

"Do as I tell you," came sternly from the under-master's lips. "Do you think I am unmanly enough to allow you to suffer for my fault? Get your satchel, while I see the janitor. We start for Kearney Junction on the next train."

"My duty is plain," continued Mr. James, "and I shall follow it. I erred in drinking the spirits, and I am punished. When you have been placed with the expedition, and my story proves your innocence, I have only made proper atonement."

"But your brother may make you leave the academy."

"Let him; it is just."

"And we may not overtake him till he reaches the end of the journey."

"Then to the end of the journey we go. I am determined. Come, we will go to the *dépôt*."

Mr. James, acting under a stern impulse, seemed a new man.

He had explained his intentions to the janitor, whom he left in charge of the academy, had secured his money, quite an amount, and had packed a small bundle in Ned's valise.

"If we have to go as far as California, I may do a little business there that ought to be attended to," Ned heard him mutter; "but I think we can overtake the excursion train," he said aloud.

"What are the Professor's plans?" asked Ned.

"The boys were transferred at the junction to a regular California excursion train from Chicago to San Francisco."

"And they stop often on the way West?"

"At all main points of interest, yes," replied Mr. James.

They were compelled to wait until six o'clock. Mr. James purchased two tickets for Kearney Junction, and, with Ned, stepped aboard the train.

Even the unpleasant circumstances leading to the strange journey did not entirely repress Ned's boyish excitement and enjoyment of the moment.

There was a novelty and zest in the fact that the moving train was starting them on a wild chase across the continent.

As the locomotive steamed out from the *dépôt* a large, dark man came rushing from the *dépôt* door.

"Ned Darrow!" he shouted breathlessly to a *dépôt* hand. "Has he and the school teacher been here?"

The man addressed pointed to the moving train.

"Wait, then, wait, I tell you! I must see them!" shouted the man.

He drove back into the *dépôt*, apparently for his carpet bag, for, flushed and panting, he appeared with it a moment later.

He was just too late to catch the train, from the platform of which Ned and Mr. James, curiously amazed at having heard their names so strikingly called, stood gazing back.

"Stop it! Stop the train!" yelled the stranger, swinging his bag frantically.

But no attention was paid to him, and as the train clattered down the grade he essayed to overtake it by running along its roadway.

A tie caught his foot before he had gone ten feet. The satchel went spinning into the ditch, and he himself fell prostrate.

They could see him arise with an angry scowling face and shake his fist at the laughing conductor.

"We can't wait for late passengers," remarked the latter, as Mr. James and Ned turned towards their seats.

A curious emotion came over Ned's mind as he cast a last glance back at the fast receding form of the victim of the recent mishap.

For he had recognized him positively as the mysterious stranger with the long black beard he had met in the woods near the academy the night before.

CHAPTER VI.

A BAD PREDICAMENT.

Ned's face looked perplexed and thoughtful as he and Mr. James came into the car, and the under-master noticed it.

"Did you hear that man, Ned?" he asked.

"Yes, Mr. James."

"He spoke your name."

"And mentioned you. He must have been looking for us at the academy, and they sent him here."

"He seemed very anxious to find us. Do you know him?"

"I have seen him before."

"Where?"

Ned related the encounter of the evening previous, and Mr. James listened intently.

"What can he want of you? Strange!" mused Mr. James. "What's that, Ned?"

"A letter I received this morning, and I never thought of opening it in the hurry and excitement of the day. Why—I believe it's from that man."

Ned had taken from his pocket the letter Dick Wilson had given him in the morning mail.

It was poorly written, and ran—

MASTER NED DARROW,—

You come to the tavern and see a friend who has come a long way to befriend you.

ABLE MORGAN.

"It must be from the bearded man," said Ned, and he showed the letter and imparted his theory to Mr. James. "What can he want of me?"

The minute Mr. James' eye rested on the letter, he uttered a startled cry.

"That writing!" he ejaculated. "Ned, there's something deeper in this than it looks."

"How so?"

"I've seen that handwriting before."

"When—where?"

"A month since, when this same man wrote me from California. I didn't tell you yesterday, but I will now. He offered five hundred dollars for the land at Sandy Flat."

"Five hundred dollars!" repeated Ned in surprise.

"Yes, and pretended the land was worthless, but he wanted it to make part of a ranch he had bought. He wrote so eagerly I suspected something, and determined to investigate. Besides, he's used a false name."

"How do you know that?"

"He's spelt Abel wrong. No man is so ignorant he can't spell his own name."

The two friends reflected deeply over the mystery for some time. Mr. James decided that a sudden value had been discovered in the land; "Able Morgan" was too anxious to get it in coming to Ridgeland after it, otherwise, and there seemed to be no doubt but that he and the man in the thicket with the bushy beard were identical.

"If I have to go to California, I'll take a look at the land myself, Ned," remarked Mr. James, thoughtfully.

Amid the changing scenes along the line, Ned's mind soon drifted from the subject last discussed.