

"Came in the mail for you, Ned," he explained.

A letter for Ned was a rarity, and he glanced curiously at the heavy superscription it bore. It was postmarked Ridgeland.

Ned placed it in his pocket without opening it, and, with his school-mates, entered the chapel.

The auspicious moment had come at last. The fall of a pin could have been heard as Professor Ballentine concluded the morning reading, and advanced to the front of the platform.

His hand resting on the desk, his benevolent face beaming down upon the assembled scholars, he prefaced his remarks with the single word—"Gentlemen."

There was a flutter of expectancy and enthusiasm, a faint whisper of "hear! hear!" and the Professor continued—

"When the grammar school of Ridgeland was first organized, a wealthy gentleman of this village, as you all know, endowed the same, and made especial provision for the enjoyment of each long vacation by establishing a fund known as the annual expedition fund. This money, invested profitably, has for years admitted of an annual excursion for pleasure and instruction.

"This year, the amount ready for the contingency being unusually large, we have decided to give the students a trip which for extent and interest will entirely eclipse that of all previous years. The memory of your uniform good behaviour and excellent scholarship for the past year enhances the happiness I feel in announcing the great pleasure I have in store for you.

"At three o'clock this afternoon you will be at the dépôt at Ridgeland. The cars will convey us to Kearney Junction, on the Union Pacific Railroad, where an excursion train will bear us across the continent to San Francisco, whence, after a visit to some of the famous natural wonders of the Golden State, we will take a two weeks' voyage down the Pacific coast."

"Hur-r-a-h!"

Like a mighty whirlwind held in check during a lull in a storm and suddenly bursting forth with renewed intensity, the shouts of delight and enthusiasm succeeding the Professor's announcement were deafening.

Despite himself, the old teacher smiled, a suspicious moisture visible in his happy eyes. It was some moments before he could resume. When he finally spoke, however, the exuberant vivacity of the assembled throng was perceptibly decreased at the serious tones he employed.

"I regret that any unpleasant incident should have occurred to mar the pleasure of this day, but my duty compels that I refer to a matter that has grieved me considerably, and which, as a flagrant violation of decorum and the rules of the academy, demands attention.

"I find this morning that many of you knew of the proposed trip to the ocean—a secret I have preserved hitherto because your parents had to be written to, and our arrangements for railroad transportation were not definitely settled until yesterday.

"I find this morning a positive clue to the spreading of the secret of the expedition. Some student, more curious than the others, broke into my study last night. In his endeavour to find some trace of the proposed journey, he examined the maps and charts I had drawn, and spilled the contents of two bottles, one of ink, the other of alcohol, over the drawings."

As Professor Ballentine spoke, he held up some discoloured sheets, and his face grew quite stern.

"Gentlemen," he said, "before you leave this room the culprit must acknowledge his guilt, and receive a merited punishment. Who did this deed?"

There was not a stir nor a murmur in the silent school-room as every eye was fixed intently on the Professor's impressive face.

Ned Darrow started violently. His breath came quick and he turned pale.

"Trouble in the study?" he murmured. "It is Mr. James, and the Professor has accused some of the boys!"

"Did you hear me, gentlemen?"

The tutor's voice was a trifle louder as he uttered the mandatory words.

Still there was no reply.

"Ned Darrow, stand up!"

Had the floor opened and engulfed him, Ned would scarcely have been more overcome than at the Professor's stern and prompt summons.

Vaguely fearful and trembling, he arose to his feet, met the Professor's searching glance for a moment, and then, confused and apprehensive, lowered his eyes to the floor.

"Ned Darrow, did you force your way into my study last night?"

"I did not!" came clear and promptly.

A grieved, horrified look spread over Professor Ballentine's face.

"You deny it?" he ejaculated. "You deny all knowledge of the disorder in my study?"

Ned did not reply. His mind was in a sad whirl of doubt and distress.

How could he speak without inculpating Mr. James?—for he knew almost to a certainty that the under-master was the culprit.

To breathe his suspicions would be to lead to an investigation of the tavern episode. No, no, he could not betray his friend!

Yet, like the knell to all his hopes and ambition, sounded the Professor's troubled tones—

"A boyish prank I might forgive; falsehood, never. I have afforded you an opportunity to speak truthfully and confess your fault.

"I am shocked at this episode. It was you who imparted the secret of the expedition to the scholars. How could you learn of it except from an examination of the maps in my study?"

"And it was you, Ned Darrow, whom I discovered on the staircase last night about the time the library was entered. Once more I urge you to confess your fault. Did you enter my study last night?"

Ned Darrow hung his head in mute distress.

"If you did not, as you say, do you know who did?"

The Professor waited a moment or two for a reply.

Then, with a sigh that told of a gentle nature grieved at the apparent discovery of guilt in a beloved student, he said, in a tone of forced pleasantness—

"Gentlemen, do not let the harmony of the day be further disturbed by this unpleasant incident. At three o'clock you will meet me at the railroad dépôt—all of you, with one exception—Ned Darrow!"

Poor Ned! As his school-mates filed past him, and the room was deserted, he stood as if transfixed. At that moment he could not analyze his emotions or act coherently.

The sunlight of life seemed suddenly gone. He walked slowly from the apartment to his own dormitory, and sat down to reflect over all that had happened.

Around him was bustle and enjoyment, the excited lads preparing for the afternoon journey. A score of impulses filled his mind, and once he started off in quest of Mr. James, hoping to find some means of convincing Professor Ballentine of his error without betraying his friend, the under-master.