when forced to meet his fellows, the man had been endowed by them with a reputation for close—if not sharp—dealing, and this trust in him evinced by the boy moved him deeply, and with a voice in which there was a half sob, he returned:

"You won't lose by leaving the matter of wages to me, boy. Don't you worry about that, no matter what Ned Higgins or his cronies tell you."

"I shall not discuss my affairs with outsiders," replied Bob with seriousness that brought a smile to the plainsman's face.

"Good! Now, let's get down to business. Can you ride?"

"No. But I can learn."

"You'll have to. A man on a ranch who can't ride is about as useless as a rifle without cartridges. Let's see, you'll need a safe pony to learn on. I guess I'll let you try old Sox. He never was mean and he still has some speed. Pick up that saddle there," and he pointed to what is called a Mexican saddle, which has a high pommel and back; "the bridle is tied to it, and we'll go out to the corral. You ought to get so you can do pretty well by night. You've got to, because I need another puncher with my short-horn herd over by Red Top."

The thought that he was to be stationed close to the town that might hold secrets of the greatest importance to himself so excited Bob that his hands trembled as he seized the saddle.

Attributing this action to fear of the broncho, Ford said:

"You sure ain't scared of riding a pony when you faced Chester, are you?"

"No, I'm not."

"Then why are you trembling so?"

"Oh, because I'm so happy at having found a job, I guess," dissembled Bob. And then, in order to direct the ranchman's attention from himself, he asked:

"Why do you call your dog Chester?"

This question served Bob's purpose better than he could have desired, for it caused the grizzled plainsman to start suddenly.

Instantly recovering himself, however, he countered by demanding sharply:

"What makes you ask that?"

"Because it's such a queer name for a dog."

"Well, he's a queer dog," returned Ford tersely. "Now, come along with that saddle."

As though aware of their purpose, the dog had preceded them from the cabin, but as Ford and Bob stepped forth, he stopped, began to sniff the air and then emitted a long, low growl.

"Somebody's coming," announced the ranchman, pausing and following the direction of the wolfhound's gaze.

Eagerly Bob did the same, and in a few moments beheld a man riding a horse and leading another.

Instantly it flashed to the boy's mind that the horseman was his friend the station agent, who, having learned his destination, had followed, and he exclaimed:

"That's Hal Thomas!"

"What makes you think so?" demanded Ford sharply.

"Because he's a friend of mine and he was trying to buy a horse for me when I started for your ranch."

"Well, you couldn't have a better friend," asserted the ranchman.

During this colloquy the dog had set up a furious barking and snarling, leaping about in evident readiness to spring upon the horseman when he should get well within the clearing.

By this time the two men and boy were near enough to recognize one another, and Bob's surmise was correct, for the rider was none other than Hal Thomas with Firefly.

"Hey, Ford, call off your dog," yelled the agent.

"Ain't my dog!" retorted the ranchman harshly.

"Since when?" inquired Thomas, with difficulty managing the two ponies that were plunging in fright at the antics of the snarling, snapping hound.

"About thirty minutes ago."

"Whose is it, then?"

"This boy here."

"Mine?" exclaimed Bob in amazement.

"Uhuh! I ain't no use for a dog anybody else can handle."

But Bob did not hear the last words. No sooner assured that the savage beast was his, than he called:

"Steady! Chester! Come here, sir!"

Uncertain whether or not to obey, the dog looked from Bob to the horses. But the boy quickly repeated his commands, running toward the hound, and the animal, with a parting snarl at the agent, turned and trotted to the side of his new master, where he took his stand as though waiting to defend him, should it be necessary.

CHAPTER XXI

AT THE RANCH

As the ranchman watched this scene, his face was a study, but he soon forgot it in listening to the conversation between Thomas and Bob.

"Do you think it was quite fair to run away while I was trying to find a pony for you?" asked the agent.

"Don't scold, Hal," returned Bob. "I suppose it wasn't quite fair. But I wanted to surprise you by getting a job myself, without anybody's help."

Smiling at the boy's independence, Thomas asked:

"Have you got it?"

Before Bob could answer, the ranchman interposed:

"Looks like it, don't it? First he won my—I mean his—dog, and then he won me. Yes, Hal, Bob's landed and you can tell Ned Higgins from me that if he tries to put up any more jokes on Bob, I'll fix him so he can't speak for a year."

"All right, John," smiled the agent. "But I reckon he won't try any more!"

So significant was the agent's tone that Bob inquired anxiously:

"You didn't do anything to him for sending me to Mr. Ford, did you, Hal?"

"No, not much," returned Thomas grimly. Yet had he told the entire truth he would have said he had administered such a beating to the practical joker, upon learning where he had sent Bob, as Fairfax had never seen given by one man to another.

"Won't you come in?" asked the ranchman.

"No, thanks. Can't stop. Got to get back for a train. Here, Bob, come and mount Firefly. He's yours."

"What, you bought Firefly for this boy?" exclaimed Ford in surprise.

"That's what." Then turning to Bob, he added, "Put your left foot in the stirrup and swing into the saddle. That's the way. Say, John, let Bob ride back a way with me. I want to show him a few things about a pony."

"Oh, do!" chimed in Bob.

"All right, though I was calculating to teach him myself," returned Ford, a light such as the station agent had never before seen in his eyes.

"Can I take Chester?" asked Bob.

"Sure, he's yours!"

"Come, boy," called Bob. Then noticing that Hal wanted to say a word to the ranchman, he exclaimed: "Don't tell him who I am, *please*." And as the agent hesitated, he added, shrewdly, "Mr. Nichols wouldn't like it."

"All right, if you say not," returned Hal.

And wheeling their ponies, the two rode off across the plains, the dog bounding joyfully along at Bob's side.

Gazing after them, even when they had disappeared from sight, stood John Ford.

As the agent had said, Firefly was so gentle and had such an easy gait that after the first few minutes' fear had passed Bob found he could not only keep in the saddle, but could enjoy the motion of the pony.

Critically Thomas watched him, riding close at his side to be at hand in case of trouble, finally exclaiming in hearty approval:

"You take to a horse like a duck to water, Bob."

"Do you mean that, Hal?"

"I sure do. Now dismount and I'll show you a trick or two." And as soon as the boy was on the ground, he continued: "Some ponies have a mean way of starting just as soon as you put your foot in the stirrups. No matter how nervous your mount is, by drawing the left rein—remember you always handle a saddle horse from the left side—so short that it turns the pony's head, you can make him circle round and round, instead of running straight ahead, which will give you a chance to swing into the saddle. Now try it."

Without difficulty Bob performed the feat.

"Good," commented his instructor. "We'll both dismount and I'll teach you how to hobble your pony. Whenever you turn a pony loose on the plains, whether in the day time or at night, always hobble him. You never know what may happen when you are 'punching cattle' and oftentimes by having your pony handy it will save you a lot of trouble, to put it mildly."

While he was speaking, Thomas had taken Bob's lariat, which hung from the pommel of his saddle, and drawing the noose small had slipped it over his pony's right hoof.

"There are two ways of hobbling," he continued, "one, to tie the front and hind feet on the same side, the other, to tie both front feet. As ponies are often mighty lively animals, I don't need to tell you the danger or difficulty of trying to put a rope around their hind legs. But tying the front feet is easy. Allow about seven inches of rope, then take a couple of turns around the left fetlock, make a half-hitch and tie the rest of your rope about the pony's neck.

"Always remember to do that. If you don't, some time the rope end may catch between the rocks or become tangled in some way and cause trouble.

"When you stop to rest after a hard ride, always unsaddle, whether you unbridle or not, and then wipe the dirt and sweat from where the saddle has been. It rests a pony more than anything you can do.

"At night, when you are on the plains, always use your saddle for a pillow, then no one can steal it from you.

"Those are the main points. Any special tricks you'll pick up from John and the boys.

"Oh, there's one more thing: whenever you dismount for any length of time, pull the reins over the pony's head and either throw them over a post or else let them drag on the ground. I don't know why it is, but it seems to make the pony think he is tied."

The lesson over, Bob and Hal remounted and rode on.

At the request of the latter, the boy related his experience at Ford's ranch. As he did so, the agent looked at him with an expression of mingled amazement and approval, and as the story was finished, exclaimed:

"Bob, you sure are a wonder! How you had the nerve to face that dog on foot, I don't see. Many a man on horseback has been forced to turn and flee. How did you do it?"

"Oh, I don't know. Just looked him in the eye and spoke to him, that's all."

But the explanation did not satisfy the agent.

"I don't understand it," he said. "I fully expected to find you lying in Ford's cabin all chewed up. And here your clothes aren't even torn. I don't understand it. This is the first time Chester has ever made friends with anybody. He only minds Ford because he's afraid of him."

CHAPTER XXII

ON THE RANGE STATION

For some time the boy and the man rode in silence, each occupied with his own thoughts.

"Do you know why Mr. Ford calls the dog Chester?" Bob suddenly asked.

"He had to give him some name, I suppose."

"But it's such a queer name, Hal. I asked him and he wouldn't tell me."

A moment the agent was silent, evidently debating something with himself, and finally said:

"I suppose you had better know, Bob, that there's something queer about John Ford. They tell a lot of stories about him, but the one most common is that he's waiting till he gets one hundred thousand dollars before starting on a tour of revenge.

"He told me himself, however, that when he had accumulated that amount he was going to find a man. But more than that he wouldn't say.

"If I were you, I wouldn't ask too many questions."

During the conversation they had covered so much ground that the roofs of Fairfax village were visible in the distance and as he noticed this, the agent drew rein, saying:

"I didn't realize we had come so far. You'd better go back, Bob. Suppose you can find the way?"

"Sure. If I can't Chester will show me, won't you, old boy?"

And in answer, as though he had understood perfectly, the dog started off in the direction of the ranch.

"I reckon you'll be safe with him," commented the agent. "Take care of yourself, Bob. And come over to see me when you can. By the way, has John

said where he was going to send you?"

"Yes, over near Red Top, with his short-horns."

"You've certainly made a hit with him, Bob. That's the best and easiest berth on the ranch. Grazing's good and water plenty. You hardly have to move from one week to another. So long." And he gave the boy's hand a hearty grip. "I've wired your father of your safe arrival. When there are any letters, I'll bring them over."

And shaking out his reins, the agent galloped away.

Bob, however, did not hurry on his return to the ranch, his mind being occupied with trying to find the reason for the grizzled plainsman's evident liking for him and his kindness, so at variance with his usual manner.

But the puzzle was too difficult for him, and he finally abandoned it to dismount and practice the things the agent had taught him.

Such action at first mystified Firefly, but Bob patted and spoke to him, explaining what he was trying to do just as though he were talking to a human being.

"You and Chester and I will have many a long day and night together, so we had better be good friends right away. I've got to learn to hobble and saddle and I want to do it before I return to the ranch."

Evidently satisfied with this explanation, Firefly stood quietly, nibbling at the grass now and again, while the dog sat down and watched operations.

Having finally acquired the knack, Bob remounted and was soon at the ranch, where he turned his pony into the corral and carried his saddle to the cabin.

"Then you've learned enough to turn your pony into the corral, eh?" was Ford's greeting as Bob threw his saddle on the floor.

"Yes, sir. And to hobble and saddle and make my horse whirl when I'm mounting."

"Hal's a good friend to have," commented the ranchman. "Did he show you how to throw a rope?"

"Do you mean my lariat?"

"No, I mean rope; that's what we call it on the plains, though it means the same thing."

"No, he didn't."

"Then I will. You'll find some grub in the cupboard. Eat all you want and put the rest back."

"But aren't you going to eat with me?" asked Bob in an injured tone.

"I'd like to. But I ain't eaten with a man since——" then suddenly checking himself he stammered, "well, since twelve year ago."

Eager, indeed, was Bob to ask the reason for this custom, but, remembering Hal's warning, he restrained the question that was on his lips just as the ranchman, evidently determined to end the conversation, went outdoors.

The mention of eating recalled to Bob that it was hours since he had breakfasted, and hastily he explored the cupboard, bringing forth some crisp bacon, biscuits, cookies and pie while from the stove he took the coffee pot, then sat down to a meal that seemed, to his keen appetite, the best he had ever tasted.

As he was finishing, the ranchman came in and, when the food had been put away, took Bob out to teach him how to throw the rope.

For this purpose Ford had driven a four-foot stake into the ground. Making his pupil stand about twenty feet from it, he had him get used to whirling the rope around his head and then told him to drop the noose over the post.

At first Bob failed, but he was soon able to drop the noose over. So much accomplished, the ranchman ordered him to get his pony and try to rope the stake while riding past.

This, however, was more difficult, and Bob made more misses than "ringers."

"You can practice that on the range, Bob. We won't waste any more time here. I want to take you over to the short-horns to-night."

"You mean I'm to go on duty to-night?" asked the boy in delight.

"Exactly. Only there won't be much to do. Just keep awake in case anything happens. I'll have Merry Dick, the best of my boys, stay with you for a day or so."

The ranchman had saddled a big bay broncho when Bob saddled Firefly and, after locking the door of his cabin, they galloped away toward the west.

On the ride the plainsman gave Bob many valuable pointers about what to do if trouble broke out in the herd, and for getting along with the other cowboys.

After an hour or more of riding, they came to the herd, spread out over a quarter of a mile of plain, and rode round it till they came to where four cowboys were lolling on the grass, smoking.

Looking up lazily at the sight of their boss, when they caught a glimpse of Bob's fresh, young face they evinced a lively interest.

"Boys, this is Bob," said Ford, by way of introduction. "Bob, the homeliest of the lot is Merry Dick; the one next to him to the left is Yellow Tom; next is Shorty Flinn and the last is Crazy Ned.

"Dick, you're to go over on the West station with Bob for three days. Get some grub ready.

"Now, remember, every man Jack of you, Bob is my special friend. If you try any funny business, you'll have to settle with me; and don't forget, cowboys ain't worth near as much as a lean steer."

And without another word, this strange man wheeled his horse and rode away.

CHAPTER XXIII

BOB OVERHEARS A SECOND PLOT

Chester had accompanied Bob and Ford to the cowboys' station, and when they saw that the dog showed no signs of returning, Yellow Tom called out:

"Hey, you Ford. Take this cur of yours with you—or I won't stay on the job another minute."

The ranchman, however, either did not hear or pretended not to, and after a minute Bob said:

"Mr. Ford has given Chester to me."

"What?" chorused the cowboys, in amazement.

"I said that Mr. Ford had given Chester to me," replied Bob.

"And you let him?" queried Crazy Ned, staring at the boy as though he must be daft.

"Why not?"

"You're liable to wake up in mincemeat some fine day, that's all," commented Yellow Tom drily.

"Oh, I guess not," answered Bob. "Chester and I are good friends, aren't we, my boy?" and dismounting, he called the dog to him and stroked his head.

A moment the cowboys watched the proceeding in amazement, then Shorty Flinn voiced their feelings by saying:

"Am I dreamin' or is this tenderfoot pattin' that ornery cur?"

"He's pattin' him, all right," returned Merry Dick. "Say, kid, you're a wonder. There ain't no man ever dared touch that dog so long as I've known about him and that's for ten years."

"But can you make him mind?" demanded Yellow Tom.

"Surely."

"Then stop his growlin' at me."

Recognizing this as a test, Bob stroked the dog's head caressingly, saying, in a matter-of-fact tone:

"Stop growling, boy. None of these men are going to harm me."

A moment the dog looked at Bob, then leisurely glanced from one to another of the cowboys—and stopped snarling.

"That beats all," declared Crazy Ned. "Say, kid, you don't need to fear anybody's playin' tricks on you when that brute is with you."

"No, I guess not," smiled Bob. And then in a burst of confidence he added: "But I don't want people to be nice because they are afraid of Chester. If they don't like me for myself, I don't want them to like me at all."

"That's all right, kid. But there's some ornery critturs wearin' the clothes of cowboys, so just take advice of a man who knows and keep the dog with you," said Yellow Tom.

"Yellow's givin' it to you straight," asserted Shorty Flinn. "There's some folks ain't never happy unless they're makin' others onhappy."

Bob took the advice in the spirit it was given and, while Merry Dick was putting together enough food to last them for the three days he was to be with the boy, chatted and joked with them, answering such questions as he saw fit and turning off those he did not care to. And such manliness and good nature did he display that he won the respect of the four cowpunchers, than whom there were no harder characters riding the plains.

At last Merry Dick had stowed the food in his saddle bags, unhobbled and made ready his broncho, and as he waited for Bob to mount, the others began to tease him.

"No tricks, now," said one. "Remember what John said about the comparative value of cowboys and steers. Don't put salt instead of sugar in Bob's coffee."

"Don't worry about *me*," laughed Bob. "With Chester my friend, we're more likely to play tricks on Merry Dick than he is to play any on us."

And amid the shouts of merriment this suggestion produced, the cowboy and his youthful companion galloped away.

"Ain't that Firefly you're ridin'?" asked Merry Dick, after having tried in vain to leave Bob behind by sending his own pony at a mad gallop.

"Y—yes," returned Bob. "Mr. Thomas, the station agent, bought him for me."

"*Bought* him?" repeated the cowboy in amazement. "You must be rollin' in money, kid. Simons said he'd never sell for less than two hundred dollars."

Bob had no idea as to the value of horseflesh, so he asked:

"Is that much to pay for a pony?"

"Much? Well, I don't know what you call much, but I do know that you can buy all the ponies you want, good ones at that, for fifty dollars."

This knowledge of the expense to which Mr. Nichols had been put to provide him with a mount, for Bob believed it was he who had ordered the agent so to do, grieved the boy and he became silent, wondering if he should not send back the one hundred dollars present in part payment.

Merry Dick, however, mistook his silence for displeasure and exclaimed:

"I don't mean Firefly ain't a good pony. He's the best within fifty mile, so you didn't get stuck."

In due course of time, they reached a spot where a few trees surrounded a spring, and there the cowboy said they would pitch camp.

With surprise, he watched Bob hobble his pony and then rub him down, observing:

"I reckon you ain't so green as you make out."

Ignoring the left-handed compliment, Bob asked:

"What do I have to do with the cattle?"

"Mighty little, so long as you have the dog with you. He's as good as any cowboy." And then Merry Dick explained that Bob's duties lay in riding around and driving back the cattle that strayed from the herd, especially in the morning, and in case of a stampede, than which there is nothing more dreaded by

cowboys, in outrunning the leaders and changing their direction, yelling and waving arms, until the frenzied animals are made to tire themselves out traveling in a circle.

The hours till twilight passed quickly with the stories the cowboy told of experiences he had had and had heard, in both of which he did not hesitate to draw freely on his imagination.

As the sunset bathed the plains in a glorious red, the two rode out and drove the straggling cattle back to the herd, and then Merry Dick showed Bob how to boil coffee over a bed of coals and fry bacon by holding it on a fork.

As night fell, many sounds reached the boy's ears, but none scared him except the melancholy howl of the coyotes.

Without incident the hours of darkness passed and the two days that Merry Dick was with him, and, on the third, Ford rode over to see how they were getting along.

"He'll do," announced the cowboy, nodding toward Bob.

"Then you can go back to the others," returned his boss, who remained with the boy.

Day followed day with monotonous regularity, and many a time Bob was glad of the dog's company. Several times Thomas came to see him, bringing letters from both Mr. Perkins and Mr. Nichols and taking back Bob's answers, which told of his experiences, gratitude for their assistance, and delight in his new life.

Once a week, Ford came to bring his food, a signal mark of favor, for the ranch cooks supplied the others. And as month after month passed, Bob developed wonderfully. The free, outdoor life made his muscles like steel and the responsibility and solitude matured him, so that instead of the rather timid boy who had stepped from the limited that morning, he was a powerful, self-reliant young man.

Realizing this and feeling his desire growing stronger, at the end of the sixth month to learn the truth about his father when Ford paid him, Bob asked if he could ride over to Red Top for a day.

In reply to the ranchman's question as to the reason, he said he wanted to find

out about a man.

At this answer, Ford scanned his face closely, but, unable to read its expression, gave his permission, provided he took the dog, saying he would stand Bob's tour of duty.

His heart agog, Bob was on his way early the next morning, the faithful Chester at his side.

The village of Red Top was similar to Fairfax, but being the location of the Land Office was of more importance. As the boy, accompanied by the dog passed along the one street of the town, they attracted much attention, for many of the people recognized Chester.

Drawing rein, Bob dismounted at the store, went inside and asked where he could find out who owned property in the town fifteen years ago.

The interest of the loungers in the boy was no whit lessened by this question and several of them chorused:

"The Land Office, right next door."

Thanking them collectively, Bob went out, leaving the idlers to speculate over his identity and purpose.

But though he found the Land Office without difficulty, he could make neither head nor tail out of the records.

Noticing the perplexity on his face, the clerk, a kindly-faced, gray-haired man, asked him for what he was searching.

"To see if Horace Chester ever owned any property in Red Top."

"I can tell you that without looking," replied the clerk. "He had one of the best ranches in Oklahoma. It was good when he died. But it's worth ten times as much now."

This information set Bob's head in a whirl, and for some minutes he could not speak, but when he did, he asked hesitatingly:

"Was he—was he crazy?"

"Crazy? well, I should say not!" ejaculated the clerk, staring at Bob in wonder.

"Who owns the property now?"

"A. Leon Dardus."

"How'd he get it?"

"By will. There was a long legal battle between Sam and John Ford and Dardus. But Dardus finally won."

"Where is the ranch?"

"Twenty miles south of here. Jim Haskins hires it."

At these surprising answers, Bob's heart seemed to come up in his throat, stifling his speech. But noticing that his questions had aroused the clerk's curiosity, he hurriedly left the office.

Needing time to think, the boy hastened along till he came to a building which served as a saloon, diningroom and gambling den.

Attracted by the food sign, he entered, took a seat near a partition, and ordered some pork and beans.

But before it was brought, he had forgotten about eating. From behind the partition, loud voices were audible and he caught the word "Ford."

Listening intently, he heard a voice say:

"Sure, we can do it! I've got the papers all ready, old Sam Ford's signature and all. Just pass over that two thousand five hundred dollars, and I'll give them to you."

"But suppose Ford fights us in court?" exclaimed another voice.

"He won't do that!" growled a third. "Leave it to me!"

"Now, Bill, there's to be no——"

But before Bob could catch the last word, the waiter came in with his pork and beans and, noticing that the boy was listening with head close to the partition, shouted:

"What you listenin' to? That don't go in Red Top!"

And dropping his dishes, he leaped for Bob, just as the men behind the partition, who had heard the waiter's angry words, struggled to get through the door.

Realizing he was no match for so many, Bob took to his heels, the others in pursuit.

As he dashed from the restaurant, Chester leaped to his feet and, back bristling, jaws distended, faced the pursuers.

"That's Ford's dog!" gasped the waiter. "That fellow must have been one of his men!"

The commotion had attracted the attention of the loungers in the store and as they hurried to the street, the conspirators, pointing to Bob, yelled:

"Stop him! Stop him!"

But Bob, paying no heed, raced to where Firefly stood, vaulted into his saddle and, with the dog at his heels, dashed up the street.

CHAPTER XXIV

A RACE FOR LIFE

Believing the men who tried to stop Bob must have been robbed, several of those about the store leaped onto their horses and gave chase.

Meantime, the conspirators, balked in their attempt to prevent the boy's escape, held a consultation.

"If that is one of Ford's men, our goose is cooked," snarled one of them.

"Well, it is, right enough. Don't you remember hearing about the kid Ford gave his dog to?"

Too well did they remember, for the story of Bob's call at the ranch had traveled far and wide.

"What's to be done, then?" asked the first speaker.

"Get him!" growled the others.

So well did these men understand one another that no explanation of this remark was necessary, and without more ado they hastened to the stable back of the saloon, ordered their horses, and were soon riding after Bob at top speed.

Anticipating that he would be chased, the boy had urged Firefly into a mad gallop, desirous of getting as long a start as possible. And well it was that he did, for so mettlesome were the horses of the conspirators that, despite the start the loungers had, they quickly overhauled them.

"Which way did he go?" demanded the ringleader, as he rode alongside.

"To Ford's."

"What's wrong? What did he do? How much did he get?" demanded others of the volunteer posse.

But the conspirators were not eager to go into detail, and their leader said:

"This is a private matter. We are obliged to you gentlemen for trying to stop that boy. But we won't trouble you to ride farther. We are quite able to attend to this business ourselves."

Such an abrupt dismissal, however, only piqued the curiosity of the volunteers the more, and noting this the conspirators clapped spurs to their ponies and soon left them behind.

From time to time, as he raced across the plains, Bob had looked back. With satisfaction, he noted that he more than held his own with the pursuers. But when he saw the four men pass the leaders as though the others were standing still, he urged Firefly to greater speed.

Gamely the pony responded, increasing Bob's lead still more, and the boy noted from landmarks that he was only about two miles from his station. Then suddenly Firefly stumbled, hurling Bob over his head.

Picking himself up, the boy, stopping only to ascertain that he himself was not injured, ran back to his pony. But as he saw the horse his heart sank.

Firefly had stepped in a prairie-dog hole and broken his leg.

From his moaning Bob realized the pony was in great pain, and for a moment he stood undecided what to do. Then a hoarse shout of triumph raised by the conspirators reached his ears, and, gritting his teeth, Bob pulled out his revolver, placed it against Firefly's head and pulled the trigger.

Already he had lost precious minutes and, waiting only to make sure he had put his faithful pony out of misery, he once more started toward his station, leaping and bounding through the high grass as best he could.

Not far had he gone, however, before he realized that unless he could make greater speed, his pursuers would soon overtake him.

But the prospect did not daunt him and, as his danger became greater, his brain became clearer.

Apparently without effort, Chester was bounding over the plains. Noting this, an idea flashed into Bob's mind and he called the dog to him.

As he approached, Bob took a firm grip with his right hand in the mass of hair on Chester's shoulders, exclaiming:

"You've got to help me run, boy. Now don't go too fast. Remember, I can't leap the way you do."

And, as though understanding, the dog moderated his gait and together they tore through the grass.

Yet so uneven was the race that Bob would certainly have been captured had not aid come from an unexpected quarter.

So still was the air that the report of Bob's shot had carried to the ears of John Ford who, sensing trouble, was riding slowly toward Red Top to meet the lad.

Shooting not being common on the plains thereabouts, no sooner had he heard the report than he clapped spurs to his horse and dashed in its direction, and not far had he ridden before he caught sight of Bob and Chester and their pursuers.

At a glance, he realized that the boy was in great danger, and grinding his teeth savagely, he rode at him like mad, from time to time shouting to Bob to keep up courage.

But the plucky boy saw and recognized his employer long before he heard his reassuring words, and the sight lent him fresh strength.

The pursuers also saw Ford and redoubled their efforts to reach Bob first. But the terrific pace was telling on their mounts and they made little progress.

With a yell of exultation, Ford reached Bob, gave him a hand and lifted him up behind to the saddle, asking:

"What are they after you for?"

"Because I wanted to warn you!" answered Bob, and hurriedly he related all he had overheard and the incidents of the pursuit.

As he listened to the story, the ranchman's face grew terrible to behold. And as it was finished, he sat in silence a moment, then fairly hissed:

"My law is not 'an eye for an eye' or 'a tooth for a tooth.' But four eyes for an eye!"

For an instant only was Bob mystified by this speech.

Swinging his rifle from his back to his shoulder with incredible rapidity, Ford

fired four shots in quick succession. And after each shot, one of the conspirator's horses fell.

"So much for Firefly, though I wouldn't take the four for him!" snarled the ranchman. "Now for the men! Oh, no! I'm not going to shoot them," he added, noting the look of horror on Bob's face. "I intend to capture them and hand them over to the law. You're lighter than I am, so you take my pony and ride for the boys. I'll stay here and keep track of those scoundrels. They won't be able to walk far."

Even as he spoke, Ford slipped from the saddle, and Bob taking his place dashed away for the other cowboys.

By good fortune, he found them at the end of their range nearest the scene of trouble, and no urging did they need to ride to their employer's assistance when they had heard Bob's story.

Divining the purpose of the boy's departure, the conspirators had separated and then sought to hide themselves in the long grass. But the ranchman had kept watch of their general direction, and as his boys rode up, ordered them to advance abreast toward the spot where the scoundrels had disappeared.

As they approached, Ford shouted:

"If you men will surrender, we won't hurt you! But if you fire so much as one shot, we'll kindle the prairie and roast you!"

For a moment after this terrible alternative was pronounced there was silence and the conspirators made no move. Then one by one they stood up, glowering with awful hatred at Bob.

"Hands up!" commanded Ford. "That's the way! Now, boys, take their guns and knives, then bind their hands behind their backs and each carry one behind you. We're going to take them to Red Top jail."

While his cowboys were obeying his instructions with no gentle hands, Ford mounted his horse, keeping Bob behind him.

After the troop was under way, the ranchman asked:

"What made you take such a chance for me, boy?"

"Because you were a friend of my father!" replied Bob simply.

"What?" exclaimed Ford, turning so suddenly that he almost unseated the boy.

"My name isn't Bob Nichols, Mr. Ford. It's Bob Chester!"

"Then I wasn't wrong! I wasn't wrong!" murmured the ranchman. And the next moment he was hugging Bob to his breast, sobbing over him and caressing him.

The sight of their stern, unemotional employer weeping like a woman over Bob astounded the cowboys, and eagerly they closed around him, though they were too impressed by the scene to speak.

But as soon as he recovered his composure, Ford exclaimed:

"Boys, Bob is the son of the best friend I ever had—Horace Chester. I was struck by the resemblance when I first laid eyes on him. When he told me his name, I thought I must be mistaken. But Chester knew better. That's why the dog took to him. He recognized the blood.

"And now you all ride on. Bob and I want to talk."

Reluctantly the cowboys obeyed and when they were out of hearing, Bob spoke, giving a detailed account of the reasons why he had come to Fairfax, the experiences through which he had passed while on the way, his discoveries about his father's property, and finally showed the ranchman the precious letter.

"And Leon Dardus kept you at drudgery, denying you your money, even trying to make you believe your father was insane!" remarked Ford, as the narration ended. "I knew he was a villain. That will is a forgery, Bob. We'll get back the property for you, never fear. Dardus may have money. But your friends Perkins and Nichols have more. I made a vow when Dardus beat me on the will that when I had one hundred thousand dollars I'd track him down and solve this mystery. But now it won't be necessary to wait.

"Right will conquer, every time, Bob!"

CHAPTER XXV

FROM RANCH TO RICHES

Bob asked many questions about his father on the ride to Red Top, learning that he had died from pneumonia; that his mother had died soon after Bob was born, and that it had been his father's dying request that he be sent to New York, where he could grow up and receive the education he himself had been denied. But their arrival at Red Top put an end to their conversation and they turned to the matter at hand.

As the citizens saw Bob's pursuers return captives they were amazed, and when they learned the reason they expressed in no uncertain terms their anger at having been made to chase an innocent boy.

At the jail, the forged deed and other papers that were to be used in stealing John Ford's ranch away from him were found on the prisoners and were filed away to be used against them at the trial.

To one or two of his firm friends, the ranchman introduced Bob, and sincere were their expressions of delight both at meeting him and in knowing that he was to come into his own. Ford, however, swore them to silence, for there were some of the townsfolk who had supported Dardus in his lawsuit, and neither the ranchman nor Bob wished a word of his presence to leak out till they had perfected their plans for bringing the dishonest guardian to book.

"But your boys know it, John, and so do the prisoners," asserted one of these friends.

"My boys won't talk about it," declared the ranchman. "I'll see to that. If the prisoners do, you all can say the story is absurd, probably another of their plots to steal another ranch."

This decided, the grizzled plainsman summoned his cowboys, explained the situation briefly, and offered them a year's wages for their silence, which they promised when Bob added his entreaties.

But to prevent any possible miscarriage of their plans, Bob wrote his

discoveries to Mr. Nichols, mailing the letter before he left Red Top. These details attended to, Ford borrowed a horse for Bob, and they set out for the home ranch, which they reached in due course.

Leaving Merry Dick on Bob's station, Ford and Bob rode on to Fairfax, where they held a long consultation with the station agent, at which it was decided that Bob and the ranchman should both go on to New York to obtain restitution from Len Dardus. And, with much hurrying, they prepared to leave Fairfax the next night.

Thomas asked and obtained permission from Mr. Nichols for the east-bound limited to stop at the way-station, and when Higgins and the others saw the ranchman and Bob on the platform, they were consumed with curiosity.

"Kidnappin' John?" asked Higgins of Bob.

But no satisfaction did he receive, the boy replying:

"My sentiments about answering questions haven't changed since the first morning we met, Mr. Higgins."

And while the others were laughing at their crony's discomfiture, the train arrived and the two travelers boarded it, with the well wishes of the agent ringing in their ears.

At Kansas City Mr. Nichols joined them, saying he had decided to go on to New York, where they would meet Mr. Perkins, both being determined to bring Bob into his own.

A happy party they made, Bob recounting his experiences, Ford adding his dry comments, and Mr. Nichols enjoying the boy's development and manliness.

As they were rehearsing the story for the twentieth time, Mr. Nichols asked:

"Have you learned, Bob, who the man with the scar is?"

"What sort of a scar?" demanded the ranchman, before the boy could answer. And as Bob described it, he exclaimed:

"That's Knuckles, your father's old foreman!"

"Good. I'll find him and take him back with me," returned Bob; "that is, if things come out right."

"Don't worry about that," smiled Mr. Nichols knowingly. And when they arrived in New York and met Mr. Perkins, these words were explained, for Bob's patrons had set detectives at work and had learned all there was to be learned about Len Dardus, even to the banks in which he kept his money, and how much he had.

After holding a consultation and marshaling their evidence, it was decided to call in two members of the city detective force, and upon their arrival, the party set out for the grocery store where Bob had passed so many unhappy days.

No one was about when the six men entered, and, leaving Bob alone, the others withdrew to the corners of the store where the shadows practically hid them.

The proprietor had heard the footsteps, however, and shuffled from his private office.

No farther did he get than the threshold before he saw and recognized Bob.

"You!" he gasped, turning pale. "What do you want here?"

"I want the money you have stolen from me, Len Dardus! I want my father's ranch in Red Top back. I want you to say you lied when you said my father was crazy when he died!"

The tone in which the boy spoke was cold and bitter. Yet, instead of terrifying the storekeeper, it caused him to laugh as he exclaimed: "You can't blackmail me, you ungrateful young wretch! Get out of here, before I call the police! I steal your money, indeed! Insanity seems to run in the Chester family!"

"Do you think so, Len Dardus?" demanded the ranchman, suddenly emerging from the shadow.

"John Ford!" gasped the storekeeper, his bravado deserting him at the sight of this friend of Bob's father.

"Yes; John Ford," retorted the ranchman in a voice that cut like steel. "You remember when you won your lawsuit with that will you forged? I told you I should trap you some day. *That day has come!*"

At these words, the others stepped forth.

From one to another, Dardus looked, then demanded in a terrified voice:

"What—what do you want?"

"We want justice for Bob Chester," said Mr. Perkins.

"We want you to give him every cent you have in bank except the five hundred dollars you had when Horace Chester died. We want you to sign this paper admitting that you forged the will bequeathing you the ranch in Red Top. We want you to acknowledge you lied when you told Bob his father was insane."

"And if I refuse?"

"You go to jail, and we take the money and ranch."

"But I have no money," whimpered Dardus.

"Lying won't help you. We know every cent you have in bank and where it is. Here's the confession, sign it first."

Glancing from one to another, the storekeeper seemed to seek an avenue of escape.

"Officers, if this man does not sign this paper within two minutes, arrest him," exclaimed Mr. Perkins.

Quickly the detectives moved one to either side of Len Dardus.

"All right, I'll sign," he moaned, sinking into a chair.

And, after reading the words admitting his guilt, he affixed his name.

"Now, tell Bob you lied to him about his father."

"Horace—Chester—was—not—insane."

"Good, I am glad you are reasonable. Now, come with us in our automobile and withdraw the money you have in the banks."

Realizing resistance was vain, Dardus obeyed.

At each bank the boy's benefactors compared their private notes with the amounts the storekeeper withdrew, and, when the task was ended, Bob had fifty thousand dollars in addition to the ranch.

As they emerged from the last bank, however, they did not take the storekeeper into their car, but left him standing on the steps, the picture of woe.

"Now, we'll have a good dinner," announced Mr. Nichols.

During the meal the men who had been so kind to Bob asked him what he intended to do.

"Go back to the ranch and live with John Ford," was the boy's ready reply.

"Yes. We're going into partnership," added the grizzled plainsman.

"And whenever you want a rest or some hunting, there'll be two ranches at your disposal," chimed in Bob, to the railroad magnates.

Before the boy returned to the West, he gave a hundred-dollar bill to Nellie Porter, the waitress who had befriended him, and he also found Knuckles, who was overjoyed to resume his position as foreman of the Chester ranch.

The firm of Ford & Chester prospered. Many times did Mr. Perkins and Mr. Nichols, as well as Jack Foster, the reporter, visit the partners, continuing to exercise a kindly interest in their welfare, and especially the welfare of Bob Chester.

Transcriber's Notes:

Punctuation normalized.

Varied capitalization on "the limited/the Limited" retained.

Page 80, "flee-bitten" changed to "flea-bitten."

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