

A District Messenger Boy and a Necktie Party

James Otis

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by James Otis
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A DISTRICT MESSENGER BOY AND A NECKTIE PARTY

BY

JAMES OTIS

AUTHOR OF "TOBY TYLER," "TEDDY AND CARROTS,"
"JENNY WREN'S BOARDING-HOUSE," "THE BOY CAPTAIN," "LITTLE
JOE," ETC., ETC.

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A DISTRICT MESSENGER BOY.

CHAPTER I.
UNWILLING PASSENGERS.

"What is your name, boy?"

"Joe Curtis, sir."

"And your number? "

" Two hundred and ninety-seven."

" Very well, now listen to what I say, and see that you do exactly as I tell you. I am going to Providence by the Sound steamer that sails in an hour and a half; take these tickets, go to the office of the boat, get the key of the stateroom I have engaged and paid for, and put these satchels in it."

"Yes, sir."

"Then wait near the gangway of the steamer until I come, for I shall probably be late, as I have to take a sick friend with me. Be sure to have the room ready, so that I can have him carried directly from the carriage to his berth."

" I will wait for you, sir."

" What are the rates?"

"For an hour and a half, ninety cents, sir, and car fare extra if you want me to get there in a hurry."

" Very well, here is a dollar, and see that you do exactly as I have told you."

Joe touched his cap, took the two valises that the gentleman pointed out to him in one corner of the office, and, staggering under the heavy weight, started for the nearest elevated railroad station. Joe was scarcely large enough to carry the valises; but, when he succeeded in getting a situation in the messenger service, he knew that he would have plenty of hard work to do, and was fully prepared for it. Besides, this acting the part of porter was by no means so difficult a job as some that had been assigned to him in the past six weeks, and he went about it as philosophically as if he had been a man, instead of a boy only twelve years old.

Arrived at the dock, he had no trouble in getting the stateroom key, since he had the proper tickets, and, after caring for the baggage, it was only necessary to wait near the gang-plank until his employer should appear.

It was by no means hard work for Joe to wait for the gentleman; in the bustle and confusion everywhere around him he found plenty to occupy his mind, and, forgetting how hard he had struggled to get the baggage down there, he thought he had been particularly fortunate in being assigned to the work.

The moments went by so fast that, when the last bell sounded, and Joe heard the cry of "All ashore that's going," he could hardly believe it possible that he had been on the boat more than an hour, waiting for the gentleman and his sick friend.

" He's got to come pretty soon, or else his stateroom won't do him much good," Joe said to himself as he stood close by the gang-plank with the key in his hand, ready to deliver it without delay.

But although carriage after carriage was driven up just in time for its occupants to get on the boat, Joe's employer did not come, and the boy began to understand that, unless he made some decided move at once, he would be carried away.

"He told me to look out for the baggage until he came; but I don't

s'pose he meant for me to go to Providence if he didn't come."

The sailors were pulling the gang-plank ashore, and Joe saw that his time was indeed limited. Since he had been ordered to care for the baggage until the gentleman came, he had no idea of leaving it on the steamer, neither did he propose to make a trip to Providence.

"I'll get the things out of the room, an' then wait on the pier," he said to himself as he ran up to the saloon where the stateroom was located.

There were a large number of passengers on the boat, and, despite all Joe's efforts, he could not get through the crowd quickly. He struggled and pushed, even at the risk of incurring the displeasure of those gentlemen who were in his way, until he reached the stateroom. To get the valises out after he was once there was but the work of a few moments, and then he had another difficult task to reach the main deck.

When he did get there, breathless and excited, he saw that his efforts had been in vain, for the steamer had already left the dock, and was so far out in the stream that; unless he had been Mr. Giant-Stride of fairy-tale fame, he could not have leaped ashore.

" Well, this is nice!" exclaimed Joe, as he stood with a valise in each hand, looking at the dock, on which he fancied he could see the man who had been the cause of his involuntary voyage. "Now, what'll I do?"

He stood looking about him in doubt and perplexity, uncertain whether to go to the captain of the boat, and demand that he be landed at once, or to explain the situation to some of the passengers, in the vain hope that they might be able to aid him, when he heard the sound of sobs close 'beside him.

" Hello! did you get carried away, too?" he asked, as he saw a boy, not more than eight or nine years old, crying bitterly. "Come here, sonny, an' tell me. what the matter is, for it looks as' if you an' I were in the same scrape:"

"They're takin' me away from mamma an' papa, an' I'll just jump overboard," was sonny's answer.

"Oh, don't get like that," said Joe, soothingly, as he placed the valises carefully in one corner, and took the child by the hand to reassure him. "They ar'n't to blame, 'cause they told everybody to go on shore' that wanted to, an' we didn't go."

" I couldn't," sobbed the boy, "he held me, an' when I cried he struck me in the face."

"Who did?"

"The man that made me come here with him. Mamma let me go out in the street to play if I wouldn't go away from the block; but that man came up an' asked me if I did not want a real live pony, an' I did, an' I

went with him to get it"

"An' you forgot what you promised your mother," said Joe, sagely.

" Yes, 'cause he said it was only a little ways off; but when we'd walked two blocks, I wanted to go home, 'and he told me he'd cut my throat wide open if I said anything; and then we come here."

"Why, he's up an' stole you, that's what he's done," said Joe, as, with his hands deep in his pockets, he stood contemplating the boy, whose trouble was so much greater than his.

"Oh, dear!" wailed the child, as he hid his head in the corner, and gave way to his grief.

"I'm goin' right straight home, an' I won't stay here."

Joe was touched by the boy's distress; he forgot his own troubles, which were light as compared to the little fellow's, and did his best to comfort him.

"Now, see' here,-what's your name, though?"

"Ned."

" Well, Ned, you couldn't get home now, so you'd better stop crying, an' we'll see if we can't fix it in some way. Where's the man?"

" He went down-stairs when the boat started, an' he told me he'd beat me black an' blue if I spoke to anybody while he was gone."

"An' prob'ly he would," said Joe. "If he dared to reg'larly steal you he'd dare to do anything else; but I'll get away before he comes up, an' I'll go an' tell the captain of the boat. Then t rather think the man will wish he'd never'd said anything about a pony, for he'll be arrested."

" No, no, don't! " cried Ned, "he'd be sure to kill me if you should do that, an' then what good would it do me? "

"But you hain't goin' to let him carry you off, be you?"

"Oh, I don't know," said Ned, and he began to cry piteously again, while Joe tried to soothe him by wiping away the big tears with the cuff of his jacket.

"I think you'd better let me tell the captain," he said.

"I can't, 'cause he knows another man on the boat, an' one of them would be sure to kill me. Why won't you let me just go with you?"

"I would if I knew where I was goin'; but you see, I'm most as bad off as you are;" and then Joe told him of his misfortune in having become an involuntary passenger, concluding his story by saying, "An' I've got a mother that'll feel just as bad as yours will; it will be worse for "her, too, 'cause she says now that father's dead I'm all that she's got, an' every cent I make I carry home to her, 'cause she has to work hard to get money to pay the rent."

Joe could understand very readily, by Ned's clothing, that their homes were widely different. Had it not been for his uniform, the messenger boy would have worn a very shabby suit of clothes, while Ned was not only dressed expensively, but he wore what was, to Joe, the very height of extravagance - a gold ring.

"Even if you don't know where you're goin', take me with you," said Ned. "If you'd help me, I'd try to get away from that man, - there he comes now; don't let him whip me."

"I'll go off, so's he won't know we've been talkin', an' just as soon as he leaves again I'll come back," said he.

He had just time enough to dart behind a pile of baggage, before the man came up, and he needed but one glance to convince him that Ned had good cause for fear. The man's face was so brutal looking, that even he began to think perhaps it might not be advisable to appeal to the captain of the steamer, lest the story should not be believed, and he be called to an account for interfering.

The valises were still where he had left them, and, marching boldly out, but feeling quite the reverse of what he tried to assume, he took the baggage, not heeding the pleading look Ned gave him, and went to the stateroom, where he remained some time, trying to make up his mind what he could do to aid the boy who had appealed to him. He did not for a moment entertain the idea of leaving him with that man. Suddenly, what seemed to be a very brilliant idea came to him, and he walked down-stairs on to the main deck again, leaving the door of the stateroom unlocked.

The man was seated by Ned's side, smoking, and Joe went from one place to another, keeping the couple in sight all the while, until he saw him walk away with a companion who spoke to him, and looked quite as detestable as he.

Joe made sure that the two had gone into the lower cabin, and, running quickly to where Ned sat, he said, "Come up-stairs with me as fast as you can, an' I'll show you what to do." Then, taking the little fellow by the hand, he hurried to the upper deck, not looking around, and hardly daring to breathe until they were in the stateroom, with the door securely fastened and the blind of the window closed.

"There!" he exclaimed, triumphantly, in a whisper, "I guess this fixes Mr. Man, an' when he tries to find you he'll think that stealin' boys hain't so easy as he thought it was."

"But he'll come up here to get me," said Ned, hoping that there was an opportunity for him to escape, yet frightened at the step he had taken.

"He may come up-stairs; but how can he find you? See here, Ned, I've got two tickets for the passage in my pocket, an' the room's been paid for by the man I told you about. Now we can keep in here till the boat stops, and then I guess we can give him the slip; but I hain't thought yet how we either of us can get home."

"But s'posen he comes right up here to the door?"

"He w6n't do that. Can't you see, Ned, that he don 't know anything more about this room than he does of any other? We're all right for awhile anyhow; but I guess we'll be pretty hungry, 'cause we can't get anything to eat."

" I don't care 'bout that, if he don't get hold of me again," said Ned, growing bright and happy as he realized his temporary safety.

The boys examined the tickets Joe had, looked curiously at the snug little cabin, wondered what the man would say or do when he could not find Ned, and, finally, the first novelty of the situation having passed away, they talked of their homes.

It was the most unwise thing they could have done, so far as peace of mind was concerned, for at the thoughts of their mothers waiting and watching for them, both broke down. Ned lay down in the berth without a thought of hiding his grief; but Joe, who considered it his duty, in his position of protector to the younger boy, to appear unconcerned, was obliged to stand by the window in order to cry without being seen or heard, and he wiped his eyes with the curtain until his cheeks were stained blue and green from the dye of the fabric, in a sorrowfully ridiculous fashion.

However it happened, neither of the boys quite understood, but, despite their deep sorrow, they both fell asleep, shortly after Joe lay down by the side of Ned to comfort him, and did not awaken until morning. The sun was streaming in through the slats of the blinds, the throbbing of the engine was stilled, and everything betokened the end of the voyage.

Neither of the boys had undressed, for they had anticipated a long, dreary evening during which they would be very hungry, and Joe had fully intended to walk around the boat for the purpose of learning what Ned's enemy was doing. They had not laid any plans, and in this Joe felt that they had been culpable, since, now that they were at liberty to go on shore, neither had an idea of what course to pursue.

"While you are washing your face I will go out and see if that man is around anywhere," said Joe, finally, "an' I'll lock the door and take the key with me so's there won't be any chance of his gettin' in while I'm gone."

Ned did not much like being left alone, but he made no objections, since he could readily see that it was of the highest importance that they should learn if the man and his companion were watching for them.

Joe went into every portion of the boat in which passengers are allowed; but without seeing either Ned's captor or his companion. Had he been on deck when the steamer arrived at Newport, he would have seen the two men land there, after searching vainly for the boy they had stolen, much as if they feared they might be called to an account for what they had done. Of this, of course, Joe knew nothing; and when he failed to see either of the men, he naturally feared they were waiting on shore in the hope of catching Ned as he landed.

It was but seven o'clock, and as a number of the passengers were yet on board, the stewards had paid no attention to the stateroom the boys occupied; otherwise an explanation might have been made which would have prevented both the young passengers' much trouble.

"It's morning, Ned, an' I s'pose we're in Providence," said Joe, as he came back to the stateroom where the child was waiting, in fear and trembling, the result of his trip on deck. "I can't see anything of the men, an' perhaps if we go on shore now they won't catch us. We've got to 'take these valises, for the man told me to watch 'em, an' that means that I've got to keep right side of 'em."

Ned manfully took hold of one side of the heaviest piece of baggage, and with anxious hearts the two left the room. At the gangway the children were stopped by the man whose duty it was to collect the tickets. He looked at the small boys with the large valises, curiously; but as Joe gave him the two pieces of pasteboard that entitled them to first cabin passages, the officer could do no less than allow them to land.

Even though they were supposed to be in Providence, they were some distance from the city, as they learned when they were off the pier, and Joe said:

"Now, Ned, I'm sorry to make you do it, but we've got to walk fast if we don't want those men to catch us," and that was sufficient to induce the boy to do his best.

But no matter how frightened a boy may be, he cannot walk very far on a hot morning, without breakfast, more especially if he has had no supper the night previous; and some time before they were near the city, both Ned and Joe were obliged to rest.

As' a matter of course, they had seen nothing of the men, and with the feeling of freedom came the question which should have been settled the night before, - that of where they should go.

"I declare, I don't know what we will do," said Joe, in answer to Ned, and then he chewed a piece of straw, vigorously, as if by that means he hoped to be aided in arriving at some satisfactory conclusion. " You see, the trouble is that we've got all this baggage to lug 'round, when it's about as much as we can do to get along ourselves."

"Why don't you leave the things somewhere? You never can find the man that owns 'em, even if you carry them all the way back to New York," said little Ned, sensibly.

" That's so, bub," said Joe, "but all the same, you see he told me to take care of them, an' I've got to do it, or else they'll blame me at the office."

Just then an express wagon passed, which suggested to Joe a very simple way of disposing of his burden.

"I'll tell you what we can do," he said, as he started to his feet quickly, while his face lighted up with pleasure at the idea. " We'll walk along until we come to an express office, an' then we'll just send the valises on to where I work. I know we can do that, for last week

somebody sent two trunks there, an' the manager had to pay the bill for bringing them."

Unfortunately, it never occurred to Joe that it also would be possible to get money sufficient to pay for the passage home by telegraphing to the manager of the office.

"We've got a dollar," he said, as they trudged along, the valises seemingly growing heavier each moment, "and jest as soon as we get rid of these we'll get something to eat."

At the express office the clerk took the baggage and gave Joe a receipt for it without unnecessary conversation. If he had not been so busy he might have asked some questions, and thus the boys would have been advised as to the proper course to pursue; but as it was, they walked out, little thinking how much they might have learned, and rejoicing that they were freed from a heavy burden.

After they had made a very satisfactory breakfast on a pie; which Joe bought for the small sum of ten cents, in consideration of the fact that it was not as fresh as a first-class pie should be, they walked in the direction of the wharves as a first step towards learning how they should get home.

It surely seemed as if they had been singularly fortunate in taking this step, for they had gone hardly more than a block when they met a boy about ten years old, who appeared to know all about it. It was not a difficult matter to make his acquaintance, for he met their advances considerably more than half-way, and in a few moments the three were comfortably seated on some barrels near the pier, discussing the situation.

A DISTRICT MESSENGER BOY.

CHAPTER II.
HOME AGAIN.

"You see you have to go up that way to get to New York,!" said the boy, pointing with an air of wisdom, "an' if you fellers want to get home real bad, I'll carry you there tomorrow myself in a boat."

"How long would it take you? " asked Joe, just a trifle doubtful as to whether this boy could do as much as he said he could.

"Only two or three hours if we have a fair wind."

"But we was all night comin' down in the steamer," remarked Joe, quickly.

"That's nothin'," said the boy, contemptuously, "for this boat I'm goin' to take you in can sail more'n four times as fast as any steamer you ever saw. Why, she sailed right around Tom Stevens's boat the other day, an' there wasn't any wind at all. I tell you what it is, just you come up here with me an' see her, then you'll know what she can do."

There was no reason why the boys should not accept the offer, since they had plenty of time at their disposal, and they started at once.

"What's your name?" asked Joe, thinking that perhaps it might be as well to call the boy by his right name, as to be obliged to attract his attention by "I say," or "look here."

"Bartholomew West," was the prompt reply, as the boy looked around much as if he expected they had heard of him, and would recognize the name. at once. Not seeing the flush of joy he had expected would lighten up the faces of his acquaintances when they knew who he was, he walked on ahead, much as if he were angry, until they arrived at the end of the street at the water's edge.

Bartholomew pointed to a beautiful little yacht that was riding at anchor a short distance from the shore, and said, in a tone of triumph:

"That's the boat!"

Joe and Ned stood looking at her with such undisguised admiration that Bartholomew seemed willing to forgive their ignorance in not knowing him, and at once entered into a detailed account of what the yacht had done in the way of sailing.

"Do you s'pose you could manage her?" asked Joe. "You see I don't know anything about boats, an' of course this little shaver here don't."

"Manage her? Why, I could sail a whole ship all alone if I wanted to," was the confident reply. "Now you fellers be ready just as soon as it's light to-morrow mornin', an' we'll start."

"Then you'll have to come back alone," and Joe began to fear that they were accepting too much from this new acquaintance, who must belong to some important family in the city since he was the owner of such a beautiful craft.

"Well, I hain't sure but I shall stay in New York after I get there, an' if I do I'll give you fellows lots of sails in the boat. You see I'm-"

Bartholomew had assumed a confidential tone, much as if he were about to impart some important secret; but evidently concluded not to, since he stopped suddenly, and looked as if he had already betrayed too much.

"Why can't we go now?" asked Ned, who was growing more and more homesick each moment.

"We can't start until to-morrow morning," said Bartholomew, decidedly, "'cause we couldn't get the boat till then. You see some of the men will be aboard of her pretty soon now."

"Couldn't get the boat?" repeated Joe, in surprise. "Why can't you have her whenever you want her, if she's yours?"

"Well- well - you see some other fellers are going to have her to-

day," said the boy, in confusion.

"If she was my boat I wouldn't lend her to anybody," said Ned, gazing at the beautiful yacht.

"I have to sometimes.," said Bartholomew; "but we can get her to-morrow mornin' if we're down here early enough."

It never occurred to Joe that his new acquaintance intended to steal the yacht; he had no idea but that the boy owned her, although it did seem a little queer that he did not offer to take them on board then. "But what'll we do all dayan' to-night?" he asked, finally. "We hain't got but ninety cents, an' -"

"Ninety cents!" exclaimed the yacht-owner. "Have you fellers got ninety cents?"

Joe explained how it happened that they had that amount, and Master West was so delighted that he acted very much as if he wanted to embrace them. "You stay right with me," he said, as he took each by the arm in an affectionate manner, walking with them directly away from the water. "I'll show you where you can sleep, an' nobody won't ever find you. Now come. up with me, so's we can get what we want."

"What we want?"

"Why, yes, if we're goin' to sail from here to New York we've got to have some things to eat; so we'll go up an' get some candy, an' some peanuts, an' crackers, an' a lot of things."

Joe was not just certain whether or no it was wise for him to spend his money, although it did seem as if it was his duty to do so since Bartholomew was going to take them home.

He did as the owner of the yacht proposed, spending half of his money in the purchase of such dainties as Master West fancied, and then, in order to see if they had been cheated, as Bartholomew proposed, they sat down on a doorstep to test the goods.

It seemed to Joe as if Master West ate a much larger proportion of the articles he had purchased than was strictly necessary in order to learn whether they were as they had been represented, since more than half the stock had been consumed before the question was decided. Of course Ned and Joe ate some of the dainties; but they only tasted of them, while Bartholomew had a regular feast, and only stopped when, by eating as much as possible, he had lost his appetite for such things..

After this repast was ended, and the remainder of the eatables packed away in Joe's and Ned's pockets, Bartholomew appeared to have lost his desire to show his new acquaintances around the city; he still said that he would carry them to New York on the following morning, but he seemed to think that they should be able to care for themselves until then.

"I've got to lay 'round so's to find out whether anybody's goin' to be on the boat this evenin'," he said, "an' you fellers had better wait on

the wharf awhile. Perhaps we can all sleep on board the boat to-night, an' if we can, I'll come back for you and take you aboard."

"Where are you going now?" asked Joe.

"Over near where the boat is."

"Why can't we go with you?"

"It wouldn't do, 'cause somebody might see you, an' then they would know what we was up to."

"What if they should?" asked Joe, quickly, beginning to think that the yacht-owner did not appear to have many rights on board of his own vessel. "Can't you take your boat when you want to?"

"Oh, I'll tell you all about it to-morrow, after we're on the way to New York," said Master West. "You stay right around the wharf till I come back."

Before either Joe or Ned could prevent him, he had darted away in the direction of the yacht, leaving his two friends at whose expense he had just been feasting to look out for themselves.

"Do you know, Ned, I don't believe that feller owns the whole of the boat, 'cause he acts so queer about her, an' I'm almost sorry we spent that money for what we did. You see, it belongs to the office, and when I get back an' tell the manager that I had to spend it to get something to eat, he'll take it out of my wages."

"I wish we was home, an' my papa would give you the money to pay back," said Ned, warmly. "Oh, dear, have we got to stay here a whole night?"

"I'm 'fraid we have, Ned, an' it makes me feel awful bad to think about mother. She must be about crazy 'cause I don't come home, an' as likely as not the manager thinks I run away with the money."

"My papa had gone away, so he don't know that I didn't come home," said Ned, with quivering lip; "but my mamma is feeling as bad as yours is."

"Yes, Ned, but we won't talk about it now, 'cause it don't make me feel very good. We'll wait awhile, an' if that West boy don't come, we'll start off somewhere, 'cause I'd rather walk than stay 'round here."

"Don't you s'pose the captain of the steamboat would let us go back, if we should tell him what made us come here? I'm sure my mother would pay him when we got home," said Ned.

"Do you s'pose she'd have money enough? You know it would cost much as two or three dollars apiece."

"Course she's got enough. Why, sir, if she wanted as much as twenty dollars she could

get it, my mother could."

"Then let's go right down to the steamboat an' see if they'll take us, - you are a sensible little chap," and Joe started to his feet; but he stopped, suddenly, as a second thought came to him. "It wouldn't do to go, 'cause the man that stole you is waitin' round there, prob'ly, an' he'd catch you sure."

"Oh, dear, I'd forgot all about him," said the child.

Joe made no reply; seated on a pile of boards, with his chin in his hands, he gave himself up to the most gloomy reflections, so hopeless did the case, seem. He had remained in this sorrowful attitude some moments, with Ned silent by his side, when both were startled by a shout:

"Hello, there I why hain't you up to the office?"

Joe sprang to his feet. He saw just behind him a boy about his own age, in the uniform of a district messenger. "Why, you hain't one of our boys, .are you? Where did you come from?" continued the newcomer.

Joe looked first at the uniform and then at the boy that wore it, as if uncertain whether he could trust the evidence of his own senses. " Well," said the messenger, "what's the matter with .you now? Does it overcome you very much to see me?"

" Where did you come from?" asked Joe.

"Come from? Why, I belong here. What are you doin'?' Where do you work?"

" In New York."

" New York!" exclaimed the boy, and he uttered a prolonged whistle. "You don't mean to say that you was sent way down here with a message, do you?"

"See here," Joe made up his mind in an instant, "I'm in an awful bad scrape, an' so is this little feller; sit down here an' I'll tell you all about it."

"All right; but I guess we'd better get behind those barrels, 'cause if anybody should see me they'd think I ought to go back to the office, even if I have got half an hour off."

A convenient place for conversation was found behind some barrels, where the two were almost completely screened from view, and then Joe told the story; but not without many interruptions in the way of exclamations of surprise, almost incredulity, from his brother messenger. He concluded by telling the story of their meeting with Master West, and his offer to take them to New York in his yacht.

"Was it Bart West that you met?" asked the boy.

"His name was Bartholomew."

"An' where is the boat? "

Joe explained, as well as he was able, the locality in which they had seen the yacht, and the messenger said, quickly:

"Well, you don't want to have anything to do with that feller, 'cause he's a reg'lar duffer. He's too lazy to work, an' he hangs 'round the city like a loafer. That boat hain't his at all. I know who owns her. Bart West hain't got money enough to buy one end of a punt. He was goin' to steal the yacht, that's what he was goin' to do, if he was goin' to do anything, an' if you had gone off with him, you'd got into a pile of trouble."

Quite naturally, both Joe and Ned were alarmed at the narrow escape they had had, for they would have gone with Bart West without a question.

"Well, how are you goin' to get home?" asked the Providence boy.

"That's just what we don't know. We don't dare to go to the steamer, 'cause that man might catch Ned again. I'm afraid we'll have to walk, if that West boy don't own the boat."

"Walk !" echoed the messenger, "why, it would take you a year to do it, an' then I hain't sure that you could get there."

"Well, what can we do? Can't you help us somehow, if you know all the folks here?" .

" I s'pose I could," said the new acquaintance, as he rubbed his chin, reflectively. If I should tell our manager about it, I guess he could telegraph to New York to find out if it was all right; an' then he could fix it so's you could go back on the boat; but he couldn't send the other feller, 'cause, you see, he hain't one of the crowd."

"Oh, don't go away an' leave me here, will you, Joe?" asked Ned, imploringly, a sense of utter loneliness coming over him as he thought of what might happen to him if he were left alone.

" Indeed, I won't, Ned. If we can't get home together, I'll stay and go with you, if we have to walk every step of the way."

Ned stole his hand shyly into Joe's, to thank him for the promise, and the messenger said, in a tone of superior wisdom:

" You see, if he was a messenger, like we are, it would be all right; but I'm most sure our manager wouldn't have anything to do with him. But you stay here, an' I'll tell him what you've said, an' .then I'll come back to let you know . what he's going to do about it."

The boy leaped out of the hiding-place, running swiftly towards the office, as if he would scorn to walk while he had his uniform on, and Ned and Joe were left alone, two very forsaken-feeling little' fellows, even though there was a faint prospect. that they might escape from their present difficulty.

Joe was obliged to repeat, again and again, to his weary little charge, that he would remain with him, and they were talking of what they would do in case they were obliged to walk home, when suddenly they heard Master West calling to them.

"Well, what is it?" asked Joe, coolly, feeling that he had good cause for complaint against this boy, who would have allowed them to get into trouble by going away in a stolen boat.

"Come up-town, an' let's get some more things, for we hain't got half enough to last us to New York."

"I guess not," said Joe. "I hain't goin' to spend any more money for such things, and, too, we won't go with you in the boat if we never get home."

"Why not?" and Bartholomew stood before them, a perfect picture of painful surprise.

"Well, you see we hain't sure that you own the boat, an' we concluded not to run any risks."

"S'posen I don't own the boat, so long as I can get her. I'll fix all that, an' you've only got to come along."

"I guess we can walk, thank'ee. We'd rather do that than steal a boat."

"Oh, you're too much of a girl to suit me, if you don't dare to do a little thing like that," said Master West, loftily, and then he walked slowly away, much as if he expected the boys would call him back, when they found that he was really intending to leave them to their fate.

"We want to get home pretty bad," said Joe; "but not so much that we're willing to steal a boat to go in."

"All right, you can stay here, an' starve to death, for all I care. You'll be sorry, though."

"You'll be sorry, Bart West," cried a voice from up the street; "but you can't get any messenger boy to go in with you when you're goin' to steal Mr. Longley's yacht."

"Then it was you, George Browning, who told these fellers that the boat wasn't mine?" said Bart, angrily.

"Yes, it was," replied the messenger, who appeared excited, "an' these fellers can get home without you, for our manager says he'll pay their fare. He telegraphed to New York, an' if the little feller's name is Edward Hawley, he's goin' to give 'em all they want to eat, an' buy a stateroom, an' they are to go like reg'lar swells."

"'Tis Edward Hawley," piped Ned, jumping up on his tired little feet.

It was not many seconds before Joe and Ned were out from behind the barrels, questioning George, in breathless excitement.

"The manager of your office had telegraphed down here, to know if you come on the boat," said George, as soon as the boys gave him an opportunity to speak, "an' to pay your fare back if you was here. So when I told our manager, he knew all about it. Then when I told him about the other feller, he said folks in New York had been telegraphing all around the country for a boy by the name of Edward Hawley. Now you'd better come up to the office, an' everything'll be all right."

As may be imagined, it was not many moments before Joe and Ned were telling their stories to the manager of the office in which George was employed, and then their troubles were over. The fact that they were in Providence, and safe, was telegraphed to New York at once, and George was detailed to show the boys around the city until time for the boat to leave, for Mr. Hawley had sent word that Ned should be supplied with what he needed to make him comfortable and happy.

Nothing more was seen of Master West, and the two boys returned to New York on the same steamer on which they had been involuntary passengers the night previous.

"Hello, there's the man come to look for his valises," said Joe, next morning, as he and Ned stood by the rail while the steamer was being warped into the dock. "I s'pose he'll be mad, now, 'cause I sent them on by express."

"Why, that's my father!" exclaimed Ned, when Joe had pointed his employer out from among the crowd on the pier.

It was indeed the case; and the reason why Mr. Hawley had not come to relieve Joe, was that word of Ned's non-appearance at home had been sent to him nearly an hour before the steamer sailed.

Joe went back, to the office, after he had been home to see his mother, but he did not remain there very long, for Mr. Hawley gave him a position in his store, in return for his kindness to Ned, and to-day the district messenger boy is in a fair way to become a successful merchant.

DAN HARDY'S CRIPPY.

Among the flock of geese that toddled in and out of Farmer Hardy's barn-yard last winter, hissing in protest at the ice which covered the pond so that there was no chance of a swimming match, was one remarkable neither for its beauty, nor its grace. This particular goose was gray, and was looked upon with no special favor by Mrs. Hardy, who had great pride in all the flock but the gray one.

When it was a little fluffy, drab-colored gosling, one of the sheep

had stepped on it, crushing out its life so nearly that Mrs. Hardy had no idea it would ever recover, but Dan begged for its life. He felt sure he could set the broken leg, and he pleaded so hard that his mother finally allowed him to make the attempt.

And he did succeed. The gosling was naturally a strong little thing, and, thanks to Dan's nursing, was soon able to limp around the shed that had been converted into a hospital. One of its legs was nearly a quarter of an inch shorter than the other; but the little fellow increased in strength as rapidly as he did in size, and seemed to consider Dan as his owner and especial protector.

Like Mary's lamb, it followed Dan about whenever the opportunity offered, until "Crippy" - which was the name Dan had given it - was known in the village quite as well as the boy was.

Many were the long walks, confidential chats, when the boy talked and the goose cackled, that Dan and Crippy had, and, when the preparations for the Thanksgiving festival were begun, the gray goose was decidedly the fattest in the flock.

Dan had always given Crippy a share of his luncheon, or had supplied for him a separate and private allowance of corn, and by this very care of his pet did he get into serious trouble.

"Dan's goose is the largest and the fattest, and I think we had better kill him for the Thanksgiving dinner," Dan heard his father say, three days before Thanksgiving; and Mrs. Hardy had replied:

"I had thought of that; gray feathers never bring as much money as white ones, and the goose is terribly in the way; he is always in the house, and always directly under foot."

Dan could hardly believe his own ears. The thought of killing and eating Crippy seemed wicked. Why, he would as soon have thought his parents would serve him up for dinner, as Crippy, and as for eating any of his pet, it would, to his mind, be little short of cannibalism.

"You wouldn't be so wicked as to kill Crippy, would you, Mother?" he asked, while the big tears came into his eyes, almost spilling over the lashes.

"Why not?" Mrs. Hardy was so busily engaged in her work of making mince pies that she did not notice the sorrow on Dan's face. "Why not? He's only a goose, and gray. We've got to have one, and Crip is the fattest."

"But, mother, I couldn't have poor Crippy killed. He an' I do love each other so much."

"Now don't be foolish about a goose, Danny. Come help me stem these raisins."

Dan said nothing more, for he knew by the way she had spoken that his mother had fully made up her mind, and that it would be useless to try to induce her to

change her cruel plans. He stemmed the raisins as she had requested; but he worked as quickly as possible, and when the task was done he ran out to the barn.

When the gray goose toddled towards him immediately he opened the barn door, cackling and hissing with delight at seeing his young master, the tears, which Dan had managed to keep back, came at last, and, with the goose in his arms, he seated himself on the barn floor with a feeling in his heart that he and Crippy were the two most unhappy and abused fellows in the world.

"O Crippy! they say they're goin'to kill you, an' I'd a heap sooner they'd kill me! What shall we do, Crippy? "

The goose made no reply; he was perfectly content to nestle down in Dan's arms, and, so far as he could see, he and his master were in remarkably comfortable quarters.

Much as the goose had been petted by Dan, the affection bestowed upon him just then seemed to surprise him, and, while the boy was still crying over him, he struggled until he got away, when he limped over to the corn-bin as a gentle reminder that grain would please him far better than tears.

During that day and the next Dan spent his time alternately begging for Crippy's life and petting him; but all to no purpose, so far as inducing his mother to change her mind was concerned.

On the following morning the gray goose was to be killed, and Dan could see no way to save him.

That afternoon he spent the greater portion of his time with the doomed Crippy, crying and talking until all the fowls must have wondered what the matter was, for, there being no almanac in the barn, of course they could have no idea Thanksgiving was so near. Suddenly Dan thought of a plan by which Crippy might be saved. It was a desperate one, and almost frightened him as he thought it over; but with his pet's life in the balance he could not hesitate at anything.

"I'll tell you what we'll do, Crippy," he said, as he succeeded in making the goose remain quietly in his arms by feeding him with corn. "Uncle Robert lives in New York, an' he's awful good. I know if we could find him he could save you. Now I'll get up in the night, an' come out here for you. It's only seven miles, an' I'm most sure we could walk there in a day. Then if he won't come out here to see mother, Thanksgiving will be gone, an' they can't have you. for dinner."

Crippy swallowed the corn greedily, and Dan looked upon this as a sign that he not only understood what had been said, but was eating an unusually hearty meal

by way of preparation for the journey.

Under any less desperate circumstances Dan could not have been persuaded to go away from home for an hour without asking his mother's permission, and even as he was situated then, he felt that he was about to do something which was almost wicked. But since he could save Crippy's life in no other way, what could he do? He almost felt as if by taking the goose away he was preventing his parents from committing a crime, for it could hardly be less than one to kill so intelligent and loving a creature.

But though he tried to persuade himself that what he was doing was, under the circumstances, a favor to his parents, there was a big lump in his throat. As he did his work that night, and realized that in a few hours neither his father nor his mother would know where he was. He was more than usually careful about the kindling-wood and the water, and when his mother spoke to him so kindly, he had the greatest difficulty in keeping his secret.

It was only the thought that he was by no means "running away" that prevented him from telling his mother what he intended to do. He argued with himself that he was only going to uncle Robert's on business, and that he should return the day after he arrived there; that would be entirely different from running away.

During the evening Dan worked hard at a message which he was to leave for his parents, feeling obliged to take every precaution lest they should see what he was about; and after the most painful efforts he succeeded in printing this note:

CRIP & ME HAVE GORNE TO UNKLE ROBERTS TO
GET HIM TO COME UP HERE TO KOAX YOU NOT TO
KILL CRIP. WE WILL COME RIGHT BACK.
DANIEL K. HARDY.

Dan had six cents, which he had earned carrying milk, and his preparations for the journey consisted simply in putting these in his pocket, together with some corn for Crippy, and in placing the little clock and some matches by the side of his bed, so that he might be able to tell when the proper time had come for him to start.

Perhaps Mr. and Mrs. Hardy were surprised by Dan's unusually affectionate manner when he bade them good-night; but, if they were, nothing was said about it, and the inmates of the Hardy farmhouse retired on the night before the proposed execution of poor Crippy at the usual early hour of nine o'clock.

Dan's idea was to lie awake until three in the morning, then steal cautiously out of the house, get Crippy, and start. But it was much harder work to remain awake than he had fancied, and before he had been in bed an hour he was sleeping soundly.

But even though his eyes persisted in closing despite his will, Dan did not sleep very long at a time. He was awake at least every half hour and his small stock of matches was exhausted as early as two o'clock. With no means of procuring a light, it would be impossible for him to know when the time had come, and, since he did not dare to go to sleep

again, he concluded it would be better to set out at once than run the risk of delaying until his father should awaken.

During the time he was making very awkward attempts to dress himself in the darkness, his fingers trembling violently, both from fear and the cold, he fancied each moment that he could hear his parents moving around, as if they had suspected his purpose, and were on the alert to prevent him from carrying it into execution. It seemed, too, as if each particular board in the floor creaked in protest at what he was doing, and to give the alarm.

The note which was to inform his parents of where he had gone was placed conspicuously on the chair by the bed, where his mother could not fail to see it when she came to awaken him; and when that was done his journey seemed more like some demand of business, and less like disobedience to what he knew his parents' command would be.

He did finally succeed in dressing himself, although his jacket was buttoned in a very curious fashion; and then, with his shoes and mittens in his hands, he started down-stairs. If the boards of the floor had tried to arouse his parents, the stairs appeared bent on awakening the entire household, - although he did his best to put as little weight as possible upon them, they creaked and screamed in a most alarming fashion.

It seemed strange to him that his parents could sleep while so much noise was being made; but when he finally succeeded in closing the outside door behind him, there had been no sign made to show that his departure was known.

Dan was so nervous and excited that he hardly felt the frost when he stepped, with stockinged feet, upon the snow; but instinct prompted him to put on his boots and mittens, and it only remained to get Crippy and start.

He almost expected that the goose would be waiting for him at the stable door when he opened it; but, since he knew he should find his pet in 'the warm box he had made for him, he was not greatly disappointed at not seeing him ready for the journey. Besides, he had come an hour before he told Crippy he would be there, which was sufficient reason why the goose was not ready and anxious to start.

After groping his way around the barn to the corner in which was Crippy's sleeping apartment, Dan. was considerably surprised because the goose was so very careless, both in regard to his safety, and the possibility of arousing the household. He cackled and hissed when Dan took him from the box, as if he preferred to be killed and served up for the Thanksgiving dinner, rather than go out-of-doors so early on a cold morning.

Dan whispered that he knew it was hard to be obliged to start so early, but that they must do so, and the more he explained matters the harder the goose struggled, until it seemed much as if the attempt to save Crippy's life would be a dismal failure.

"I'm doin' this so's you won't have to be killed, Crippy," whispered Dan, as he held the goose tightly clasped in his arms "an' it does seem's if you might help a feller, instead of tryin' to wake up father an' mother."

Perhaps Crippy was weary with struggling, - Dan thought he began to realize his position,
- for he ceased all protests after his master's last appeal, and, with his head tucked under Dan's coat, submitted quietly to the rescue.

If he had not repeated to himself so many times that he was not running away from home,
but simply going to uncle Robert's, to save poor ~ Crippy's life, Dan would have felt that he was doing something wrong because of the warning cries uttered by everything around. The stable door, when he tried to close it softly, shut with a spiteful clatter, and even the snow gave forth a sharp, crunching sound, such as he had never heard before. But he must keep on, for to remain would be to see the plump, brown body of poor Crippy on the Thanksgiving dinner-table, while to go on would be, at the worst, but a few hours' discomfort, with Crip's life as the reward.

Once they were out-of-doors Crippy behaved much as if he had suddenly realized how important it was for him to get away from the Hardy farm, and Dan had no trouble with him while he was passing the house.

There seemed to be an unnatural stillness everywhere, amid which the crunching of the dry snow sounded with a distinctness that almost frightened the boy, who was simply going to his uncle Robert's to spend a day or two. But finally Dan was on the main road, where the snow was frozen so hard that his footsteps could not be heard as distinctly, and where the two tracks worn smooth by the runners of the sleighs lay spread out before him, looking like two satin ribbons on white broadcloth.

Dan trudged slowly on, his heart growing lighter as the moments went by and he knew he had actually gotten away without arousing anyone; but after he had walked some distance he began to realize how heavy Crippy was. He had thought he could carry his pet almost any length of time; but at the very commencement of his journey his arms began to ache.

"It's no use, Crippy, you'll have to walk some of the way," he said, as he put the goose on the snow, and then started off to show him he must follow. Now a moonlight promenade on the snow, in the morning, with the thermometer several degrees below zero, was not at all to Crip's liking, and he scolded most furiously in his goose dialect, but he took good care to run after his master at the same time.

As Mrs. Hardy had said, Crippy was very fat, and when he toddled on at full speed he could only get along about half as fast as his master, so that Dan's journey was made up with alternately trudging over the frozen road, and waiting for his pet to overtake him.

And soon it was necessary to make a change even in this slow way of travelling, for before Crippy had been half an hour on the road he began to evince the most decided aversion to walking, and it became necessary for Dan to take him in his arms again. On he walked, carrying Crippy the greater portion of the time, and coaxing him along when it became absolutely necessary for him to give his aching arms a little relief, until the sun came up over the hills, and he could see the great city but a short distance ahead of him.

During all this time he had not stopped once to rest; but now, since he was so near his destination, at such an early hour in the morning, he sat down in the snow, and began to arrange with the discontented Crippy as to how they might best find uncle Robert, for Dan had not the slightest idea of where his relative lived.

"I'll tell you what we'll do, Crip," he said, as he gave the goose a handful of corn, contenting himself with half a biscuit he had taken from the supper-table the night previous. " We'll walk right along till we see uncle Robert, or some of the folks. It's the day before Thanksgiving, you know, an' some of 'em will be sure to be out buyin' things."

Crippy had finished eating the corn as his master ceased speaking, and he looked up sideways into Dan's face much as if he doubted the success of their plan if carried out in that manner.

"Well, if we don't find him that way, we'll ask some of the boys" an' they'll be sure to know," said Dan, replying as earnestly to Crippy's look as if his pet had spoken. .

Then the weary journey was resumed, much to Crippy's displeasure, even though he was carried comfortably in Dan's arms, and it was not until the outskirts of the city were reached that the goose was requested to walk. There the pavements were free from snow, and Crippy could move along much faster than on the icy road; but yet his progress was far from satisfactory.

The great number of people, all of whom regarded the boy and the goose curiously, bewildered both the travellers. More than once, when Dan was sure Crippy was close at his heels, on looking around he would see the goose, standing on one foot near the curbstone, looking sideways at the street, much as if trying to decide whether he would continue to follow his master, or toddle back home as fast as his legs of unequal length would carry him.

"Oh, come on, Crippy," Dan said, in a tone that showed plainly how tired and discouraged he was. "We sha'n't ever find uncle Robert this way, an' if a strange dog comes along, where will you be ? "

It seemed very much as if Crippy had not realized that he might chance to meet a dog, until Dan spoke of it, for then he ran hurriedly on, as if he fully understood the danger that might come to him by loitering on the way.

But there were other enemies besides dogs, which Crippy was to meet with, as he and Dan learned when they reached the more densely populated portions of the city, and those enemies were boys.

Dan was walking slowly on, looking first at the houses, in the hope of seeing some of his uncle's family, and then at Crippy, to make sure he was following, when half a dozen boys, who had been watching the singular pair from the opposite side of the street, made a sudden dash at the goose.

The first intimation Dan had that his pet was in danger was when he heard the shouts of the boys, followed by Crippy's angry hiss, and the flapping of his wings. Quickly turning, Dan saw the goose closely pressed by the boys, all of whom were trying to catch him; and some of whom already had one or more feathers as trophies.

It did not take Dan many moments to catch his pet up in his arms, and then he stood ready to do battle for the goose, while the city boys advanced towards him, threateningly.

There could have been but one result to such a battle, where six boys attacked one who was hampered in his movements by the goose, and some serious injury might have been done to both Dan and Crippy, had not a policeman come from around the corner just at that instant. Dan's assailants fled at the sight of the officer, and the country boy, with his heavy, noisy burden, continued on his journey.

There was no further interruption for nearly an hour; for when Dan carried the goose in his arms he was by no means the object of curiosity he was with Crippy following him. At the expiration of that time it dawned upon him that in a place as large as New York it was useless for him to walk around in the hope of meeting his uncle, or any of his family.

"I declare, I don't know what to do, Crippy," he said, as he seated himself on a doorstep with the goose by his side, and looked mournfully up and down the street. ". I shouldn't wonder if we hadn't been more'n half-way 'round the city in all this time, an' yet we hain't seen any of uncle Robert's folks. What. shall we do?"

Crippy made no reply to the question; but a boy about Dan's size, who was looking wonderingly at the goose, as he stood on his shortest leg in a mournful way, spoke:

"Wot is it yer don't know wot ter do? "

"I don't know how to find my uncle Robert. Crippy an' me come down to see him, an' now we can't find his house."

" Do you call him Crippy?" asked the boy, as he nodded towards the goose.

"Yes, he's Crippy Hardy. Mother was goin' to kill him for dinner to-morrer, so we come down here to get uncle Robert to go up an' see about it."

" How far have you come? "

" Seven miles."

" Did you walk? "

" Every step."

" Well," said the boy, as he looked at Crippy in a critical way, "it seems to me that's a mighty mean kind of a goose ter walk so far fur. He hain't handsome no ways, an' I think he'd look a good deal better on ther table roasted, than he does out here on ther street."

Up to that moment Dan had been disposed to trust this boy who was so friendly; but when he spoke so slightly of Crippy, he was disappointed in him.

"You don't know Crippy, or you wouldn't say that," replied Dan, gravely. "I would walk seventeen times as far if it would keep him from gettin' killed."

"Well, I tell yer wot it is," and the boy spoke like one thoroughly conversant with geese and their ways, "he's got ter be a good deal better'n he looks, ter 'mount to anything."

"An' he is," replied Dan; and then he gave the stranger a full account of Crippy's sagacity and wisdom, with such success that, when he had finished, the goose evidently stood high in the city boy's estimation.

"He's prob'ly a mighty nice kind of a goose," said the boy; "but it seems to me if I had a pet I'd want one that could sleep with me, an' you know you couldn't take this goose to bed."

"I could if mother would let me, an' I don't see why she won't, for I know Crippy would just snuggle right down as good as anybody could."

For some time the two discussed the question of pets in general, and Crippy in particular, and then the city boy remembered that his mother had sent him on an errand which should have been done an hour before.

Dan felt more lonely than ever after this new-made friend had gone, and, with Crippy in his arms, he started wearily out in search of uncle Robert, hardly knowing where he was going. In his bewilderment he had walked entirely around the same block four times, and an observant policeman asked him where he was going.

Under the circumstances, Dan did not require much urging to induce him to tell the man his story.

"Do you know your uncle's name?" asked the officer.

"Uncle Robert Hardy."

"What is his business - I mean, what kind of work does he do ? "

" He keeps store."

The officer led Dan to the nearest drug store, and there, after consulting the directory, told him there were several Robert Hardys mentioned, at the same time giving him a list of the names.

Dan took the paper with the written directions upon it, feeling more completely at a loss to know how to proceed than he had before, and it was in a dazed way that he listened to the instructions as to how he should find the nearest Hardy.

But he started bravely off, still carrying Crippy, who seemed to have doubled in weight, and when he had walked half an hour in the direction pointed out by the

policeman, he appeared to be no nearer his destination than when he started.

"What can we do, Crippy?" he cried, as again he took refuge on a doorstep, weary, hungry, and footsore. He had seen no opportunity to buy a breakfast with his six cents; it was then long past his usual time for dinner, and his hunger did not tend to make him more cheerful.

The goose was as unable to answer this question as he had been the ones Dan had previously asked, and the only reply he made was a loud cackling, which, in his language, signified that he thought it quite time that he had some dinner.

By this time, and Dan had not been on the doorstep more than five minutes, a crowd of boys gathered around, all disposed to make sport of the goose, and to annoy the boy.

"Say, country, why don't you sell your . goose? "

" Where did the bird find you? "

"Does yer mother know you're so far away from home? "

These and other equally annoying questions Dan listened to, until he could no longer control himself, and he cried to his tormentors:

"See here, boys, if you had somethin' you thought a good deal of, an' it was goin' to be killed an' roasted for dinner, what would you do?"

The boys were too much surprised by the question to reply, and Dan continued, earnestly:

"This goose is Crippy, an' I've had him ever since he was a baby, an' got his leg broke. We come in here to find uncle Robert so's he could tell mother not to kill poor Crip, an' now we can't find him, an'-an'-well, we're jest two as lonesome fellers as you ever saw, an' if you knew jest how we did feel you wouldn't stand there, pokin' fun at us.

For a moment none of Dan's tormentors spoke, and then the tallest one said, sympathetically, as he seated himself by the country boy's side to show that he took both the boy and the goose under his protecting arm:

"They sha'n't plague you any more, an' ef I'd 'a' known how you was feelin' I wouldn't 'a' said a word. Now tell us all about it."

Dan was in that frame of mind where he needed sympathy, and he told the whole story, while the entire party stood around, interrupting him now and then by exclamations of surprise that his parents should have been so cruel as to even think .of killing that faithful Crippy.

This consolation, even though it did Dan no material good, was very sweet to him, and he

would have continued to sing the praise of his pet, had not one of the boys proposed that an effort be made to find uncle Robert's house. Then each one had a different plan to propose, none of them thinking that .at that hour-four o'clock in the afternoon ~ it might be an act of charity first to give Dan and Crippy something to eat.

It surely seemed as if this discussion as to how the search should be begun would continue until it would be too late to do anything, and while each one was stoutly maintaining that his plan was the best, an old-fashioned sleigh, drawn by a clumsy-looking horse, stopped directly opposite where the boys were holding their conference.

"Why, father!" cried Dan, as he saw the occupant of the sleigh, and at the same time he hugged Crippy close to him as if he believed his father had come for the goose.

"Well, Dan, you did find your uncle Robert, after all, didn't you?" asked Mr. Hardy as he alighted, covered old Dobbin carefully with the robe, and then went to where Dan was sitting, already deserted by his new-made friends, who feared Mr. Hardy was about to inflict some signal punishment.

"No, sir, I didn't find him," faltered Dan, wondering what his father would do to him and Crippy.

"Why, haven't you been in yet?"

"In where?" asked Dan, in surprise.

"In here, of course; this is where .your uncle Robert lives," and Mr. Hardy pointed to the house on the steps of which Dan had been sitting.

To his great surprise, Dan learned that he had followed the policeman's directions exactly; but, not knowing it, had neglected to look on he house doors for his uncle's name.

In a few moments more he and his father were in the house, while Crippy was in the kitchen actually gorging himself with food.

When Mr. Hardy found the note Dan had left, he was not at all worried about his son's safety; but when, later in the day, he had leisure, he started to the city for the travellers, and, driving directly to his brother's house, found them as has been seen.

It is easy to understand that, after all this labor on Dan's part to save his pet, Mr. Hardy readily promised that Crippy should be allowed to die of old age, instead of being killed and roasted, and Dan, with Crippy hugged very close to him, started for home with his father, sure that no boy in all the. wide world would spend a merrier Thanksgiving than he.

Crippy was also happy on that day, if food could make him so, and it is safe to say that, if he survives the wonderfully. big dinner Dan proposes to give him

this year, he will live to a green old age.

A NECKTIE PARTY

CHAPTER I SI'S SCHEME.

WHEN Deacon Littlefield dismissed the pupils of the one school in the little town of Orland, on a certain day in December some years ago, he was at a decided loss to understand what caused such an excitement among them before they had walked the short length of the playground. The deacon had a very large bump of inquisitiveness on his bald head, which, perhaps, accounted for his great desire to know why nearly all the boys and girls had stopped beside the tiny brook that scolded and fretted all the long summer days away, but which was now closely encased in ice, and why they were apparently holding a very animated discussion, despite the intensely cold weather. But the deacon's bump of inquisitiveness was counterbalanced by one representing dignity, and he thought that it would be hardly the proper thing for a deacon and a school-teacher to be seen running through the snow with a skull-cap and dressing-gown on; therefore he watched his pupils from the window, but without being able to satisfy his curiosity in the slightest degree.

The girls and boys were indeed in a high state of excitement.

On the noon of that same day, Agnes Morrell had, under injunctions of strictest secrecy, told Maria Gilman and Annie Rich of a certain plan which she had developed in her own mind. In some unaccountable way it had been whispered around until, before recess was over, nearly everyone, excepting Deacon Littlefield, knew that Aggie proposed giving what she called "a necktie party." There were but two others who knew what kind of a party this could be, and they were Maria and Annie; therefore it is not to be wondered at that she was almost overwhelmed by questions from the other girls, even before she was fairly out of the schoolhouse.

As a matter of fact, the boys were equally interested; but Si Kelly had said to his particular friends, "Now, don't let on that we care a cent about the party, whatever it is;" and, acting under what was both advice and a command, none of the boys had condescended to ask any questions, although they took good care to be near Aggie when she finally explained the purpose of the party.

"Now, this is what it is," she said, as she tied her muffler closer about her neck, and sought shelter from the cold wind behind the high board fence. "All of us girls must meet as often as we can, during the coming week, to make aprons and neckties out of print. Only one apron and one necktie is to be alike, and Walt Haley and Mr. Dilloway are going to give us as much calico as we need."

"I thought you said you was goin' to have a party!" And Master Kelly, forgetting his own caution to the boys not to appear interested in the scheme, looked decidedly disappointed.

"So I am; but we are going to get money enough out of it to give aunt Betsey Bolton a nice present."

"Oh, it's some begging thing, is it?" And although Si knew very well that he had not a single penny about his person, he plunged his hands deeply in his pockets, as if to prevent any inroad upon his wealth.

"It isn't anything of the kind," replied Aggie, indignantly, her face flushing with something very nearly resembling anger until her numerous freckles stood out quite prominently. Aggie had a large supply of freckles, as even a very near-sighted person could see. "We are going to have just as many boys as girls, and no one is obliged to come. But if any boy is willing to pay ten cents' towards helping Aunt Betsey, he buys a necktie, and the girls each buy an apron. Either one will be worth the ten cents, so it hasn't anything to do with begging."

"But what do you have these things to sell for? Why not let each one give ten cents for . . . going to the party?" asked Winny Curtis, in a tone that was very nearly a squeak, so shrill and peculiar was his voice.

"That's the fun of it," replied Aggie, triumphantly. "After we girls have made the neckties and aprons, mother will wrap each one in paper, so that no one can tell which is which. Then when a boy buys one of the packages, he sees what color of necktie he has got, and he hunts for the girl that has an apron like it. He must go in to supper with that girl, and walk home with her after the party is over."

"Are you goin' to have a supper?" squeaked Winny.

"Yes, mother says she will get a nice one for us, and that will be the only party I am to have this winter."

"Goin' to have cake?" continued Winny, growing deeply interested, despite Si's caution.

"Of course we are. It will be just like any party, except that each boy will have to pay attention to the girl whose apron matches his necktie. Now, we want all of the boys to come, because it won't be any fun if there isn't an even pattern of aprons and neckties. We girls are going to Maria Gilman's house tonight to begin the work, and tomorrow morning the boys that will come must tell us, so we'll know just how many neckties to make."

Winny Curtis, thinking more of cake than of the charitable purpose of the party, and remembering how difficult it was for him to persuade any of the girls to allow him to walk home with them, because of his diminutive size and disagreeable voice, at once announced his determination to be present. The other boys looked at Si, and as he did not choose to commit himself, they also remained silent.

Aggie saw at once that there were more difficulties in the way of this manner of giving a party than she had supposed. She knew that Winny, as the only boy present, would not make matters very lively, even though he should be willing to buy a dozen neckties, and escort as many of the girls home.

"We'll have lots of fun," she said, "if you boys will come, for I'm sure the girls will all be there, and while we're enjoying ourselves we shall know that we're

doing something to help aunt Betsey, who's a good deal poorer this year than she was last."

Then Aggie understood from Si's face that he was growing more and more opposed to the plan, and as her freckles came prominently into view again, she said, with a show of dignity that even Deacon Littlefield might have been proud of, as she started down the street: "Come, girls, let's go home, so that we can get over to Maria's house early. We'll have the party, and we'll each buy an apron."

Then Aggie walked away, followed by the girls, each one trying to appear as if perfectly indifferent whether any of the boys came to the party; but all thinking that it would be a very tame affair if no one but Winny was present.

On this particular year there had been but little to amuse the school children of Orland; therefore the girls, if not the boys, had hailed Aggie's scheme with delight. None of the girls had openly expressed any opinion as to the advisability of having the party for the double purpose of enjoying themselves and helping aunt Betsey; but it was easy to tell from their faces that the plan had their unqualified approval.

Winny looked around him' as the girls walked away. He had but just begun to understand that he was the only boy who had agreed to attend the party, and it was by no means pleasant to be in opposition to Si Kelly, who had a most disagreeable way of making sport of anyone who did not agree with him. Nothing but the thought that he could have a perfect feast of cake would have caused him to forget, even for an instant, that the self-appointed leader of the boys had not approved of the plan. Now, since he had accepted the invitation without first consulting Si, he believed it necessary for him to make some effort to correct what had undoubtedly been a very grave error on his part:

"Of course I sha'n't go if" the other fellers don't," he said; "I thought you was- all in for it when I spoke."

"Well, you'd better run home now, an' see how many ten-cent pieces you can find," said Si, in what he intended should be a scornful tone. "You'll be the only feller to the party, and you'll have to buy a good many neckties "

"Where are you fellers goin'?" asked Winny, feeling that he was in disgrace.

"That needn't bother you any. We're goin' to have a reg'lar good time, none of your tencent parties, - an'. you can go home now."

"But if you are to have a time, I want to be in it."

"Well, you can't, 'cause you've agreed to go to Aggie Morrell's an' wear a ten-cent necktie; so run home, sonny, for we want to talk about what it wouldn't do for you to hear."

Poor Winny! his desire for cake had caused him to place himself in a

most unenviable position. He knew that Si and all the boys would call him a "girl baby" during the remainder of the winter, and he was quite sure the fellows would get up some kind of a good time which would be more jolly than the girls' party. He knew, however, that it would be useless for him to say anything more after having offended Si, and he went sorrowfully home, while the other boys remained to discuss a scheme their leader had decided upon on the impulse of the moment.

"We won't have nothin' to do with the ten-cent party," the Oracle said, as soon as Winny was so far away that he could not hear. "If the girls had come to us an' asked what we thought of it, then p'rhaps we'd gone in with 'em; but instead of that they fixed the thing up to suit themselves, an' then told us what they was going to do. Now they can have their party, and Win Curtis will be the only feller there."

It is safe to say that fully half the boys wished to go to Aggie Morrell's, and that nearly every one would have been pleased to have done something towards helping poor old aunt Betsey; but Si had said that it must not be.

"But what'll we do to get even?" asked Lute Hubbard, anxiously. "We shall have to get up something that'll be better than the party."

"I guess that won't be very hard to do," replied Si, loftily. "If I couldn't get up a better kind of a time than following girls 'round by their apron - strings! We'll each of us put in twenty-five cents to hire Grout's two-horse sleigh, an' go on a ride to Bucksport for all day."

There was no question but that Si was right. A ride to Bucksport in Mr. Grout's handsome sleigh was the one thing the boys could enjoy, and for the moment all desire to go to the party was forgotten. Each boy pledged himself to raise twenty-five cents, and with some little difficulty in "counting noses," after which Si laboriously figured up the total amount, it was learned that they would not only have money enough to hire the sleigh and horses, but there would be a surplus sufficient to buy such a goodly supply of candy and nuts as would make a really respectable feast.

"Now that's all right, an' we'll have the sleighride," Si said; "but we've got to fix it with the girls. Let's go back to the schoolhouse, an' I'll write a letter to Ag Morrell that'll show her she can't make us do just what she thinks best."

"What's the use of writin' her a letter?" asked Tom Hardy, who wanted to get home in time to do his chores before dark. "We can tell her in the mornin' that we hain't goin' to the party, an' that will settle it."

"We'll write the letter," said Si, with the air of one who does not allow himself to be contradicted. "We've got to let the girls know that they can't do jest what they want to with us, an' I now's the time to do it."

Then Si led the way back to the schoolhouse, knowing that every boy would follow him; and while Deacon Littlefield was making his preparations to leave for the night, Master Kelly wrote a letter to Aggie. The composition and writing required no little amount of time and labor, for if Si was the leader of the school, he was not a remarkably brilliant scholar, and he was forced to pucker his brows and bite his tongue a good many times before it was completed.

"There," he said, as he handed it to Tom Hardy, after he had tried unsuccessfully to wipe off a large blot of ink with his coat sleeve, "read that out loud, an' if it won't show them girls that they can't do jest what they want to, then I don't know what will."

Tom read, after considerable difficulty, the following remarkable production, which, in justice to Si, is given here exactly as he wrote it:

"MIS MOREL US BOYS DONT WANTER COME TO YOUR PARTY CAUSE WE'RE GOIN SOMEWHERE ELSE YOU THINK YOU CAN DO WHATEVER YOU WANTER JEST CAUSE YOUR GIRLS BUT YOU MAKE A MISTAK THE NEXT TIME YOU WANTER START ANYTHING YOUD BETTER ASK US. ABOUT IT & THEN PURHAPS YOU CAN DO SOMETHING WE HOP YOULL HAVE A GOOD TIME AT YOUR TEN CENT PARTY BUT DONT GET TOO MUCH MONEY SO THAT ANT BETSEY WILL THINK SHE IS RICH & GET RECKLIS. THE BOYS."

No one ventured to express an opinion on this ungentlemanly epistle, although there were several in the party who did not think it fair to send such a reply to the kindly meant invitation, and Si said, with a satisfied air:

"I guess that'll show 'em what kind of fellers we are I When they want to get up any more times, they'll find out first what we think about it. I'll put it in her readin' book, where she'll be sure to see it the first thing in the mornin', an' then I'll talk to Grout about hirin' his sleigh."

Even those who were opposed to sending so harsh a reply in answer to the invitation, did not remonstrate against the plans of their leader, and that which was believed would be the death-blow to the girls' necktie party was left where Aggie would be sure to see it when she came to school next morning.

CHAPTER II AGGIE'S SCHEME

While it is a fact that nearly every boy who had allowed himself to be influenced by Si Kelly in the matter of refusing to attend Aggie Morrell's necktie party was almost ashamed of himself for permitting such a letter to be written without making protest, each one was at the schoolhouse early next day in order to learn "what the girls were going to do about it."

Aggie had always been a favorite with her schoolmates; but on this particular morning, when she came into the schoolhouse a quarter of an hour before Deacon

Littlefield called the pupils to order, the boys., with the single exception of Winny Curtis, were very careful to keep on their own side of the room. Every fellow was anxious to hear what she would say when she read Si's note; but no one was willing to put himself forward more prominently than another, for even the redoubtable Si was rather afraid of Aggie's temper.

Although Winny had no idea of what the boys were intending to do, he was. at the schoolhouse quite as early as anyone, in order to see all that might take place, as well as to make his peace with the boys, if possible. Si refused positively to have anything to do with the "ten-center," as he called Winny, and the others gave him the " cold shoulder," acting very much as if they blamed him because they had refused to go to the necktie party.

When the girls entered the schoolroom in a body, the boys were gathered in the back seats, strictly following Si's commands to "act as if nothin' was up."

It was not many moments before Aggie and her friends understood that the boys had decided against the party; therefore, when, just before school was opened, the letter was found, it caused but little surprise. Indignation was the feeling that predominated, and had Deacon Littlefield not rapped loudly on his desk, as a signal that it was time for school to open, it is probable that Master Si would have heard from more than one of the "ten-centers" the exact opinion they all had regarding him.

The good old deacon knew that some great and barely suppressed excitement among the pupils was the cause of the inattentiveness, even on the part of those who were usually the most studious, and he acted as if his life was particularly a burden to him during the hour and a half that elapsed before recess. He had reproved nearly every pupil before half-past ten, and then he said, in his most severe tones:

"I hardly know whether you or I feel the most relieved because the forenoon session is half finished. If it was any other time than immediately before the holidays, I should think it my duty to inflict extra tasks upon you all; but, under the circumstances, I propose to do just the reverse, by increasing the length of recess, giving you half an hour instead of fifteen minutes. After that time, I expect you will be in a more fitting condition to give proper attention to your studies; if such should not be the case, it will become my duty to remind you forcibly that you must not try to unite your amusements with your studies."

The boys, headed by Si, rushed out with their customary shout of joy, and the girls went at once into one of the classrooms, where an indignation meeting was held, but not called to 'order.

" It's all Si Kelly's doings!" exclaimed Aggie. " The other boys would have been in favor of the party if he hadn't said they shouldn't. I should think they would be ashamed of themselves to come and go at his beck and call!"

Si's ears must have tingled during that recess, . if there is any truth in the old saying that those useful members grow warm when their owner is being spoken ill of, for every girl present seemed to think it her

duty to say something against him before she could discuss the matter with calmness.

"It's no use standing here talking about that Kelly boy," Maria Gilman said, at last. "The bell will ring, and we sha'n't have anything settled. The question is, what are we going to do? Of course it is foolish for us to say that we can have very much of 'a party if all the boys stay away."

"We must have it," said Annie Rich, decidedly. "It would never do to let them think that we had given up a good time just because they wouldn't join us."

"Yes, we must have the party," said Aggie, thoughtfully, " and we must make the boys come, if possible. It's no use for me to try to study now, and I'm going to ask the deacon to let me go home. Some of you girls catch Winny Curtis, and find out from him what the boys are going to do. I'll think up some kind of a plan, and after school to-night we'll see what can be done."

Then, refusing to answer a single question, but cautioning the girls not to look as if they cared in the slightest because of the letter, Aggie went into the schoolroom, where she had no difficulty in getting permission to go home. As a matter of fact, Deacon Littlefield would have been more pleased than his pupils could have been, if he could have given them all a holiday; for trying to teach a number of boys and girls who were in the highest state of excitement over Aggie's proposed necktie party, was a task.

Maria and Annie "caught" Winny Curtis, as Aggie had proposed; but the information they succeeded in getting from him was limited, for the reason that he knew nothing of the boys' plans. All he could tell them was that "Si Kelly was fixin' it for a reg'lar high old time," but, unfortunately, he had not been permitted to join them, even had he been disposed to give up the party, where it seemed probable that he would be the only boy among twenty-five or thirty girls.

The boys did not have as much sport out of the letter as they had expected. The girls spoke to them pleasantly, without any reference to what had been said or done, and they began to fear that some plan was under way which might promise even better sport than their sleigh-ride.

"They'll get up something to beat us," Tom Hardy said, mournfully. "It's got to be a pretty smart boy who can get the best of a lot of girls, an' I tell you what it is, fellers, they'll serve us out before we get through puttin' on airs."

"Now, don't be an idiot, Tom," cried Si, angrily. "Do you want them to say that we can't have a good time unless they're along too? Our sleigh-ride will go ahead of anything they can get up, an' they'll be mighty sorry they can't go with us."

"P'rhaps so," replied Tom, doubtfully; "but Aggie Morrell has gone home to cook up some plan, an' we sha 'n 't know whether we're goin' to have the best time or not till we find out what she's about."

"If you want to go in with the' ten-centers' an' wear a calico necktie,

why don't you say so?" cried Si, now thoroughly angry. "If I wanted to, I would," retorted Tom. "I stood by an' saw you write that letter, an' I'll stick to it; but all the same I'm sorry we've done what we have, 'cause whenever we've started anything the girls have always gone in with us, an' it looks mean."

More than one of the boys believed as Tom did, and the result was that the opponents of the necktie party held a stormy meeting, although no one had the slightest idea of "backing down" from the position he had taken under Si's leadership.

Aggie did not show herself to friend or foe until just as the afternoon recess was ended, and then she entered the schoolroom with such a demure, innocent look on her face that every girl knew she had decided upon some plan that promised success. Even Si Kelly looked anxious when she came in, and he immediately resolved to collect, on the very next morning, the money each of the boys was to pay towards the sleigh-ride, in order that no one might be tempted to join the necktie party.

So attentive was Aggie to her studies during the remainder of the afternoon, that Deacon Littlefield must have thought it would be a good idea to send each one of his pupils home for a few hours.

The girls tried in every way, except that of breaking the rule against whispering, to induce Aggie to give some hint of what she had decided upon, and the boys watched her jealously; but neither to the one party nor the other did she make a sign betokening that she had even thought of the necktie party since she went home.

When school was dismissed, the boys, instead of rushing out at full speed, as was their custom, appeared to have a remarkable amount of trouble to arrange the books in their desks, and Deacon Littlefield was yet more surprised by seeing every one of his boy pupils loitering around as if pained at being obliged to go home.

The girls understood at once that they might have some trouble to hold a meeting in the schoolroom and at the same time prevent the boys from knowing what was said or done, and they adjourned to the classroom, locking the door behind them.

"Now tell us all about it, Aggie," said Annie Rich, as she stuffed the keyhole with paper.
"What is it to be?"

"Did anyone find out from Winny Curtis what the boys think of doing?" asked Aggie.
"He doesn't know anything about it. Si Kelly won't let him join them because he said he would come to our party."

"Jen Hardy, you must try to find out from Tom to-night what they are going to do, and at the same time you mustn't whisper to him a word of what we say here," and Aggie spoke in a tone of authority warranted by the fact that the

girls looked up to her as their leader. "Now I believe we can shame those boys so that, whether they come to our party or not, they won't serve us such a trick again. Here is a letter I have written to Si Kelly, and each one of you must write the same thing to some other boy, so that they will all get one. 'Now listen; .I'll read it, and then every one can copy it."

With a look of the most intense satisfaction on her freckled face, Aggie read:

Dear Si: - All of us girls are sorry that you can't come to the party. We made a great mistake when we proposed that each one should pay ten cents, even though the money was to be used to help aunt Betsey. We know that only the lack of money prevents you from coming, and, in order that you need not be obliged to stay away when we all want to see you, I have paid the ten cents for your necktie, which I send with this letter. Will you please come as early as eight o'clock?

Your friend,
Agnes Morrell

For several moments after Aggie ceased reading, the applause was so great that it was impossible for anyone to make herself heard.. The girls were so pleased with the scheme that they were almost as noisy as the boys would have been under similar circumstances.

"Now we must each give twenty-five cents," Aggie said, as soon as the tumult had partially subsided, "and we will buy the things for aunt Betsey, so that the boys will know we have really paid the money. Each one decide which boy she will write to, so that everyone will get a letter, and mother says you may all come to my house to-night to make the neckties. I've been to Mr. Dilloway's and Lute Haley's and got the prints, so that we can have everything fixed this evening."

"When will we send the letters?"

"The first thing in the morning. Mother will wrap up the neckties to-night, so that we -sha'n't know which ones we are sending away. We will leave the letters, with the packages, on the boys' desks before school begins, and if they are not ashamed of themselves by the time they read them, I'm mistaken."

" But suppose the boys don't come after we do all this?" said Maria, dolefully.

"Then we'll have the party just the same, and I guess we can manage to have a good time even if Mr. Si Kelly does not permit the boys to come."

" But how can we leave the letters?" Maria appeared to be full of doubts, even though Aggie's plan seemed so promising. "The boys will be sure to come here the first thing, and we shall look rather silly carrying the letters around to the desks when they are all here."

"I know that," replied Aggie, promptly, "and I'm going to tell Deacon Littlefield the whole story just as soon as we get through here. We

will ask him to let us come in first, and to keep the boys out until we get everything fixed."

There was no question but that Aggie had thought of all possible contingencies, and the girls were convinced that under her leadership they would be able to rout Master Kelly, even though they might not have the satisfaction of seeing him at the party.

"Now we'll go home and write the letters before supper, so that we shall have nothing to do this evening but work on the neckties," said Aggie, as she made her preparations for leaving the room. "You girls go, and I'll arrange it with the Deacon, so that we can get in here in the morning ahead of the boys."

Of course girls don't cheer, when anything pleases them, as boys do, but this particular party of girls were strongly tempted to do so as they left the room, so thoroughly convinced were they that they would soon triumph over those who had tried to humiliate them.

CHAPTER III TOM 'S SCHEME

DESPITE all efforts, not a boy had been able to learn what course the girls had decided upon during the meeting in the classroom. Several of those who were in favor of the sleigh-ride had sisters among the "ten-centers," and they used every effort to learn what had been the result of the meeting; but, in each individual case, before the boy had asked very many questions, he found that his sister was more successful in getting information from him than he from her.

During that evening the girls kept their secret closely guarded, while more than one of the boys had inadvertently divulged enough of Si's great scheme to enable the girls to judge quite clearly what they proposed to do. Si had notified his friends and adherents that he would meet them at half-past eight in the schoolroom, when he expected that each one would be prepared to pay his share of the cost of the sleigh-ride, and all hands were in the playground at an early hour next morning, anxious, but unable to get into the building.

Why it was that the schoolhouse door should be locked so late on this particular morning, when it was usually opened as early as seven o'clock, no fellow could imagine. That the girls were the cause of their being deprived of their regular place for holding business meetings never occurred to them, and the only reason they could assign for this remarkable delay on the part of the janitor was that Deacon Littlefield was ill. They did not really hope that their teacher was sick; but they would have been willing he should be slightly indisposed, if, in such case, they would have an unexpected holiday.

Si did not think it advisable to neglect business simply because they were obliged to stand out-of-doors instead of being in a warm room, and he promptly collected twenty-five cents for the proposed sleigh-ride from each boy who was so fortunate as to have that amount of money with

him.

At ten minutes before nine, the boys, who had begun to grow surprised because none of the girls had appeared, were disappointed at seeing Deacon Littlefield, whom they had believed to be sick, come into the yard, and in five minutes more they trooped into the schoolroom behind him, the door having been opened by the janitor from the inside the moment the teacher stood before it.

All this looked mysterious, and the mystification was complete when the sleigh-riders saw every individual member of the "ten-centers," with the single exception of Winny, seated at their desks much as if they had remained there all night. On going to his seat, each boy found a letter and a package staring him in the face; and from that time until the Deacon called the school to order, no sound was heard, save the rustling of paper as the boys read the missives, while the girls appeared to have no thought save for their books, which they were studying with most remarkable intentness.

No one of the boys had time to compare notes with his neighbor when Deacon Littlefield said, after he had rapped vigorously on his desk to command attention: "It has been suggested to me by such of your parents as I have had time to call upon, that, in view of the near approach of the holidays, and of the many plans you may possibly have in mind, school be dismissed until after the beginning of the New Year. To have followed out my original intention, we should have continued in session to-day and to-morrow; but, believing that I should have only your divided attention during that time, I have concluded to give you two extra holidays, trusting that, when we assemble here again, you will endeavor to make up for the time thus lost. You are, therefore, dismissed from attendance until the day after New Year's."

Under ordinary circumstances, this unexpected announcement would have been received with cheers by the boys; but so confused were the sleigh-riders by the letters they had just received, that they remained quietly in their seats, while the girls walked demurely out of the building.

Even before Deacon Littlefield had taken his departure the confusion began, Tom Hardy being the first one to express an opinion. "I tell you what it is, fellers, the girls have got the best of us, and no mistake."

"The best of us!" growled Si Kelly. "I call it about as mean a thing as I know of."

"Is it any meaner than what we did to them?"

"Of course it is. They write as if we couldn't afford to pay ten cents to go to their old party, an' here the most of us have already given twenty-five cents for our ride. Ag Morrell can have her calico necktie back, an' I'm goin' to carry it up to her house before I'm an hour older."

"I wouldn't do that," squeaked Winny, who was secretly delighted at the turn in affairs.

"If she gets to talkin' about the letter you sent you'll have the worst of it."

Then everybody spoke at the same time until no one could understand what the other was saying, and Deacon Littlefield rushed out of the building to save himself from premature deafness.

It was some time before anything like order was restored, and then Tom Hardy said, impatiently:

"Look here, fellers, it's no use for us to stand here cawing like a lot of crows, when nobody knows what the one next to him is saying. I go in for havin' this thing done right, if we're goin' to do it at all. The girls have got the best of us now, an' if any of you think we can turn things around, let's go to work shipshape."

"I nominate Tom Hardy president of this meetin', to see how we can get ahead of the girls," squeaked Winny; and, to say the least, he was very officious in so doing, since he was a member of the "ten-centers," and really had nothing to do with the discomfiture of the sleigh-riders.

In the general excitement, however, no one seemed to remember that Winny was not one of them, and all called for Tom Hardy to conduct the meeting. Si Kelly recognized the fact that he should have been the one to occupy this proud position; but the leadership seemed to be slipping away from him, and, shout as he might, no one paid any attention to him. He had led the boys on to defeat, instead of victory, and since he could suggest no wiser plan than to return the neckties and letters, all looked to Tom Hardy for advice.

"Fellers," he said, gravely, as he seated himself in the Deacon's chair, understanding the importance of his position, "we've got to do something to get ahead of the girls, an' I go in for havin' each one say what he thinks is best. After that we can pick out a plan. Now, what do you think we ought to do, Si?"

Master Kelly was very sulky; but he managed to state, as his conviction, that they could do no less than return the neckties and letters to the senders, treating the whole matter with silent scorn, and carry out the idea of the sleigh-ride, as if such insignificant persons had never had an existence.

Joe Barr thought it best to accept the invitations given, and treat the whole matter as a good joke whereby each boy had saved ten cents. Joe, however, had not yet paid the assessment twenty-five cents for the sleigh-ride, and many ought he had proposed this plan as a way of rading any outlay of money.

Eben Coulliard was willing to do whatever the others thought best; but at the same time he reminded them that a party at Aggie Morrell's house was not a thing to be "sneezed at," and if the invitation could be accepted graciously, he thought it would be a pleasant way of spending an evening.

Dan Crockett announced that he was not afraid to say he had rather go

to the party. He had already paid his quarter towards the sleigh-ride; but he was willing to look upon that as so much money thrown away if the others would agree to go to Aggie's house.

He thought that the money that the girls had spent could be returned to them in some way, and that the friendly feelings between the boys and girls of the school could be restored.

Jack Haley and his four intimate friends "did not care a cent what was done;" they would agree to anything the other fellows thought best.

Bart Carleton agreed with Si Kelly, but since it was known that he owed Si four agates and seventeen marbles, to say nothing of three tops, all believed that his debt had influenced his decision.

All, save Tom Hardy, gave their opinion, and it was found that the boys were about evenly divided; one party adopting Si's suggestion, and the other favoring the acceptance of the invitations, if it could be done so that they would not appear to be "backing down."

It "Now, see here, fellers'," said Tom, when every one looked at him as if expecting to hear what he thought, "I want you all to understand in the first place that I am willing to do what the majority think best; but I've got a little scheme that I think a good one. Let's go on the sleigh ride, an' go to the party, too."

"Then the girls would think we were smart," growled Si.

"Wait a minute, till you hear the whole of it. About half want to do one thing, and half another. Now, I say, let's each one write to the girl who has sent him a necktie, thanking her for the invitation to the party, and ask her to go on a sleigh-ride with us. We can hire both of Grout's big sleighs, an' have about as big a time as was ever seen in this town. I guess the girls won't be much ahead of us then."

"But how about their payin' for our neckties? " asked Dan Crockett.

"We'll let that go as if we was much obliged. to them; but we'll raise ten cents more apiece, an' buy aunt Betsey wood enough to last her till summer. If we pay the money now, we can each get a saw, an' have it all cut up before night. The girls won't have any the best of us then; aunt Betsey will be just that much better off; we can have our sleigh-ride, and we can go to the party as well. But if we should do simply one thing or the other, then the girls would be sure to think we had been beaten. Now, if all the fellers will agree to that, I'll get my share of the money right away, an' we'll ask Deacon Littlefield to buy the wood this morning."

Tom saw, even before he had ceased speaking, that the majority of the boys were in favor of his scheme, since by carrying it out they would miss neither one pleasure nor the other, and would only be obliged to pay ten cents extra, and to spend a little time sawing wood.

"But we can't get both sleighs for the same price we could one," said Si; but even this objection showed that he was favorably inclined towards Tom's scheme, if it could be accomplished without too great a sacrifice.

"Yes, we can, if we don't take them till the middle of the afternoon. We will start about three o'clock, an' come back to Aggie's house in time for the party."

"But how'll you fix it about the letters?" asked Si.

"I'll send this one to Maria Gilman, for she sent me the necktie, an' you can all copy it."

Then Tom read the following letter, which he had written while the others had been talking:

DEAR RIE: - I am much obliged for the invitation and the necktie. I will be there by eight o'clock if you will do a little favor for me. Us boys have been getting up a sleigh-ride for Saturday afternoon; we shall start about three o'clock from the schoolhouse, and get back to Aggie's in time for the party. Will you go?

I am sure aunt Betsey will feel grateful to you girls when she knows you each gave twenty cents towards making her comfortable, and if it had not been for the "lack of money," we boys would have paid our share.

Your friend, TOM.

"Hurrah! " shouted Dan Crockett. "I reckon that will fix things, an' when they find that we bought the wood for aunt Betsey, they can't think that they've got the right to feel very superior."

"They'll never know but that we meant all the time to do this very thing," said Tom, "an' we shall have as good a time as can be had."

There was no question but that this scheme would be carried out, for even Si Kelly came to understand that it was a very graceful way of extricating themselves from what, at one time, promised to be a decidedly disagreeable position, and he announced his decision by saying:

"Now, every feller must hurry home an' get the ten cents, so's we can buy the wood quick, an' then there won't be any chance for the girls to believe that we thought of this after we got their letters."

"Take the money you had collected for the ride, an' we will all make it up before night," suggested Tom.

In another moment Si was running at full speed towards Deacon Littlefield's house to ask him to buy the wood, and Tom suggested that each sleigh-rider sharpen his saw in order to be ready for work as soon as the fuel should be in aunt Betsey's yard.

Before night the wood had been purchased, , sawed, and split; the letters had been written and sent to the girls, and both of Mr. Grout's sleighs engaged for Saturday afternoon.

The story of the ride, and of the necktie party that followed it, would, without doubt, be interesting; but the telling of these pleasant festivities would occupy too much space. Suffice it to say that the girls readily accepted the invitations that were the result of Tom's scheme, and although they learned from some of the more garrulous sleigh-riders under just what press of circumstances they had been given, the "ten-centers" were too generous to hint of what they knew.

Aggie's party was a dazzling success. Every one appeared to have a good time, and the pairing off of the aprons and neckties caused considerable amusement, especially when Debby Thompson, the tallest girl present, found that she must accept the smallest boy - who was Winny, of course - as an escort.

It is hardly necessary to say that Winny was allowed to become one of the sleigh-riders; and since he had voluntarily agreed to go to the party, he was obliged to pay for his necktie, as well as his proportion of the cost of the sleighride and the wood. Thus it was that his love for cake proved to be quite expensive to him, owing to the varied schemes of his friends.

The End
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*** END OF THE PROJECT GUTENBERG EBOOK, A DISTRICT MESSENGER BOY AND A NECKTIE PARTY ***

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