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The Young Bank Messenger

Horatio Alger

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THE
YOUNG BANK MESSENGER

BY

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RIES," ETC.

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ILLUSTRATIONS

"Now tie him, Mason, while I keep him covered
with the revolver."

"He stood at the window and looked in."

**THE
YOUNG BANK MESSENGER.**

CHAPTER I.

THE LONELY CABIN.

Just on the edge of the prairie, in western Iowa, some thirty years since, stood a cabin covering quite a little ground, but only one story high. It was humble enough as a home, but not more so than the early homes of some who have become great.

Let us enter.

The furniture was scanty, being limited to articles of prime necessity. There was a stove, a table, three chairs, a row of shelves containing a few articles of crockery and tinware, and a bed in the far corner of the room, on which rested a man. He had a ragged gray beard and hair, and a face long and thin, with preternaturally black eyes.

It was evident that he was sick unto death. His parchment-colored skin was indented with wrinkles; from time to time he coughed so violently as to rack his slight frame, and his hand, thin and wrinkled, as it rested on the quilt that covered him, shook as with palsy.

It was hard to tell how old the man was. He looked over seventy, but there were indications that he had aged prematurely.

There was one other person in the room, one whose appearance contrasted strongly with that of the old man. It was a boy of sixteen, a boy with dark brown hair, ruddy cheeks, hazel eyes, an attractive yet firm and resolute face, and an appearance of manliness and self-reliance. He was well dressed, and, though the tenant of such an humble home, would have passed muster upon the streets of a city.

"How do you feel, Uncle Peter?" he asked, as he stood by the bedside.

"I shall never feel any better, Ernest," said the old man, in a hollow voice.

"Don't say that, uncle," rejoined Ernest in a tone of concern.

There seemed little to connect him, in his strong, attractive boyhood, with the frail old man, but they had lived together for five years, and habit was powerful.

"Yes, Ernest, I shall never rise from this bed."

"Isn't there anything I can get for you, uncle?"

"Is there is there anything left in the bottle?" asked Peter, wistfully.

Ernest walked to the shelf that held the dishes, and took from a corner a large black bottle. It seemed light and might be empty. He turned out the contents into a glass, but there was only a tablespoonful of whisky left.

"It is almost all gone, Uncle Peter; will you have this much?"

"Yes," answered the old man, tremulously.

Ernest lifted the invalid into a sitting posture, and then put the glass to his mouth.

He drained it, and gave a sigh of satisfaction.

"It is good," he said briefly.

"I wish there were more."

"It goes to the right spot. It puts strength into me."

"Shall I go to the village and buy more?"

"I--I don't know--"

"I can get back very soon."

"Very well--go then, like a good boy."

"I shall have to trouble you for some money, Uncle Peter."

"Go to the trunk. You will find some."

There was a small hair trunk, in another corner. Ernest knew that this was meant, and he knelt down before it and lifted the lid.

There was a small wooden box at the left-hand side. Opening this, Ernest discovered three five-dollar gold pieces. Usually his uncle had gone to the trunk for money, but the boy knew where it was kept.

"There are but three gold pieces, uncle," he announced, looking towards the bed.

"Take one of them, Ernest."

"I wonder if that is all the money he has left?" thought Ernest.

He rose from his kneeling position and went to the door.

"I won't be gone long, uncle," he said. He followed a path which led from the door in an easterly direction to the village. It was over a mile away, and consisted only of a few scattering houses, a blacksmith's shop, and a store.

It was to the store that Ernest bent his steps. It was a one-story structure, as were most of the buildings in the village. There was a sign over the door which read:

JOE MARKS.

Groceries and Family Supplies.

Joe stood behind the counter; there were two other men in the store, one tall, gaunt, of the average Western type, with a broad-brimmed, soft felt hat on his head, and in the costume of a hunter; he looked rough, but honest and reliable, and that was more than could be said of the other. He may best be described as a tramp, a man who looked averse to labor of any kind, a man without a settled business or home, who picked up a living as he could, caring less for food than for drink, and whose mottled face indicated frequent potations of whisky.

Ernest looked at this man as he entered. He didn't remember to have met him before, nor was there anything to attract him in his appearance.

"How are you, Ernest?" said Joe Marks, cordially. "How's Uncle Peter?"

"He's pretty bad, Joe. He thinks he's going to die."

"Not so bad as that, surely."

"Yes, I guess he's right. He's very weak."

"Well, well, he's a good age. How old is he?"

"I don't know. He never told me."

"He's well on to seventy, I'm thinking. But what can I do for you?"

"You may fill this bottle, Joe; Uncle Peter is so weak he thinks it will put new life in him."

"So it will, Ernest; there's nothing like good whisky to make an old man strong, or a young man, for that matter."

It may be easy to see that Joe did not believe in total abstinence.

"I don't drink, myself!" said Ernest, replying to the last part of Joe's remark.

"There's nothing like whisky," remarked the tramp in a hoarse voice.

"You've drunk your share, I'm thinking," said Luke Robbins, the tall hunter.

"Not yet," returned the tramp. "I haven't had my share yet. There's lots of people that has drunk more'n me."

"Why haven't you drunk your share? You hadn't no objections, I reckon."

"I hadn't the money," said the tramp, sadly. "I've never had much money. I ain't lucky."

"If you had had more money, you'd maybe not be living now. You'd have drunk yourself to death."

"If I ever do commit suicide, that's the way I'd like to die," said the tramp.

Joe filled the bottle from a keg behind the counter and handed it to Ernest. The aroma of the whisky was diffused about the store, and the tramp sniffed it in eagerly. It stimulated his desire to indulge his craving for drink. As Ernest, with the bottle in his hand, prepared to leave, the tramp addressed him.

"Say, young feller, ain't you goin' to shout?"

"What do you mean?"

"Ain't you goin' to treat me and this gentleman?" indicating Luke Robbins.

"No," answered Ernest, shortly. "I don't buy it as drink, but as medicine."

"I need medicine," urged the tramp, with a smile.

"I don't," said the hunter. "Don't you bother about us, my boy. If we want whisky we can buy it ourselves."

"I can't," whined the tramp. "If I had as much money as you,"--for he had noticed that Ernest had changed a gold piece--"I'd be happy, but I'm out of luck."

Ernest paid no attention to his words, but left the store, and struck the path homeward.

"Who's that boy?" asked the tramp.

"It's Ernest Ray."

"Where'd he get that gold?"

"He lives with his uncle, a mile from the village."

"Is his uncle rich?"

"Folks think so. They call him a miser."

"Is he goin' to die?"

"That's what the boy says."

"And the boy'll get all his money?"

"It's likely."

"I'd like to be his guardian."

Joe and Luke Robbins laughed. "You'd make a pretty guardian," said Luke.

"I won't get it," said the tramp, mournfully. "I never had no luck."

CHAPTER II.

A DEATHBED REVELATION.

Ernest made the best of his way home, for he knew his uncle would be waiting for him.

The old man's eyes were closed, but he opened them when Ernest entered the room.

"Was I gone long?" asked the boy.

"I don't know. I think I fell asleep."

"Shall I give you some of the drink?"

"Yes."

He drank a small amount, and it seemed to brighten him up so much that Ernest said, "You look better, Uncle Peter. You may live some time."

Peter shook his head.

"No, boy," he replied; "my time has come to die. I know it. I would like to live for your sake. You will miss me when I am gone, Ernest?"

"Yes, uncle, I shall miss you very much."

The old man seemed gratified. Ernest was the only one he cared for in all the world.

"I don't care so much about dying, but I am anxious for you. I wish I had money to leave you, Ernest, but I haven't much."

"I am young and strong. I can get along."

"I hope so. You will go away from here."

"Yes, uncle. I don't think I shall care to stay here after you are gone."

"You will need money to take you away."

"There is a little more in the trunk."

"But only a little. It is not quite all I have. I have a hundred dollars in gold laid away for you."

Ernest looked surprised.

"I must tell you where it is while I still have life. Do you remember the oak tree on the little knoll half a mile away?"

"Yes, I know it."

"Dig under that tree five feet in a westerly direction. There is a wooden box about half a foot below the surface of the earth. There's nothing to mark the spot, for it was buried a year since, and the grass has grown over it, hiding all traces of the earth's being disturbed. After I am gone go there and get the money."

"Yes, uncle."

"Don't let any one see you when you visit the spot. It will be best to go at night. There are evil-disposed men who would rob you of it if they had the chance. I am sorry it is so little, Ernest."

"But it seems to me a good deal."

"To a boy it may seem so. Once I thought I might have a good deal more to leave you. Go to the trunk and search till you find a paper folded in an envelope, and inscribed with your name."

"Shall I search now?"

"Yes."

Ernest went to the trunk, and followed the old man's directions. He found the envelope readily, and held it up.

"Is that it, uncle?"

"Yes. Put it in your pocket, and read it after I am gone. Then be guided by circumstances. It may amount to something hereafter."

"Very well, uncle."

"I have told you, Ernest, that I do not expect to live long. I have a feeling that twenty-four hours from now I shall be gone."

"Oh, no, uncle, not so soon!" exclaimed Ernest, in a shocked tone.

"Yes, I think so. If you have any questions to ask me while I yet have life, ask, for it is your right."

"Yes, Uncle Peter, I have long wished to know something about myself. Have I any relatives except you?"

"I am not your relative," answered the old man slowly.

Ernest was amazed.

"Are you not my uncle?" he asked.

"No; there is no tie of blood between us."

"Then how does it happen that we have lived together so many years?"

"I was a servant in your father's family. When your father died, the care of you devolved upon me."

"Where was I born?"

"In a large town in the western part of New York State. Your grandfather was a man of wealth, but your father incurred his displeasure by his marriage to a poor but highly-educated and refined girl. A cousin of your father took advantage of this and succeeded in alienating father and son. The estate that should have descended to your father was left to the cousin."

"Is he still living?"

"Yes."

"But my father died?"

"Yes; he had a fever, which quickly carried him off when you were five years of age."

"Was he very poor?"

"No; he inherited a few thousand dollars from an aunt, and upon this he lived prudently, carrying on a small business besides. Your mother died when you were three years old, your father two years later."

"And then you took care of me?"

"Yes."

"And I have been a burden to you these many years!"

"No! Don't give me too much credit. A sum of money was put into my hands to spend for you. We lived carefully, and it lasted. We have been here three years, and it has cost very little to live in that time. The hundred dollars of which I spoke to you are the last of your inheritance. You are not indebted to me for it. It is rightfully yours."

"What is my uncle's name?"

"Stephen Ray. He lives a few miles from Elmira, on the Erie road."

"And is he quite rich?"

"Yes; he is probably worth a quarter of a million dollars. It is money which should have gone to your father."

"Then the wicked are sometimes prospered in this world!"

"Yes, but this world is not all."

"Has there been any communication with my cousin in all these years?"

"Yes, two years ago I wrote to him."

"What did you write?"

"You must forgive me, Ernest, but I saw you growing up without an education, and I felt that you should have advantages which I could not give you. I wrote to your cousin asking if he would pay your expenses in a preparatory school and afterward at college."

"What did he reply?"

"Go to the trunk. You will find his letter there. It is in the tray, and addressed to me."

Ernest found it readily.

"May I read it?" he asked.

"Yes, I wish you to do so."

It ran thus:

PETER BRANT.

Sir: I have received your letter making an appeal to me in behalf of Ernest Ray, the son of my cousin. You wish me to educate him. I

must decline to do so. His father very much incensed my revered uncle, and it is not right that any of his money should go to him or his heirs. He must reap the reward of his disobedience. So far as I am personally concerned I should not object to doing something for the boy, but I am sure that my dead uncle would not approve it. Besides, I have myself a son to whom I propose to leave the estate intact.

It is my advice that you bring up the boy Ernest to some humble employment, perhaps have him taught some trade by which he can earn an honest living. It is not at all necessary that he should receive a collegiate education. You are living at the West. That is well. He is favorably situated for a poor boy, and will have little difficulty in earning a livelihood. I don't care to have him associate with my boy Clarence. They are cousins, it is true, but their lots in life will be very different.

I do not care to communicate with you again.

STEPHEN RAY.

Ernest read this letter with flushed cheeks.

"I hate that man," he said hotly, "even if he is a relative. Uncle Peter, I am sorry you ever applied to him in my behalf."

"I would not, Ernest, if I had understood what manner of man he was."

"I may meet him some time," said Ernest, thoughtfully.

"Would you claim relationship?"

"*Never!*" declared Ernest, emphatically. "It was he, you say, who prejudiced my grandfather against my poor father?"

"Yes."

"In order to secure the estate himself?"

"Undoubtedly that was his object."

"Nothing could be meaner. I would rather live poor all my life than get property by such means."

"If you have no more questions to ask, Ernest, I will try to sleep. I feel drowsy."

"Do so, Uncle Peter."

The old man closed his eyes, and soon all was silent. Presently Ernest himself lay down on a small bed near by. When he awoke, hours afterward, he lit a candle and went to Peter's bedside.

The old man lay still--very still. With quick suspicion Ernest placed his hand on his cheek.

It was stone cold.

"He is dead!" cried Ernest, and a feeling of desolation came over him.

"I am all alone now," he murmured.

But he was not wholly alone. There was a face glued against the window-pane a face that he did not see. It was the tramp he had met during the day at the village store.

CHAPTER III.

A SUCCESSFUL ROBBERY.

The tramp stood with his face glued to the pane, looking in at the boy. He could not quite understand what had taken place, but gathered that the old man was dead.

"So much the better!" he said. "It will make my task easier."

He had hoped to find both asleep, and decided to wait near the house till the boy went to bed. He had made many inquiries at the store of Joe Marks, and the answers to his questions led him to believe that old Peter had a large amount of money concealed in his cabin.

Now, Tom Burns was a penniless tramp, who had wandered from Chicago on a predatory trip, ready to take any property he could lay his hands on. The chance that presented itself here was unusually tempting to a man of his character.

Earlier in the evening he had reached the cabin, but thought it best to defer his plans until later, for Ernest was awake and stirring about the room.

The tramp withdrew to some distance from the cabin and lay down under a tree, where he was soon fast asleep. Curiously, it was the very oak tree under which Peter's little hoard was concealed, but this, of course, he did not know. Had he been aware that directly beneath him was a box containing a hundred dollars in gold he would have been electrified and full of joy.

Tom Burns in his long and varied career had many times slept in the open air, and he had no difficulty in falling asleep now. But asleep he took no note of time, and when he woke up it was much later than he intended. However, without delay he made his way to the cabin, and arrived just as Ernest discovered the death of the old man whom he had supposed to be his uncle.

What time it was the tramp did not know, for it was years since he had carried a watch; but as he stood with his face glued to the

window-pane he heard a clock in the cabin striking the hour of three.

"Three o'clock," he ejaculated. "Well, I did have a nap!"

The boy was awake and he thought it best to wait a while.

"Why didn't I get here a little sooner?" he grumbled. "Then I could have ransacked the cabin without trouble. Probably the old man has been dead some time."

He watched to see what Ernest would do.

"He won't be such a fool as to sit up with the corpse," he muttered, a little apprehensively. "That wouldn't do no good."

Apparently Ernest was of this opinion, for after carefully covering up the inanimate body he lay down again on his own bed.

He did not fall asleep immediately, for the thought that he was in the presence of death naturally affected his imagination. But gradually his eyes closed, and his full, regular breathing gave notice that he was locked in slumber.

He had left the candle burning on the table. By the light which it afforded the tramp could watch him, and at the end of twenty minutes he felt satisfied that he could safely enter.

He lifted the window, and passed into the room noiselessly. He had one eye fixed on the sleeping boy, who might suddenly awake. He had taken off his shoes, and left them on the grass just under the window.

When Tom Burns found himself in the room, he made his way at once to the trunk, which his watchful eye had already discovered.

"That's where the old man keeps his gold, likely," he muttered. "I hope it isn't locked."

Usually the trunk would have been fastened, but the conversation which Ernest had had with old Peter so engrossed his mind as to make him less careful than usual. Tom Burns therefore had no difficulty in lifting the lid.

With eager fingers he explored the contents, and was not long in discovering the box which contained the two gold coins.