

As the house door and then the door of the limousine closed after him, she went back toward the window, slowly taking off the wrap. She saw the motor shoot swiftly out upon the drive, turn northward in the way that it had come, and then turn again, and disappear. She could only stand and watch for it to come back and listen for the 'phone; for the moment she found it difficult to think. Something had happened to Uncle Benny, something terrible, dreadful for those who loved him; that was plain, though only the fact and not its nature was known to her or to her father; and that something was connected—intimately connected, her father had said—with a name which no one who knew Uncle Benny, ever had heard before, with the name of Alan Conrad of Blue Rapids, Kansas. Who was this Alan Conrad, and what could his connection be with Uncle Benny so to precipitate disaster upon him?

CHAPTER II.

Who is Alan Conrad?

THE recipient of the letter which Benjamin Corvet had written and later so excitedly attempted to recover, was asking himself a question which was almost the same as the question which Constance Sherrill had asked. He was, the second morning later, waiting for the first of the two daily eastbound trains which stopped at the little Kansas town of Blue Rapids which he called home. As long as he could look back into his life, the question, who is this person they call Alan Conrad, and what am I to the man who writes from Chicago, had been the paramount enigma of existence for him. Since he was now twenty-three, as nearly as he had been able to approximate it, and as distinct recollection of isolated extraordinary events went back to the time when he was five, it was quite eighteen years since he had first noticed the question put to the people who had him in charge: "So this is little Alan Conrad. Who is he?"

Undoubtedly the question had been asked in his presence before; certainly it was asked many times afterwards; but it was since that day when, on his noticing the absence of a birthday of his own, they had told him he was five, that he connected the evasion of the answer with the difference between himself and the other children he saw, and particularly between himself and the boy and girl in the same house with him. When visitors came from somewhere far off, no one of them ever looked surprised at seeing the other children or asked about them. Always, when some one came, it was, "So this is little Jim!" and "This is Betty; she's more of a Welton every day!" Then, each time with that change in the voice and in the look of the eyes and in the feel of the arms about him—for though Alan could not feel how the arms hugged Jim and Betty, he knew, that for him it was quite different—"So this is Alan Conrad," or, "So this is the child!" or, "This, I suppose, is the boy I've heard about!"

However, there was a quite definite, if puzzling, advantage at times in being Alan Conrad. Following the arrival of certain letters, which were distinguished from most others arriving at the house by having no ink writing on the envelope but just a sort of purple or black printing like newspapers, Alan invariably received a dollar to spend just as he liked. To be sure, unless "papa" took him to town, there was nothing for him to spend it upon; so, likely enough, it went into the square iron bank, of which the key was lost; but quite often he did spend it according to plans agreed upon among all his friends and, in memory of these occasions and in anticipation of the next, "Alan's dollar" became a community institution among the children.

But exhilarating and wonderful as it was to be able of one's self to take three friends to the circus, or to be the purveyor of twenty whole packages—not sticks—of gum, yet the dollar really made only more plain the boy's difference. The regularity and certainty of its arrival as Alan's share of some larger sum of money which came to "papa" in the letter, never served to make the event ordinary or accepted.

"Who gives it to you, Alan?" was a question more often asked, as time went on. The only answer Alan could give was, "It comes from Chicago." The postmark on the envelope, Alan noticed, was always Chicago; that was all he ever could find out about his dollar. He was about ten years old when, for a reason as inexplicable as the dollar's coming, the

letters with the typewritten addresses and the enclosed money ceased.

Except for the loss of the dollar at the end of every second month—a loss much discussed by all the children and not accepted as permanent till more than two years had passed—Alan felt no immediate results from the cessation of the letters from Chicago; and when the first effects appeared, Jim and Betty felt them quite as much as he. Papa and mamma felt them, too, when the farm had to be given up, and the family moved to the town, and papa went to work in the woollen mill beside the river.

Papa and mamma, at first surprised and dismayed by the stopping of the letters, still clung to the hope of the familiar, typewritten addressed envelope appearing again; but when, after two years, no more money came, resentment which had been steadily growing against the person who had sent the money began to turn against Alan; and his "parents" told him all they knew about him.

In 1896 they had noticed an advertisement for persons to care for a child; they had answered it to the office of the newspaper which printed it. In response to their letter a man called upon them and, after seeing them and going around to see their friends, had made arrangements with them to take a boy of three, who was in good health and came of good people. He paid in advance board for a year and agreed to send a certain amount every two months after that time. The man brought the boy, whom he called Alan Conrad, and left him. For seven years the money agreed upon came; now it had ceased, and papa had no way of finding the man—the name given by him appeared to be fictitious, and he had left no address except "general delivery, Chicago"—Papa knew nothing more than that. He had advertised in the Chicago papers after the money stopped coming, and he had communicated with every one named Conrad in or near Chicago, but he had learned nothing. Thus, at the age of thirteen, Alan definitely knew that what he already had guessed—the fact that he belonged somewhere else than in the little brown house—was all that any one there could tell him; and the knowledge gave persistence to many internal questionings. Where did he belong? Who was he? Who was the man who had brought him here? Had the money ceased coming because the person who sent it was dead? In that case, connection of Alan with the place where he belonged was permanently broken. Or would some other communication from that source reach him some time—if not money, then something else? Would he be sent for some day? He did not resent "papa and mamma's" new attitude of benefactors toward him; instead, loving them both because he had no one else to love, he sympathized with it. They had struggled hard to keep the farm. They had ambitions for Jim; they were scrimping and sparing now so that Jim could go to college, and whatever was given to Alan was taken away from Jim and diminished by just that much his opportunity.

But when Alan asked papa to get him a job in the woollen mill at the other side of town where papa worked in some humble and indefinite capacity, the request was refused. Thus, externally at least, Alan's learning the little that was known about himself made no change in his way of living; he went, as did Jim, to the town school, which combined grammar and high schools under one roof; and, as he grew older, he clerked—as Jim also did—in one of the town stores during vacations and in the evenings; the only difference was this: that Jim's money, so earned, was his own, but Alan carried his home as part payment of those arrears which had mounted up against him since the letters ceased coming. At seventeen, having finished high school, he was clerking officially in Merrill's general store, when the next letter came.

It was addressed this time not to papa, but to Alan Conrad. He seized it, tore it open, and a bank draft for fifteen hundred dollars fell out. There was no letter with the enclosure, no word of communication; just the draft to the order of Alan Conrad. Alan wrote the Chicago bank by which the draft had been issued; their reply showed that the draft had been purchased with currency, so there was no record of the identity of the person who had sent it. More than that amount was due for arrears for the

seven years during which no money was sent, even when the total which Alan had earned was deducted. So Alan merely endorsed the draft over to "father"; and that fall Jim went to college. But, when Jim discovered that it not only was possible but planned at the university for a boy to work his way through, Alan went also.

Four wonderful years followed. The family of a professor of physics, with whom he was brought in contact by his work outside of college, liked him and "took him up." He lodged finally in their house and became one of them. In companionship with these educated people, ideas and manners came to him which he could not have acquired at home; athletics straightened and added bearing to his muscular, well-formed body; his pleasant, strong young face acquired self-reliance and self-control. Life became filled with possibilities for himself which it had never held before.

But on his day of graduation he had to put away the enterprise he had planned and the dreams he dreamed and, conscious that his debt to father and mother still remained unpaid, he had returned to care for them; for father's health had failed and Jim, who had opened a law office in Kansas City, could do nothing to help.

No more money had followed the draft from Chicago and there had been no communication of any kind; but the receipt of so considerable a sum had revived and intensified all Alan's speculations about himself. The vague expectation of his childhood that sometime, in some way, he would be "sent for" had grown during the last six years to a definite belief. And now—on the afternoon before—the summons had come.

THIS time, as he tore open the envelope, he saw that besides a cheque, there was writing within—an uneven and nervous-looking but plainly legible communication in longhand. The letter made no explanation. It told him, rather than asked him, to come to Chicago, gave minute instructions for the journey, and advised him to telegraph when he started. The cheque was for a hundred dollars to pay his expenses. Cheque and letter were signed by a name completely strange to him.

He was a distinctly attractive looking lad, as he stood now on the station platform of the little town, while the eastbound train rumbled in, and he fingered in his pocket the letter from Chicago.

As the train came to a stop, he pushed his suitcase up on to a car platform and stood on the bottom step, looking back at the little town standing away from its railroad station among brown, treeless hills, now scantily snow-covered—the town which was the only home he ever consciously had known. His eyes dampened and he choked, as he looked at it and at the people on the station platform—the station-master, the drayman, the man from the post office who would receive the mail bag, people who called him by his first name, as he called them by theirs. He did not doubt at all that he would see the town and them again. The question was what he would be when he did see them. They and it would not be changed, but he would. As the train started, he picked up the suitcase and carried it into the second day-coach.

Finding a seat, at once he took the letter from his pocket and for the dozenth time reread it. Was Corvet a relative? Was he the man who had sent the remittances when Alan was a little boy, and the one who later had sent the fifteen hundred dollars? Or was he merely a go-between, perhaps a lawyer? There was no letter-head to give aid in these speculations. The address to which Alan was to come was in Astor Street. He had never heard the name of the street before. Was it a business street, Corvet's address in some great office building, perhaps?

He tried by repeating both names over and over to himself to arouse any obscure, obliterated childhood memory he might have had of them; but the repetition brought no result. Memory, when he stretched it back to its furthest, showed him only the Kansas prairie.

Late that afternoon he reached Kansas City, designated in the letter as the point where he would change cars. That night saw him in his train—a transcontinental with berths nearly all made up and people sleeping behind the curtains. Alan undressed and got into his berth, but he lay awake most of the night, excited and expectant. The late February