

Stratemeyer Edward

Young Auctioneers: or, The Polishing of a Rolling Stone



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«Public Domain»

Stratemeyer E.

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PREFACE

“The Young Auctioneers” forms the initial volume of a line of juvenile stories called “The Working Upward Series.”

The tale is complete in itself, and tells of the adventures of a homeless, although not a penniless youth, who strikes up an acquaintanceship with another young fellow experienced as an auctioneer. The two purchase a horse and wagon, stock up with goods, and take to the road. The partners pass through a number of more or less trying experiences, and the younger lad is continually on the lookout for his father, who has broken out of an asylum while partly deranged in mind over the loss of his wife and his fortune.

I have endeavored in this tale to give a faithful picture of life among a certain class of traveling salesmen who are but little known to the world at large, especially to those who inhabit our large cities. In country places the traveling auctioneer is looked for as a matter of course, and he is treated according to the humor of the inhabitants, or rather, according to the merits or demerits of the “bargains” offered on a previous trip.

I sincerely trust that my numerous boy readers will find the tale to their liking, and that the moral – to lead an upright, honest life under any and all circumstances – will not escape them.

Edward Stratemeyer.

CHAPTER I. MATT ATTENDS A SALE

"Now, ladies and gentlemen, what am I offered for this elegant vase, imported direct from Italy, a most marvelous piece of workmanship, worth every cent of twenty-five dollars? Who will start it at five dollars? Start it at four? Start it at three? At two? At one dollar? What is that – fifty cents? Rather low, lady, but as I said before, these goods must be sold, regardless of the prices obtained. Fifty cents, it is! Fifty – fifty! Who will make it one dollar?"

"Sixty!"

"What, only sixty? Well, well, well! Never mind, the goods must go, and sixty cents is better than nothing. Sixty – sixty – "

"Seventy-five!"

"Eighty!"

"One dollar!"

"At last I am offered one dollar! Think of it! One dollar for a beautiful vase such as might well adorn the home of a Gould, or a Vanderbilt! But such is life. One dollar – one dollar – "

"One and a quarter!"

"One and a half!"

"One and a half is offered! Oh, what a shame, ladies and gentlemen; a paltry dollar and a half for an article worth, at the very lowest estimate, twenty-five dollars. Who makes it two dollars?"

"Two!"

"Two and a half!"

"Three!"

"Three and a quarter!"

"Three and a quar – Ah, four dollars? Four dollars! Who says five? Going at four – at four – at four. Four and a half – four and a quarter – this is your last chance, remember. Did you say five, sir? No? Well, four it is, then. Going – going – the last chance, ladies and gentlemen! Going – going – gone, to the lady in the brown dress, Andrew, for four dollars!"

The scene was a small store on Nassau street near Fulton street, in New York City. Outside of the open doorway hung a red flag, indicative of an auction sale. The single window of the place was crowded with vases, imitation marble statues, plated tableware, and gorgeous lamps of highly-polished metal.

Among these articles was a sign in black letters on white cardboard bearing these words:

ROYAL CONSIGNMENT AUCTION CO.,

Sales Daily from 10 A.M. to 3 P.M

Inside, toward the rear, there was a small raised platform, and upon this stood the auctioneer, a tall, thin-faced man, with sharp black eyes, and rather a squeaky voice. To one side was his assistant, a much younger and much more pleasant-looking individual, who wrapped up the articles sold and collected for them.

It was between twelve and one o'clock in the day, and the auction store was crowded with business people, who, during their lunch-time, had dropped in to see what was going on, and, possibly, make a purchase. There were middle-aged business men, young clerks, and several young ladies, and all appeared interested in the mild excitement attending the disposal of the goods.

Among the young people present was a boy of fifteen, whose clothing, although not of a fashionable cut, was, nevertheless, neat and clean. He had dark curly hair, and his face was as honest in appearance as it was fearless and handsome.

The youth was as much interested in the sale as though he was buying half the articles auctioned off, although he had not enough in his trousers pocket to even start bidding, for no bid of less than twenty-five cents was recognized by the auctioneer in beginning a sale.

The vase disposed of, the auctioneer's assistant brought forth from a side shelf a piece of imitation marble statuary, representing three doves bearing a wreath of flowers between them. The bit of bric-a-brac looked quite nice, but as it was but imitation marble, it was not worth more than two dollars, if as much.

"Now, here we have as fine a piece of Italian marble as was ever brought to New York," began the auctioneer, holding up the piece in question. "And the work upon it cannot to-day be excelled by any sculptors on this side of the Atlantic. How beautiful are those three doves, and how natural that wreath! Examine the piece for yourselves, ladies and gentlemen. It is genuine Italian marble, and will not go to pieces in your hands. There you are, sir."

The bit of statuary was handed to a gentleman who stood directly in front of the auctioneer. He gave it a hasty glance and then started to hand it back.

"Pass it through the crowd, please. I want every one to be convinced of its quality before I attempt to sell it!" bawled the auctioneer, and the gentleman handed it to the man next to him.

Thus started, the bit of bric-a-brac traveled from one hand to another until it reached a heavy-set man with red mustache, who stood but a couple of yards from the doorway.

"Humph!" muttered the man, as he turned over the article in contempt. "I wouldn't give a dollar a cartload for them. Here you are!"

As he finished, he thrust the piece of bric-a-brac toward a young lady who had just entered. She drew back in surprise, not knowing what his action meant. The statuary left the man's hand, touched the young lady's arm, and then fell to the floor with a crash, and was broken into a dozen pieces.

The young lady uttered a slight shriek of surprise at the accident, and instantly the crowd looked toward her, and then at the auctioneer.

"Here, who broke that?" demanded the auctioneer, in an entirely different tone of voice, as he left his stand and hurried to the spot.

"That young lady," replied a fellow who had not seen the movements of the man with the red mustache.

"No! no! I did not do it!" cried the young lady, shrinking back. "I did not touch the piece, sir."

"Well, but it's right at your feet, madam; you must have let it fall," said the auctioneer harshly.

"I did not, sir."

"Well, who did, then?"

"A man who ran out as soon as the statuary was broken."

"Oh, pshaw! It isn't likely a man would run away like that."

"The young lady speaks the truth, sir," put in the boy previously mentioned. "The man shoved the statue toward her, and when she drew back it slipped from his hand to the floor. She was not in the least responsible."

"Thank you for that, Matt Lincoln," said the young lady, with a grateful nod. "I shall not forget this service."

"Oh, that's all right, Miss Bartlett," returned the boy, blushing. "I like to be of service to you."

"You evidently seem to know this young lady?" said the auctioneer, turning to Matt Lincoln.

"I do; she is the stenographer at our office. That's how I came to notice her when she came in."

“No wonder you try to shield her!” sneered the auctioneer. “But I can’t afford to let this matter pass. You will have to pay for the damages done, madam. The cost price of that piece of bric-a-brac was ten dollars, but I’ll throw off two dollars and call it eight.”

CHAPTER II. A LIVELY DISCUSSION

At the intimation that she must pay eight dollars, the face of the young lady stenographer grew pale, while that of Matt Lincoln flushed up.

“I – I cannot pay the money!” gasped Ida Bartlett. “I have no such amount with me.”

“It’s a swindle!” burst in Matt Lincoln indignantly. “Don’t you pay a cent. Miss Bartlett. It was not your fault, and he cannot force you to pay.”

“Shut right up!” snarled the auctioneer, turning to Matt fiercely. “Unless you want to get yourself into trouble.”

“I won’t shut up and see this young lady ill-treated!” retorted Matt, flushing still more. “You may think you can ride over me, but you can’t do it. I’ll – ”

“Hush, Matt!” pleaded the stenographer, catching him by the arm. “Do not say anything rash.”

“But, Miss Bartlett, this chap wants to force you into paying for something you didn’t do! I wouldn’t stand it! I’d fight him first!”

“You would, would you?” growled the auctioneer, his face growing dark and sour.

“Yes, I would!” retorted the boy defiantly. “I’m not afraid of you!”

“Say, that boy’s game!” laughed a bystander.

“Yes, a regular little bantam,” replied another.

“I’ll settle with you in a minute,” said the auctioneer, finding he could not silence Matt. “Now, madam, do you intend to pay for the damage done or not?”

“I did not do the damage, and I cannot see how you can ask me to pay,” faltered Ida Bartlett.

“I have proof that you let the piece of bric-a-brac fall.”

“The chap who says he saw her drop it had his back turned at the time,” put in Matt, and turning to the individual in question, he added: “Can you swear that you saw the piece of statuary leave her hand?”

“N-no, I can’t do that,” returned the fellow slowly. “But it went down at her feet, and – ”

“You imagined the rest,” finished Matt. “I told you so,” he went on triumphantly.

“See here; you shut up,” cried the auctioneer, losing his temper. “Dilks, come here and help me,” he went on, appealing to the assistant he had before called Andrew.

The assistant auctioneer came forward upon this. His face wore a troubled look, as if he did not relish the duty he was called upon to perform.

“I’m afraid there is some mistake here, Mr. Gulligan,” he said in a low tone, meant only for the auctioneer’s ears.

“Some mistake!” howled Caleb Gulligan, for such was the auctioneer’s name. “I don’t make mistakes.”

“I saw the man run out as soon as the statuary was broken, and by his manner I am sure he must be the guilty party.”

“See here, Andrew Dilks, who is running this establishment?” stormed Caleb Gulligan wrathfully. “I lay the accident at the door of the young woman, and, as the man is gone, she will pay the bill – or take the consequences.”

The assistant auctioneer flushed up at these words. It was plain to see that he was an honest young man, and did not like such underhand work.

“Perhaps she hasn’t the money to pay?”

“Then she must take the consequences,” replied the auctioneer sourly.

“Not much!” put in Matt, who had overheard the best part of the conversation between Caleb Gulligan and his assistant. “Miss Bartlett, if I was you I wouldn’t stay here another minute,” he went on to the stenographer, in a whisper.

“Why, what would you do?” she returned.

“Skip out. They haven’t any right to make you trouble.”

“But, Matt, that would not be right.”

“Never mind; go ahead. You haven’t any friend here but me. Mr. Fenton wouldn’t help you any, even if you ask him.”

The young lady stood still for a moment, and then made a sudden movement for the doorway. Caleb Gulligan rushed after her, only to find Matt Lincoln barring his progress.

“Get out of my way, boy!”

“Which way?” queried Matt coolly.

“You rat! Out of my way!”

The auctioneer placed his hand upon the boy’s arm, with the intention of hurling him aside. But, strange to say, although he was taller than the youth, he could not budge the latter for several seconds, and by that time the young lady had disappeared, swallowed up in the noonday crowd which surged past the door.

“Now see what you have done!” stormed Caleb Gulligan wrathfully. “You have aided that young woman to escape!”

“That’s just what I meant to do,” returned Matt, with a coolness that would have been exasperating to even a less sensitive man than the crusty auctioneer.

“I shall hold you responsible for it!”

“I don’t care if you do,” was Matt’s dogged reply. “She’s my friend, and I always stick up for my friends.”

At this last remark there was a low murmur of approval from those gathered about. Evidently, the boy’s unpolished but honest manner had won considerable admiration.

“Do you know that I can have you locked up?”

“What for?”

“For aiding her to escape.”

“Didn’t she have a right to hurry away if she wanted to go? It’s almost one o’clock – I’ll have to be off myself soon, if I want to keep my job.”

There was a laugh at this, and half a dozen looked at their watches and left.

“If you please,” put in the assistant nervously. “Had we not better go on with the sales? The crowd will be gone before long. We might make more than what was lost here.”

“Certainly, go on with the sales,” howled Caleb Gulligan. “I will take care of this young rascal, and find out what has become of that young woman.”

“And that man,” began the assistant.

“Never mind the man; the young woman shall pay for the damage done, and she can fix it up with the man afterward, if she wishes. I am not going to stand the loss.”

“It seems to me you are making an awful row over a fifteen-cent piece of plaster-of-paris,” said Matt to Gulligan, as Andrew Dilks turned toward the auctioneer’s stand. “Why didn’t you ask me to pay for the stuff and done?”

“Plaster-of-paris!” cried the auctioneer wrathfully. “That is real Italian marble – ”

“Made in Centre street,” interrupted Matt.

“And it is worth every cent of ten dollars – ”

“Ten dollars a carload, you mean,” went on the boy. “Come, let go of me; I’ve got to go to work.”

“You’ll go to the Tombs!”

“No, I won’t. I have done nothing wrong, and I want you to let go of me.”

Matt began to struggle, much to the delight of the spectators, who refused to listen to what the assistant auctioneer might have to say from the stand.

“I’ll teach you a lesson!” fumed Caleb Gulligan. “How do you like that?”

He swung Matt around and caught him by the throat and the collar. But only for an instant was he able to hold the boy in that fashion. Matt squirmed and twisted like an eel, and suddenly gave the old auctioneer a push which sent him sprawling upon his back. Before Caleb Gulligan could recover, Matt was out of the door and running like a deer up Nassau street.

“Hi! hi! stop him!” roared the old auctioneer. “He must not get away.”

“Stop him yourself, then,” said one of the bystanders heartlessly. “We have nothing to do with your quarrel with the boy.”

“You are in league with him,” fumed Caleb Gulligan, as he scrambled to his feet. “But, never mind, I’ll catch him!”

He ran out of the auction store and gazed perplexedly up and down into the crowd. It was useless. Matt Lincoln, like his friend, Ida Bartlett, had disappeared.

CHAPTER III. SOMETHING OF THE PAST

Matt Lincoln did not stop until he reached Temple Court, as that large office-building on the corner of Nassau and Beekman streets is called. Then he drew a long breath as he took a stand in one corner of a side corridor.

"There, I've put my foot into it again, I suppose," he said, somewhat dismally. "I reckon old Uncle Dan was right, I'm the rolling stone that's forever getting into a hole and out without settling anywhere. But I couldn't stand it to see Miss Bartlett threatened. It wasn't a fair thing to do, and that auctioneer ought to be run out of the city. I suppose he'll be after my scalp now."

Matt Lincoln was sixteen years of age. For the past two years he had been depending entirely upon himself, and during that time he had, indeed, been a rolling stone, although not entirely without an object.

Up to his tenth year Matt had lived with his father and mother in the Harlem district of the great metropolis. He had attended one of the public schools, and, take it all in all, had been a happy boy.

Then came a cloud over the Lincoln home. Mr. Lincoln was interested, as a speculator, in some mines in Montana, and by a peculiar manipulation of the stocks of these mines he lost every dollar of his hard-earned savings. He was an over-sensitive man, and these losses preyed upon his mind until he was affected mentally, and had to be sent to an asylum.

For several months Mrs. Lincoln and Matt paid weekly visits to the asylum to see the father and husband, and they were beginning to rejoice over the thought that Mr. Lincoln would soon be himself once more, when one day Mrs. Lincoln fell down in the middle of Broadway, and a heavily-loaded truck passed directly over her chest.

When the poor woman was picked up it was found she was unconscious. An ambulance was at once summoned, and she was conveyed to one of the city hospitals. Here Matt visited her, and listened to her last words of love and advice. She died before sunrise the next day, and three days later was buried.

If his mother's unexpected death was a shock to poor Matt, it was even more of a one to Mr. Lincoln. Again was the father and husband's mind unbalanced; this time far worse than ever before. He escaped from the asylum, made a dramatic appearance at the home during the burial services, and then disappeared, no one knew where.

Matt's only remaining relative at this time was his Uncle Dan, a brother to Mr. Lincoln. He took charge of Matt, and took the boy to his home in Bridgeport, Connecticut. At the same time a diligent search for Mr. Lincoln was begun.

The search for Matt's father was unsuccessful, although continued for several weeks. It was learned that he had boarded a train in Jersey City bound for Philadelphia, but there all trace of his whereabouts was lost.

Matt lived with his Uncle Dan for four years. He went to school in Bridgeport part of the time, and when not learning, could be found at Mr. Lincoln's ship chandlery, a large place, situated down near the docks.

It would seem that the tragic occurrences through which he had passed would have made Matt melancholy and low-spirited, but such was not the case. Mrs. Lincoln had naturally been of a light heart, and the boy partook of much of his mother's disposition. He loved a free-and-easy life, loved to roam from place to place. With a captain who was a friend of Uncle Dan, he had made a trip to Bangor and Augusta, and he had likewise put in two weeks at a lumber camp in Maine, and a month during the summer at a hotel among the White Mountains, doing odd jobs for the proprietor.

“A rolling stone and nothing less,” Uncle Dan had called him, over and over again, and the title seemed to fit Matt exactly.

At length, when Matt was fourteen years old, Uncle Dan Lincoln, who was then an elderly man, was taken with pneumonia, and died two weeks later. His wife, a crabbed woman, who detested Matt, and was glad when he was out of the house, at once sold out the chandlery, and went to live with her folks in a small village in Vermont. Thus Matt was thrown out upon his own resources with no capital but a ten dollar bill, which his Uncle Dan had quietly slipped into his hand only a few days before the end.

Matt remained around Bridgeport but two days after his uncle’s funeral. Then he struck up a bargain with the captain of a schooner which was loaded with freight for Philadelphia, and sailed for that city.

When no trace of Matt’s father could be found the detectives who had been put on the case declared their belief that the poor man had drowned himself in the Delaware River. This belief was strengthened when some clothing that looked like that which the demented man had worn was found in a secluded spot not far from the river bank.

But Matt could not bring himself to believe that his father was dead. There was a hope in his breast which amounted almost to a conviction that some day he would again find his parent, alive and well.

Yet Matt’s search in and around Philadelphia, lasting several months, was unsuccessful. His money was soon spent, and then he started to tramp from Philadelphia to his former home, New York.

This tramp, of about one hundred miles by the various turnpikes through New Jersey, took the boy just one week, and when he arrived in the metropolis, both his clothing and his shoes were considerably worn. But he brushed up, and lost no time in hunting up work, knowing that it would never do to remain idle.

For two days Matt was without employment. Then he thought of the man who had sold his father the mining shares, Mr. Randolph Fenton, and he paid the stock-broker a visit at his offices, on Broad street, just off of Wall street.

As it happened, Randolph Fenton was just then in need of a boy to run errands and do copying, and after a talk with Matt, he hired him at a salary of four dollars a week.

“I’ll take you in because I thought so much of your dear father,” explained Randolph Fenton. “We were great friends, you must know, and I feel it my duty to do something for his son.”

Randolph Fenton spoke very nicely, but Matt soon found that he was by no means the kind-hearted gentleman he wished to appear. In reality, he was very mean and close. He worked his clerks almost to death, and such a thing as a raise in salary was unknown in the office.

But Matt found it would do no good to complain. Times were just then somewhat hard, and another place was not easy to obtain. He decided to make the most of it until times grew better, and in this resolve remained with Randolph Fenton week after week until the opening of this story.

Matt had been sent by Randolph Fenton on an errand to Temple Court, to be done as soon as the boy had finished lunch. Waiting for another minute to make certain that he was not being followed, the boy hurried to one of the elevators, and was lifted to the third floor.

The errand was quickly transacted, and with several books under his arm for his employer, Matt started on the return to the offices in Broad street.

Not wishing to be seen in the vicinity of the auction store, Matt turned down Park Row instead of Nassau street, and so continued down Broadway, his intention being to pass through Wall to Broad.

He had just reached the corner of Fulton street when some one tapped him upon the shoulder, and turning, he found himself confronted by Andrew Dilks, the old auctioneer’s assistant.

CHAPTER IV. AN INTERESTING PROPOSITION

On catching sight of Andrew Dilks Matt's first thought was to break and run. But a second look into the old auctioneer's assistant's face assured him that no immediate harm was meant, and he stood his ground, his eyes flashing, defiantly.

"You didn't expect us to meet quite so soon, did you?" remarked Andrew Dilks with a quiet smile.

"No, I didn't," returned Matt bluntly.

"I suppose you were doing your best to keep out of the way of Gulligan and myself."

"Is Gulligan the man I had the row with?"

"Yes."

"Then you are right. I don't want to get into trouble for nothing. That young lady was not to blame for what happened, and I considered it my duty to take her part."

"Mr. Gulligan was very mad," went on Andrew Dilks, still smiling quietly.

"I can't help that. He ought not to have pitched into me the way he did."

"I agree with you."

At these words, so quietly but firmly spoken, Matt's eyes opened in wonder. Was it possible that the old auctioneer's assistant took his part?

"You agree with me?" he repeated.

"Yes, I agree with you. Gulligan was altogether too hasty – he most generally is," returned Andrew Dilks.

"I'll bet you don't dare tell him that," and Matt grinned mischievously.

"I have just told him."

"What?"

"Yes. I believe that unknown man was entirely to blame. It was a shame the way Gulligan carried on. As soon as you ran out he turned upon me for not stopping you, and we had some pretty hot words."

"Good for you!" cried Matt. "I must thank you, not only for myself, but for Miss Bartlett as well."

"Those hot words have cost me my situation," went on Andrew Dilks more soberly.

Instantly Matt's face fell.

"That's too bad, indeed, it is!" he said earnestly. "Why, I would rather have gone home and got the money to pay for the broken stuff than have that happen."

"It was not altogether on account of the broken piece of bric-a-brac," went on Andrew Dilks. "Gulligan has been angry at me for over two weeks – ever since I wouldn't pass off a counterfeit five-dollar bill he had taken in. I said the bill ought to be burned up, but he wouldn't hear of it."

"But now you are out of a job."

"That's true. But I don't much care. Working for him was not easy, and he never paid me my weekly wages of ten dollars until I had asked for it about a dozen times."

"I thought auctioneers made more than that," said Matt. There was something about Andrew Dilks that pleased him, and he was becoming interested in the conversation.

"Most of them do – a good deal more. But Gulligan considered that he had taught me the business, and that I was still under his thumb."

"Why don't you go in business for yourself? It seems to me it would just suit me," said Matt enthusiastically. "I once passed through the town of Rahway, out in New Jersey, and a fellow not much older than you had a big wagon there, and was auctioning stuff off at a great rate – crockery

ware, lamps, albums, razors, and a lot more of goods. They said he had been selling goods there every night for a week.”

“Those are the fellows who make money,” returned Andrew Dilks. “Here in the city the business is done to death. Give a man a good team of horses and a wagon, and enough money to stock up, and he can travel from place to place and make a small fortune.”

“I believe you. Why don’t you start out?”

“I haven’t enough money, that’s the only reason.”

“How much would it take?”

“The price of the turnout, from two hundred dollars up, and about a hundred dollars for stock. You know stock can be purchased as often as desired.”

“By crickety! If I had the money I would go in with you!” cried Matt, caught with a sudden idea. “That sort of thing would just suit me.”

“You? Why I thought you were a city boy, a clerk – ”

“So I am. But my Uncle Dan always called me a rolling stone, and that hits it exactly. I am tired of New York, and I would jump at the first chance to get out of it and see some of the country.”

“Then you are like me,” returned Andrew Dilks warmly. He was quite taken with Matt’s candor. “If I had a turnout I would travel all over the United States, stopping a week here and a week there. How old are you?”

“Sixteen.”

“I am twenty-one. Do you live with your parents?”

“No, I am alone here.”

“So am I. I used to live in Chicago before all my folks died. I like your appearance. What is your name?”

Matt told him, and also gave Andrew Dilks a brief bit of his history. The auctioneer listened with interest, and then told a number of things concerning himself. He had been with Caleb Gulligan four years. He had been sick several times, but, nevertheless, had managed to save a hundred and thirty-five dollars.

“I’ve got seventy-five dollars saved, part of which I got from other brokers than Mr. Fenton, for running errands, and so forth,” said Matt. “That and your money would make two hundred and ten dollars. Couldn’t we start out on that?”

“We might,” replied Andrew Dilks reflectively. “You are on your way to work now, are you not?”

“Yes, and I ought to be at the office this minute!” cried Matt, with a start. “Mr. Fenton will be tearing mad, I know. But I won’t care – that is, if we come to a deal.”

“Come and see me this evening, then. I am stopping at the Columbus Hotel, on the Bowery.”

“I know the place, and I’ll be up at seven o’clock,” returned Matt; and on this agreement the two separated.

“My, but I would like to become a traveling auctioneer!” said the boy to himself, as he hurried down Broadway. “I wish I had enough money so that we could go in as equal partners. He seems a first-rate chap in every way, and honest, too, or he would not have gotten into that row over the five-dollar counterfeit.”

Matt had lost much time in talking to Andrew Dilks, and now, in order to reach Wall street the quicker, he hopped upon the tail-end of a dray that was moving rapidly toward the Battery.

“Beating the cable cars out of a nickel!” he called to the driver, and that individual smiled grimly, and said nothing.

Less than ten minutes later the boy entered the stock-broker’s main office. He was just about to pass into Randolph Fenton’s private apartment when the figure of a man moving rapidly down the street attracted his attention. It was the red mustached man who had created the trouble at the auction store.

“Please give these books to Mr. Fenton, and tell him I’ll be back shortly,” said Matt to the head clerk, and without waiting for a reply he placed his package on a desk, and hurried out of the door after the man.

CHAPTER V. MATT IS DISCHARGED

When Matt Lincoln reached the pavement he saw that the man he was after had reached Wall street and was turning down toward Water street. The boy started on a run and caught up to the individual just as he was about to descend into an insurance office which was located several steps below the level of the street.

“Hold on there!” cried Matt, and he caught the man by the arm.

“What is it, boy?” demanded the other, with a slight start at being accosted so unexpectedly.

“I want to see you about that piece of bric-a-brac you broke at the auction store up on Nausau street.”

The man’s face reddened, and he looked confused.

“I don’t – don’t know what you are talking about,” he stammered.

“Oh, yes, you do,” returned Matt coolly. “You tried to let the blame fall on a young lady, but it won’t work. You must go back, explain matters, and settle up.”

“I’ll do nothing of the kind!” blustered the red mustached man. He had recovered from his first alarm. “I know nothing of the affair you have in mind. I have not been near an auction store to-day – for a month, in fact.”

“That’s a whopper!” exploded Matt. “You were in the place less than an hour and a half ago!”

“Nonsense, boy, you have got hold of the wrong man. Let me go.”

“Not much I won’t! You are the man, and you can’t fool me.”

“If you don’t let go I’ll call a policeman just as sure as my name is Paul Carden.”

“I don’t care what your name is, you’ve got to go back and set matters straight.”

The man glared at Matt for a moment. Then, without warning, he pushed the boy backward. Matt was standing upon the edge of the steps leading to the insurance office at the time, and he went down with a crash into the wire-netting door, knocking a large hole into it.

Before Matt could recover the man darted down Wall street and around the nearest corner. Matt would have gone after him, but the proprietor of the insurance office came out, and demanded to know what he meant by bursting the wire-netting door in such a rude fashion.

“A man knocked me down the steps,” Matt explained. “I hope the door isn’t ruined.”

“Hardly, but there’s a hole in it.”

“The wire has broken from under the molding, that is all,” said the boy. “Let me see if I can’t fix it.”

He brought out his penknife, and loosened part of the molding. Then drawing the wire back into place, he tacked the molding fast again; and the door was as good as before.

But all this had taken time, and Matt knew it would now be useless to attempt to follow Paul Carden. He looked around the corner, and seeing nothing of the fellow, retraced his steps to Randolph Fenton’s establishment.

“Where in the world have you been so long?” demanded Mr. Fenton, as Matt entered the private apartment. “Here I have been waiting an hour for you to deliver a message to Ulmer & Grant. I hire you to be on hand when wanted, Lincoln; not to loaf your time away.”

“I was not loafing my time away, Mr. Fenton,” returned Matt calmly. “There was a private matter I had to attend to, and – ”

“You have no business to attend to private matters during office hours!” roared Randolph Fenton wrathfully. “You will mind my business and nothing else.”

“But this could not wait. There was a man – ”

“I do not care for your explanations, young man. Too much time has already been wasted. Take this message to Ulmer & Grant’s, and bring a reply inside of ten minutes, or consider yourself discharged.”

And with his face full of wrath and sourness, Randolph Fenton thrust a sealed envelope into Matt’s hand.

An angry reply arose to the boy’s lips. But he checked it, and without a word left the office and hurried away on his errand.

“I trust I make a satisfactory arrangement with Andrew Dilks,” said Matt to himself. “It is growing harder and harder every day to get along with Mr. Fenton. Every time he talks he acts as if he wanted to snap somebody’s head off. Poor Miss Bartlett at her desk looked half-scared to death.”

Arriving at the offices of Ulmer & Grant, Matt found that Mr. Ulmer had gone to Boston. Mr. Grant was busy, but would give him an answer in a few minutes.

Matt sat down, wondering what Mr. Fenton would say about the delay. Ten, fifteen, twenty minutes passed. At last Mr. Grant was at liberty, but it was exactly half an hour before Matt managed to gain a reply to the message he carried.

When Matt got back to Randolph Fenton’s office he found the broker in his private apartment alone, and almost purple with suppressed rage.

“You think it smart to keep me waiting, I suppose?” he sneered, as he took Mr. Grant’s message and tore it open.

“It was not my fault. Mr. Ulmer is away, and Mr. Grant was busy.”

“Why didn’t you let Mr. Grant know I was in a hurry?”

“The clerk said he was not to be disturbed just then, and – ”

“No more explanations, Lincoln. I took you into this office more for the sake of your poor father than for anything else. But you have not endeavored to make the most of your chances – ”

“I have done my work, and more,” interrupted Matt bluntly.

“Stop! don’t contradict me, young man! You are more of an idler than aught else. This noon you wasted an hour on that errand to Temple Court, and – ”

“Mr. Fenton,” interrupted a voice from the doorway, and looking up the stock-broker saw Ida Bartlett standing there.

“What is it?” snapped the broker.

“If you please, I would like to say a word in Matthew’s behalf,” went on the stenographer timidly.

“It’s no use saying anything, Miss Bartlett,” put in Matt hastily. “Mr. Fenton won’t listen to any explanations.”

“Yes, but it was – ”

“It’s no use,” went on Matt in a whisper. “I’m not going to stand it any longer,” and then he added, as the stock-broker’s attention was arrested by the reply Mr. Grant had sent. “I am ready to leave anyway, if he discharges me, and you will only get into trouble if you mention that auction-store affair.”

“But it was all my fault – ”

“No, it wasn’t, and please keep quiet.”

“But if you are discharged, Matt – ”

“I’ve got something else in view.”

“Oh!”

“Well, what have you to say, Miss Bartlett?” asked Randolph Fenton, tearing up the message and throwing the pieces into the waste basket.

“I – I was going to say that I was partly to blame for his being behind time this noon. I was – ”

“Do not try to shield him, Miss Bartlett. I know him better than you do. He is a very lazy and heedless boy, and I have already made up my mind what I am going to do in the matter.”

“And what’s that?” asked Matt, although he felt pretty certain of what was coming.

“This shall be your last day of service in these offices. This afternoon I will pay you what is due you, and to-morrow I will endeavor to get a boy who is willing to attend to business and not fritter away his time on the streets.”

“I have not frittered away my time,” replied Matt warmly. “And I feel certain you will not get any one to do more than I have done. You expect a boy to do two men’s work for a boy’s pay – ”

“Stop!”

“Not until I have finished, sir. I am perfectly willing to leave, even though times are dull, and have been contemplating such a step on my own account for some time. I was getting tired of being a slave.”

“You outrageous imp! Not another word from you. I will not have you in this place another minute! Go to Mr. Gaston and draw your pay and leave, and never let me see your face again!”

And white with passion, Randolph Fenton sprang to his feet and threw open the door for Matt to pass out.

CHAPTER VI. A BUSINESS PARTNERSHIP

Mr. Randolph Fenton's voice had been raised to its highest pitch, and thus the attention of every one in the offices had been attracted to what was going on.

Ida Bartlett again came forward to speak in Matt's behalf, but ere she could say a word the boy put up his hand warningly, and turned to the book-keeper.

"I will take what is due me, Mr. Gaston," he said.

Mr. Gaston, a somewhat elderly man, nodded, and without a word, turned to his desk and passed over to Matt two new one-dollar bills.

"I'm sorry, my boy, it isn't more," he whispered.

"Thank you," returned Matt. "Good-by," he went on, turning to the other office workers. And with a smile and a bow to Ida Bartlett, he passed out of the place.

Not until he was some distance away did he draw a deep breath. Somehow he felt as if he had just emerged from a prison cell.

"It's a wonder to me that I stood it so long," he muttered to himself. "Mr. Fenton is a regular tyrant, and ought to move to Russia. How poor father ever came to invest in those mining shares through him is a mystery to me." Matt gave a sigh, and for an instant an unusually sober look crossed his handsome face. "If only I could learn what became of poor father – if I could make sure whether he was alive or dead – I wouldn't care how other matters went. I must continue my searching as soon as I can afford to do so."

Matt boarded with a private family on Third avenue, and having nothing else to do, he walked slowly to the place. He wished he might meet the man with the red mustache or Andrew Dilks, but he saw nothing of either. When he arrived at the boarding-house it was still an hour to supper-time. He ascended to his room and spent the time in looking over his wardrobe, for Matt was handy with a needle, and disliked to have buttons off or rent seams in his garments.

At length the bell for supper rang, and washing up and combing his hair, he went below. He ate his portion leisurely, and was just finishing when the landlady said there was a young lady to see him in the parlor.

Matt at once thought of Ida Bartlett, who lived but a few blocks away, with her two sisters and her mother. He was right; it was the young lady stenographer.

"I could not wait, Matt, and so came over just as soon as we had tea," she explained. "I want you to tell me what you are going to do, now you are out of Mr. Fenton's offices. You spoke of having something else in view. I trust it is something better."

"I can't tell as to that yet," returned the boy, and then sitting down beside her on the *tête-à-tête*, he told her of Andrew Dilks and the auctioneer's proposition.

"That sounds as if it might be quite a good thing," said Ida Bartlett, when he had finished. "You are sure this Dilks is no sharper? There are lots of sharpeners in the auction business, you know."

"Like the one who tried to make you pay?" laughed Matt.

"Exactly."

"Well, to tell the truth, I thought of that. But Dilks doesn't look like a sharper; quite the contrary. Of course, I'll have to keep my eyes open. We will have a written agreement, and I will not let the outfit go out of my sight, at least not until I know him thoroughly."

"In that case I think you will be safe."

"It is possible that we may not come to any agreement. He has more money than I. He may want somebody who can put up an equal amount."

"How much has he?"

“A hundred and thirty-five dollars.”

“And that is a good deal more than you have, I suppose?”

“I have saved seventy-five dollars,” returned Matt, and not without some pride.

“Is it possible! And on a salary of four dollars a week!”

“Not much! That salary only paid my way. I saved the money out of extras I earned from other brokers – running errands for them and doing writing at home in the evenings.”

“I see. It is very creditable to you.”

“Yet Mr. Fenton said I was lazy,” replied Matt bitterly.

“Don’t you care what he said. He is a very mean man – I am finding that out more and more every day. I myself intend to leave just as soon as I can find another place. I have been there three months, and can hardly bear it longer.”

“The last stenographer only stayed two months, and the one before that, a man, didn’t stay the week out,” grinned Matt. “They soon find out what kind of a man he is.”

“I would leave to-morrow, only I cannot afford to be out of work, and times are somewhat dull. But, about your proposed venture. You will need sixty dollars more to hold an equal share if you go in, won’t you?”

“Yes.”

Ida Bartlett meditated for a moment.

“Perhaps I might let you have that money,” she said slowly.

“Why – I – I – have you got it?” stammered Matt.

“Yes; I and my two sisters have saved quite a bit out of our earnings, you must know. I’ll have to ask Kate and Jennie and mother first. If they are willing, I’ll let you have the sixty dollars, and then you and this Dilks can form an equal partnership.”

“You are very kind,” exclaimed the boy warmly, for the offer was entirely unexpected.

“No more than I ought to be, Matt. You saved me from great annoyance this noon, and I have not forgotten the many favors you have done me from time to time. When did you say you were to meet this Dilks?”

“This evening. I ought to be on my way to his hotel now.”

“Then do not let me detain you longer.”

“I guess he’ll wait.”

“I will speak to my two sisters and my mother to-night, and I will let you know to-morrow what they think of the matter. If they do not consent, I can let you have twenty-five dollars on my own account, anyway.”

“Thank you. But, supposing the venture doesn’t pay? We may go all to pieces on the road.”

“I’ll risk that – with you,” smiled Ida Bartlett. “If you cannot make it pay in one place, I know you’ll soon find some other place where it will pay. The main thing is to make sure that this Andrew Dilks is honest. I would not like to hear of you being swindled.”

“Nor would I want to be swindled,” smiled Matt. “It wouldn’t pay, and, besides, I might find it a hard job to pay back what I had borrowed.”

“You may make a fortune!”

“I would be content if we made a good living.”

“And you would be able to see a good part of the country.”

“That’s the best part of it – to me. I hate to stay in one place all the while. Besides” – Matt lowered his voice – “it will give me a chance to look for my father, if he is still alive.”

“You poor boy,” returned Ida Bartlett sympathetically. “Always thinking of him! Well, I trust, with all my heart, that you may some day find your father, alive and well.”

CHAPTER VII. GETTING READY TO START

A few minutes later found Matt on his way to the Columbus Hotel. The Bowery was crowded with all classes of people, some just returning from work, and others out sightseeing and buying, but the boy had no difficulty in making his way along at a rapid gait. In less than a quarter of an hour he reached the hotel and entered the office. He was about to accost the clerk at the desk, when somebody tapped him on the shoulder, and turning he saw Andrew Dilks.

"I have been watching for you," said the young man. "I was a little afraid you might disappoint me."

"I was detained," said Matt. "But I am at your service now. Where shall we go?"

"My room is rather small and warm, but it is more private than the reading-room down here," returned Andrew Dilks. "Suppose we go up there. You can sit by the window and get what little breeze there is."

They started for the stairs (there was no elevator, as in all better-class hotels), and were soon comfortably seated in Andrew Dilks' room, an apartment on the third floor, in the rear.

"It's not a very elegant place," remarked the young man apologetically, "but it's cheap, and that's what I wanted. A fellow can't spend his money and save it, too."

"You are right there."

"As I said before, old Gulligan only gave me ten dollars a week, and out of that I had to pay for many articles that got broken. He put off what he could on me, whether it was my fault or not."

"I believe you said you had a hundred and thirty-five dollars?"

"Yes. It's not much, but it's something. I wish you had as much. I've figured it that we might start with a single horse and an ordinary covered wagon on two hundred and seventy dollars, and still keep twenty dollars in cash for emergencies."

"I have an idea I can raise the amount."

"You can? Good enough!"

"But, first, I want you to give me some of the particulars of your scheme."

"I'll do that willingly. I want you to understand every detail before you invest. Then you will know just what to expect."

Andrew Dilks brought out a sheet of paper and a pencil and began to do some figuring.

"We will put down our combined capital at two hundred and fifty dollars," he said. "Now, what can we get a good horse for?"

"Two hundred dollars!" laughed Matt.

"You are right, but we must get one cheaper."

"Supposing we look around for a bargain at one hundred dollars, then?"

"That is nearer the figure. We do not want a fancy animal nor a particularly fast one. A horse that can pull our wagon ten to twenty miles a day once or twice a week will answer."

"Yes; we can trade him off for something better later on."

"Now, I'll put down a hundred for the horse. The wagon ought not to cost over fifty or sixty dollars."

"Make it seventy-five for wagon and harness," said Matt.

"It will foot up to two hundred with rubber blankets and extras."

"I suppose it will. Well, even that will leave us with fifty dollars for stock."

"Will that be enough?"

"We'll make it do. If we run out I can leave you with the turnout, and come back to New York and buy more, and have it shipped as freight to the nearest railroad station."

“I see. I suppose they do not do any trusting with auctioneers?”

“Not with such traveling auctioneers as we will be. I would rather buy for cash, anyway, for you can buy much cheaper.”

“I suppose you can. What would you take along, and where would you go?”

“My idea for the balance of this summer would be to strike out through New York State down into Pennsylvania, and then across to New Jersey. Then we can rent a store in some small town for the winter, especially for the holidays, and start out early in the spring for the New England States.”

This plan met with Matt’s approval, and he asked what goods Andrew Dilks thought would be the most profitable to take along.

“I have a list here in my pocket,” returned the young man, bringing it forth. “You see, it includes fancy articles and statuary, besides cheap watches, table cutlery, spoons, imitation gold rings, such musical instruments as accordions, banjos and violins, albums, razors, whips, and a dozen others. That ought to meet the wants in almost any small town.”

“Can you play the musical instruments?” asked Matt.

“I can play the accordion – not very well, but enough to show the instrument off.”

“I can play the banjo, and also the harmonica. You had better lay in a stock of mouth harmonicas.”

“I certainly will if you can play them. They will sell readily if they are shown off. It is good you can play the banjo. We can play that and the accordion whenever we want to open up, and thus attract a crowd. Some use a bell, but music, even when it is poor, is better. Sometimes I used to sing a comic song or two for old Gulligan when we were on the road, but I didn’t much care to do it.”

“No, I wouldn’t like that,” said Matt.

“Gulligan sold lots of what are called ‘fake’ goods,” went on Andrew Dilks. “But my intention is to sell honest goods and sell them for just what they are. We will perhaps not make as much, but people will be better pleased, and they will not want to run us out of town if we ever go back to the same place again.”

“I am with you there,” said Matt heartily. “I was afraid you might want to palm off a lot of trash for first-class goods and I didn’t want to be a party to any such transaction.”

They continued to talk the subject over for fully an hour, and by that time both understood each other thoroughly, and had decided, if Matt could raise the necessary cash, to go into the scheme without delay.

“You see, we ought to do all the traveling possible before cold weather sets in,” said Andrew Dilks. “It is in the villages where the most money is to be made, especially now, when the farmers are about done harvesting and have some ready cash.”

“As I am out of work, I can start the moment I get the money,” said Matt. “And even if I don’t get that other money, I am willing to put in every cent of what I have now.”

On the following morning Matt was surprised to receive another visit from Ida Bartlett, who had eaten an unusually early breakfast so that she might come over before going to work.

“I knew you would be anxious to hear from me,” she said. “It is all right. The others are willing to let you have the money for a year at the regular bank interest, three per cent.”

“Thank you, and I’ll try to pay it back before the year is out,” returned Matt, much relieved.

“And you have arranged to go into the scheme? It is all satisfactory?”

“Yes.”

“Good! I wish you every success.”

CHAPTER VIII. AN UNEXPECTED SET-BACK

The next three days were busy ones for Matt and his newly-made partner. After they had drawn up and signed such papers as they deemed proper between themselves, they set out to look for a horse and wagon.

Andrew Dilks had cut several advertisements of bargains from the morning papers, and these they hunted up one after another.

The so-styled bargains proved to be more or less false. In nearly every instance they ran across some shrewd horse-dealer, who, under pretense of selling an outfit for a widow, or man who had left the city, tried to palm off on them an animal and wagon not worth taking away.

Late in the afternoon, however, when they were almost ready to give up and go to a regular dealer, they ran across a German baker who was selling out at a private sale.

"I vos go to Chermany next week," he explained to the two. "Mine old fadder vos dead, and he vos left me all his land and houses in Bremen. See, I vos shown you der letter from der lawyers vot have his vill got."

And he produced a large letter-head, upon which was written a dozen lines in German, which neither could read.

"Never mind that," said Andrew. "Show us your horse and wagon, and set a bottom cash price on them."

"Come dis vay."

The baker led the way around the corner to a boarding-stable, and brought forth a good, chunky brown-and-white horse, that did not look to be over six years old.

"Stand around, Billy!" he cried. "Dere he vos, chentlemen, and chust so goot a horse as der vos in New York."

"Anything the matter with him?" asked Matt, as he began an examination of the animal.

"Not a ding, sir. He vos sound as a tollar, and chentle as a lamb. I vos use him on der bread route for a year and more."

"And where is the wagon?" questioned Andrew Dilks.

"Here vos der wagon," said the baker, as he ran the vehicle out so that they might look it over.

It was a four-wheeled affair, quite large and heavy. There was one seat in the center, and before and behind this were two big boxes, each with a hinged lid. In the rear was a rack for pies and cakes. There was also a box under the seat, and a money drawer which opened with a concealed push button.

"This is just the thing for us," whispered Andrew to Matt. "For a one-horse wagon, it could not be better arranged. The running gear seems to be in good condition, too."

"Vell, vot you dinks of them?" asked the baker, after they had finished their survey.

"Where is the harness?" asked Matt.

"Here she vos, new two veeks ago, and here vos der vip, too."

"And what is the lowest you can take for the rig?" asked Andrew. "We are willing to pay spot cash, but cannot afford a fancy figure."

"I vos sold der whole dings for dree hundred dollar."

At this announcement Matt's face fell. Three hundred dollars! It was more than they had to spend for both turnout and stock.

"Three hundred dollars," repeated Andrew Dilks. "If that's the case, we can't do business with you."

"Dot's too pad. How much you gif, hey?"

“We will give you a hundred and seventy-five.”

At this announcement the German baker held up his hands in horror, and muttered a number of ejaculations in his native tongue.

“Make it two hundred and seventy-five,” he said.

“We can’t do it.”

“Den take der turnout for two hundred and fifty.”

“No, we can’t do it,” said Matt, and with a wink to Andrew Dilks, he pulled his companion toward the stable doors.

“Hold up!” shouted the baker, in alarm. “Don’t go yet, chentlemen. Make dot figure two hundred and twenty-five, and it vos more as tog cheap at dot.”

“Perhaps it is, but we can’t afford to pay it.”

“If I could haf der dime to sell, I vos got more as dot, chentlemen.”

“Perhaps so,” returned Matt. “But you haven’t got to accept our offer, you know. We’ll look around for something cheaper.”

“You vill bay cash on der spot?”

“Yes; but you must give us a free and clear bill of sale.”

“I vos do dot. Make it chust two hundred dollar.”

But Andrew Dilks had set his mind on getting a further reduction, and at last the bargain was settled, and they paid over a hundred and ninety dollars for the turnout, leaving them still ten dollars to expend upon rubber blankets and other necessary articles.

The purchase completed, they made arrangements with the boarding-stable keeper to keep the horse and wagon for them until the following Monday morning. In the meantime they procured some paint, and painted over the baker’s signs on the wagon, and then Andrew, who was a fair letterer, painted on each side of the wagon-cover the following:

THE EUREKA AUCTION COMPANY

Best and Cheapest Goods on Earth

“There, that ought to attract attention wherever we go,” said Andrew when the job was finished. “The word company makes it sound big, and we can call ourselves a company as well as not.”

On Friday and Saturday the two made a tour of the wholesale houses in New York, and Andrew expended the fifty dollars as judiciously as possible in the purchase of goods. As business was rather slow, and ready money scarce, he struck several decided bargains, especially in cutlery and musical instruments. He had all of the goods sent up to the stable, and the two worked until ten o’clock Saturday night stowing away all of the stock in their wagon.

“Now, we are all ready for the start on Monday morning,” said Andrew as the two walked away from the stable.

“Yes, but we haven’t decided where we shall go first yet,” returned Matt.

“Let us leave that until the last minute. We know about where we are going, and it doesn’t make much difference what villages we strike so long as we do the business.”

Sunday passed quickly enough for Matt. He attended church and the Sunday-school into which Ida Bartlett had introduced him, and in the evening he packed his valise with all of his worldly possessions. Ida Bartlett also came over to bid him good-by, and remained to give him such advice as he might have received from an elder sister.

Matt had arranged to meet Andrew at the stable at six o’clock sharp, and quarter of an hour before the appointed time found him on his way to the place, valise in hand.

“I’ll show Andrew that I mean to be on time,” he thought to himself, as he turned into the street upon which the stable was situated.

Suddenly he saw a crowd running up from the block below. There were at least a dozen men and boys, some of whom were shouting at the top of their lungs:

“Fire! fire!”

“Fire!” repeated Matt quickly. “I wonder where it can be?”

But hardly had he uttered the words than, happening to glance toward the stable in which their turnout was located, he saw a thick volume of smoke come pouring out of several of the upper windows.

“My gracious!” he gasped, his face blanching. “It’s that stable, and our horse and wagon with the stock still inside!”

“That place is doomed!” said a man beside Matt. “See how the fire is gaining headway! They won’t be able to save a single horse or anything else!”

CHAPTER IX. THE RESULT OF A FIRE

It was no wonder that Matt's heart was filled with dismay when he saw the stable which contained the auction outfit being thus rapidly devoured by the flames. Almost every cent he possessed was invested in the horse, wagon and stock, and if they were consumed he would be left in New York City next to penniless.

Close to where he was standing was a grocery store, and rushing into this he threw his valise on the counter.

"Keep this for me, please!" he cried to the proprietor. "I want to try to save my horse and wagon!"

And before the grocer could reply he was out of the store again, and running toward the burning stable as fast as his feet could carry him.

When he reached the front of the building, which was three stories high, and quite broad and deep, he found an excited mob of stable-hands, cab-drivers and tradespeople assembled, each trying to get inside to save his belongings.

The owner of the stable was also present, having just arrived, and was directing, or trying to direct, the movements of the highly excited ones.

"Go into the alley on the left!" he shouted. "You can get more out of the side doors. The smoke is blowing too thickly out here!"

A rush was made for the alley and Matt got into the midst of the crowd. The side doors, to which the owner of the stable had referred, were found to be securely bolted from the inside.

"Get some axes!"

"Get a log and smash in the doors!"

"Never mind that!" yelled Matt. "I'll climb through one of the windows and open the door!"

"Good for the boy!"

"Give me a boost up, somebody!"

Half a dozen willing hands raised Matt's form to one of the small side windows, and an instant later the boy's form disappeared within the smoke-laden building.

"He can't stand it in there!"

"He'll be smothered to death!"

Once inside, Matt found it advisable to crouch low down to the floor, for the smoke did, indeed, almost smother him. He could see but little, and had to feel his way out of a stall, and across the floor to where the doors he wished to open were located.

"I'm afraid our nag will be a goner!" he thought dismally. "A horse never can stand anything in the shape of a fire."

At last the doors were reached. Fortunately, he found the bolts at once, and lost not a second in drawing them from their sockets. Then he gave the doors a kick outward, and willing hands flung them far back against the side of the building. Then came a rush of men and boys, all eager to save something. For the moment it looked as if Matt would be carried from his feet.

"Here, don't knock me down!" he cried. "Remember, I opened the doors for you."

"So he did!" returned a burly cab driver. "Give the lad a show!"

And then Matt was given room. He quickly found his way through the smoke and heat to where the wagon stood, ready for the start on the road. The horse was but a few feet away snorting in alarm.

Matt had handled horses before, and he now knew just the best possible thing to do. Taking off his coat, he flung it over Billy's head, thus completely blindfolding him. Then he led the animal out of the stall, and started him toward the open doors.

"Hi, Matt, is that you?" yelled a voice close at hand.

"Yes, Andy, and I'm glad you have come. See if you can pull the wagon out."

"Can you manage Billy alone?"

"I think I can."

But Matt had his hands full, as he soon learned. Billy was not in the humor to listen and walk the way he desired. He pranced about wildly, and the boy had all he could do to keep from having his feet stepped upon.

But at last Matt managed to reach the open doors, and then he gave the horse a sharp cut on the flank, which sent him up the alley on a canter. The boy did not wait to ascertain how far Billy might continue on his way, but turned swiftly to help his partner, who was straining every nerve to budge the wagon from its resting-place.

"The floor is up-hill to the side doors!" gasped Andrew Dilks. "We can't get it out, I'm afraid!"

"We must get it out!" returned Matt desperately. "Let me get hold of the shafts and you push. And be quick, for the floor overhead looks as if it was going to give away at any minute!"

Andy did as Matt directed, and together they strained to their utmost. At first the wagon, heavily loaded, refused to budge, but then it moved slowly from its place against the wall.

"Hurrah! we are getting it!" cried Andrew Dilks. "Be sure and guide it right, Matt. Can you see, or is the smoke too thick for you?"

"I can see; but – hold on, or we'll smash into that other wagon."

Matt held back, and allowed another wagon to pass out first. In the meantime, the burning brands from overhead were coming down livelier than ever. One caught Matt on the left arm, burning the flesh slightly, and another landed on Andrew Dilks' neck, causing the auctioneer to howl with sudden pain.

Outside could be heard the whistle of fire-engines and the clanging of hook-and-ladder truck bells. Then came a heavy stream of water from somewhere behind them, nearly lifting Andy from his feet.

But the way was now once more clear, and Matt yelled to his partner to push. Both exerted every nerve, and ten seconds later the wagon rolled out of the open doors, and was guided by Matt up the alley.

"Thank goodness we are out!" panted the boy, as they brought the wagon to a standstill in the midst of half a dozen carriages. "Another minute in there would just about have settled me."

"Yes, it was getting dangerous," returned Andy, with a serious shake of his head, as he tied his handkerchief over his burned neck. "Hark! what is that?"

His words were called forth by a dull boom, which made the soft dirt in the alley quake.

"The upper flooring has come down!" shouted several in the crowd.

"They won't be able to get any more stuff out now!"

"We were just in time," remarked Matt, with a shiver. "Supposing we had been in there when that flooring, with all the burning hay and those sleighs that were stored there, came down!"

"We ought to be very thankful, not only for that, but for being able to save our wagon and our horse. If they had been burned up we would have been next door to beggars!"

"By the way, where is Billy?" cried Matt. "I don't see him anywhere around."

"I'm sure I don't know."

"Stay here with the wagon and I'll hunt him up," replied Matt; and he started off without further delay.

The alleyway had now become so choked up with vehicles, horses, and people that it was with great difficulty that he fought his way through the dense mass out to the next street. Once here, he looked up and down for the horse, but could see nothing of him.

“Did you see anything of a brown and white horse around here?” he asked of a stable-hand standing near.

“Yes; just saw him gallop up the street,” was the reply. “You had better jump on a horse-car if you want to catch him.”

“You saw him run clean out of sight, then?”

“Yes; he must be halfway up to Harlem by this time.”

Matt waited to hear no more, but boarded the first horse-car which came along bound north. He took a position on the front platform, and as they moved along kept his eyes open for a sight of the animal in which he owned a half-interest.

Ten blocks had been passed, and the boy was beginning to grow anxious, when, chancing to look over the fence of a small yard adjoining a blacksmith shop, he saw a horse standing tied to a post. A second look convinced him that it was Billy, and he at once leaped from the moving car and hurried toward the place.

“Well, sir, what can I do for you?” asked the blacksmith, a tall, heavy-set fellow, as he left his bellows, where he had been blowing up the fire.

“I’ll take my horse, please,” returned Matt.

“Your horse? Which horse is that?”

“The runaway you just caught.”

“I haven’t any runaway,” returned the blacksmith boldly.

“What?” cried the boy in amazement. “Why, of course you have. He is tied to the post in the yard.”

“No runaway here.”

“I mean the brown and white horse.”

“That horse was just left here to be shod.”

For the moment Matt was too dumfounded to speak.

“To be shod?” he said at last. “Who left him here?”

“A colored man. I don’t know his name.”

“But he is my horse, and he doesn’t need shoeing.”

“I don’t know anything about that,” returned the blacksmith darkly. “He was left here and that’s all I know about it. You’ll have to hunt up the colored man, and fix it up with him if you want the horse.”

CHAPTER X. ON THE ROAD AT LAST

Had the blacksmith spoken with more real concern, Matt would have believed what he said, but there was that in the fellow's manner which tended to make the boy suspicious.

"How long ago was it that the colored man left the horse?" he asked, after a pause.

"Not more than an hour ago."

"An hour?"

"About that, as near as I can remember. I've been rather busy this morning."

"That horse did not get away until about fifteen minutes ago," returned Matt coldly.

"Oh, you must be mistaken," returned the blacksmith smoothly.

"No, I am not mistaken," replied Matt, and his tones began to grow sharper. "He just got away from me, after I rescued him from a burning stable. He is my horse, and I intend to take him away."

As Matt spoke he crossed the blacksmith shop to where a doorway led to the little yard beyond.

"Hold up there!" cried the blacksmith roughly. "You are not going out there!"

"Yes, I am, and you can't stop me," returned Matt spiritedly. "I own that horse, or at least I own a half-interest in him, and if you dare to molest me you'll get into trouble."

"Will I?" sneered the blacksmith.

"Yes, you will. If you stop me, I'll call in the police."

At these words the blacksmith's face fell. Evidently he had not anticipated that a mere boy would take such a decided stand.

"Yes, but that colored man –" he began, more mildly.

"If there was a colored man in the case, you can explain matters to suit yourself. As for me, I believe you caught the horse yourself and wanted to do what you could to keep him."

"How dare you!" cried the blacksmith, with a threatening gesture. "Do you take me for a thief?"

"Never mind what I take you for. That is my horse, and I am going to take him away."

And undaunted by the blacksmith's manner, Matt marched out into the yard, and untied Billy, who was covered with sweat, and still trembling from fright.

"It's playing a bold game you are," grumbled the man of the anvil, as the boy led the horse through the blacksmith-shop toward the front door. "I reckon you think you are mighty smart."

"One has to be smart to deal with such a man as you!" retorted Matt. "Had you done the fair thing at the start, I might have rewarded you for stopping the horse, but as it is, I don't believe you deserve a cent."

And with this parting shot, which, by the way was fully deserved by the dishonest blacksmith, Matt sprang upon Billy's back and rode off.

When the boy reached the alleyway again he found that the fire department had gotten the fire under control, and that much of the crowd of people had gone on about their business. In the space around the wagon several cabmen were busy getting out their horses and cabs, all thankful that their turnouts and animals had not been consumed by the conflagration, which had all but leveled the great stable to the ground.

Andy was seated on the wagon, anxiously awaiting his return. While the two harnessed Billy into place, Matt told his partner of the trouble he had experienced.

"That blacksmith meant to bluff you off and keep the horse," said the auctioneer. "If you hadn't come back soon I would have gone off after you."

"Is the wagon damaged?" questioned Matt anxiously.

“Not in the slightest. I have examined everything carefully. And the stock is O. K. too. We can start off just as if nothing had happened.”

“But we haven’t decided yet as to just where we are to go,” returned the boy.

“Oh, that reminds me!” cried Andy. “I meant to tell you before, but the fire drove it clean out of my head. I saw a fellow yesterday who is going to strike out up through Harlem to-morrow. He was going to take the very route I had thought out. So I was going to propose that we take the ferry over to Jersey City, and strike out through New Jersey first.”

“Well, one way will suit me just as well as another,” returned Matt. “So New Jersey it is.”

In less than five minutes later they were ready to start. The owner of the stable, nearly distracted over his loss, was around, and into his hand they thrust the money they owed him. Then Matt procured his valise, and without waiting to be questioned by the police and the firemen any more than was necessary, they drove off.

“Not a very favorable start,” was Andy’s comment, as the scene of the conflagration was left behind. “But they say ‘a bad beginning makes a good ending,’ so we ought not to lose heart.”

“Lose heart!” cried Matt lightly. “No, indeed! I am thankful we are able to start, even though we do look like a couple of tramps,” he added with a grin.

“We’ll take a wash-up when we are across the ferry. We’ll have lots of time, for we won’t be able to do any business to-day. We must get at least twenty or thirty miles from New York before we attempt to open up.”

The drive down to Cortlandt street ferry was an uneventful one through the crowded streets. A boat had just come in when they reached the ferry-house, and after paying the fare, they drove upon this, and were soon on their way to the New Jersey shore.

“Do you know the road?” asked Matt, as they tied up upon an open street on the other side, and went into the great ferry-house to wash and brush up.

“I know the roads through Newark and Elizabeth,” returned Andrew Dilks. “I think we had better strike along the New Jersey Central Railroad as far as Bound Brook or Somerville, and then strike through Flemington, and across to the Delaware River, and so on into Pennsylvania.”

“That suits me,” returned Matt.

It was exactly half-past ten o’clock when they left the vicinity of the ferry in Jersey City, and moved off toward the old plank road, so called, which leads to Newark, five miles distant. Both were in excellent spirits, despite the thrilling experience through which they had passed.

“I have here a list of all the articles we have in stock,” said Andy, as he set Billy on a brisk trot. “You had better study it. The prices are also put down, and of course, we never will auction a thing off for less, unless it is unsalable otherwise and we wish to dispose of it.”

“But supposing a thing is put up and people won’t bid above a certain figure?”

“We will buy it in ourselves, or get some one to bid for us, or else refuse to take a bid under a certain sum.”

Matt took the sheet of paper, and resting on the box in the back of the wagon, began to study it carefully, and so absorbed did he become that he did not notice when Newark was reached, and was only aroused when Andy drew up in front of a restaurant and asked him if he did not feel like having some dinner.

“You can just bet I do!” exclaimed Matt. “The fire and the drive have made me as hungry as a bear.”

The restaurant was not a very large place, and but few customers were present. They ordered what they wished, and it was soon brought to them.

“I didn’t want to go to one of those high-toned places where they charge big prices,” observed Andy, as he began to fall to. “We can’t afford to cut a spread until we see how our venture is going to pan out.”

“You are right there,” returned Matt. “As it is, I think our supply of cash is getting mighty low.”

“I notice the knives and forks are rather rusty here,” went on Andy. “I wonder if I can’t sell the proprietor some table cutlery. We have some on board that is both cheap and good.”

“I’d try it by all means,” cried Matt heartily.

So when the meal was concluded Andrew Dilks walked up to the proprietor, who was also cashier, and paid their bill. Then he asked the man if he did not think some new knives and forks would be appreciated by his customers.

“I have no doubt but what they would be,” returned the restaurant keeper. “But they cost too much money, and times are rather hard.”

“I can sell you some cheap,” returned Andy, and he mentioned his price.

The restaurant man smiled.

“Too cheap to be good,” he said. “I must have some that will stand the wear.”

“Let me show you them. Matt, go out and bring in a few dozen of the No. 23 knives and forks, and also some of the X23 spoons,” went on Andy briskly.

Matt at once complied, and his partner continued to talk to the restaurant keeper, thus keeping his attention. When the articles were brought Andy invited the prospective purchaser to make a thorough examination of them.

“Send a couple down to the kitchen and have them scoured. They are triple-plated, and will stand it,” he added.

Andy’s business-like way pleased the restaurant keeper, and after a little more talk he purchased three dozen each of knives and forks and two dozen spoons.

The price was paid over, and both Andy and Matt were congratulating themselves on their good luck, when a man who had been standing near the window of the restaurant peering in stepped inside and tapped both on the shoulder.

“I would like to see your license for selling,” he said sternly.

CHAPTER XI. HARSH TREATMENT

Both Matt and Andy were considerably taken aback by the unexpected demand of the stranger. When they had come to Newark they had not expected to sell anything, and therefore had not given the question of a license a single thought.

“Excuse me, but I am sorry to state we have no license,” returned Andy frankly. “We did not expect to make any sales here, but were going straight through to Elizabeth.”

“Very likely,” sneered the man, who was a special officer attached to the police department. “But I saw you make the sale, and you must come with me.”

“Oh, Andy, let us pay the license,” exclaimed Matt, in a low voice, as visions of a week or a month in jail floated before his mind. It would be simply terrible to be locked up.

“That’s what we will have to do,” returned Andy, who had been through such a predicament before, and was not, therefore, greatly alarmed. “Don’t be afraid; we will come out all right. Only it will cost us two or three dollars.”

“I don’t care if it costs fifty – I don’t want to run afoul of the law,” returned Matt bluntly.

“Nor do I,” returned his partner.

“Well, what do you say?” demanded the officer sharply.

“We will go with you and pay the license,” replied Andy.

“All right.”

“Will you ride with us?”

“Don’t care if I do,” said the officer, and all three hopped on the wagon seat, and Matt drove off.

The office where licenses could be procured was at the City Hall, on Broad Street. When they turned into that thoroughfare Matt uttered a cry of surprise.

“What a broad street!” he exclaimed, as he surveyed it.

“It is one of the broadest in any eastern city,” returned the officer, who seemed inclined to be more friendly now that they had shown a disposition to do the right thing.

Inside of the City Hall they were compelled to wait near half an hour before they could procure their license. Then they were asked for how long a term they desired it.

“For to-day only,” returned Andy, and so it was made out and as quickly paid for.

“Oh, but I’m glad we are out of that scrape so easily!” murmured Matt, as the two walked back to their wagon. “I was afraid they would lock us up for ten days or a month.”

“They would have their hands full locking up all the peddlers who try to sell goods without a license,” laughed Andy. “All they care for is the money.”

“We will have to pay in almost every town we go, won’t we?”

“Yes, every town. Some places charge so much that we won’t try to sell in them. I’ll make it a point after this to find out about a license as soon as we enter a place.”

“Yes, do that by all means,” returned Matt, much relieved.

Now that they had a license good for the balance of the day, Matt moved that they remain in Newark and try to make more sales.

“Let us try all the restaurants,” he said. “We may be able to sell more of those knives and forks and spoons.”

“I am willing,” said Andy. “This isn’t exactly auctioneering, but it pays just as well, so we have no cause to grumble.”

They turned back into the business portion of the city and drove along slowly until two restaurants, directly opposite to each other, were reached.

“I’ll take one and you can take the other,” said Andy. “Be sure and sell all you can,” he added, with a laugh.

Matt nodded, and with half a dozen samples under his arm, he entered the restaurant on the right.

It must be confessed that the boy’s heart beat rather fast. This was the first time he had endeavored to effect a sale solely on his own responsibility. Moreover, Andy was pitted against him, trying to sell goods in a similar way to similar people.

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