

coat. Its owner stirred, gave utterance to a startled cry, and sat bolt upright.

A big, swarthy man, wearing an enormous black beard, stared at the intruding lad with flashing eyes.

One hand of the stranger, with marvelous rapidity, had whipped out a gleaming knife from a heavy belt worn under his woolly coat.

His hoarse, harsh tones brought a momentary terror to the trembling and bewildered Ned.

"Ha! trying to rob me, eh?" growled the bearded stranger, catching Ned's wrist in a grip like iron.

Ned Darrow was so completely taken by surprise at the appearance of the strange man that he was speechless for the time being.

He reasoned that he had disturbed some sleeping tramp, until he noticed that the man was well dressed, and that the parcel by his side more resembled a traveller's outfit than a vagrant's bundle of rags.

"Are you going to speak?" yelled the man, angrily. "You were trying to rob me!"

"I never thought of it."

"Then who sent you here?"

"No one. I came by accident. I was going home to the academy, when I stumbled over you."

"Going where?" demanded the stranger, eagerly.

"To the academy—to Professor Ballentine's grammar school. Won't you please let go of my wrist? You hurt me."

The stranger released his hold of Ned's arm, muttering some incoherent words about "being pilfered and robbed everywhere," and that "they wouldn't catch no weasel asleep when he was around."

He replaced his knife and put on his hat, which had served as a pillow. Then he began to question Ned anew.

"You needn't be afraid of me, lad," he said. "I'm a stranger here, and come from a country where civility ain't much used, and I didn't know but you was trying to rob me. You're pretty well acquainted here. I reckon?"

"Yes."

"In the village? Ridgeland, they call it, don't they?"

Ned nodded assent, and edged slightly away from the stranger.

"Wasn't there a family named Darrow lived here once?"

Ned started and was silent for a moment or two. The stranger's manner impressed him most unfavourably, yet he wondered what possible interest he could have in the question he asked.

"Yes," replied Ned, finally, "there was a family by that name here. Why do you inquire, if I may ask? The Darrow family are all dead, except one member of it."

"And who's that? A lad, I believe?"

"Yes," responded Ned, more and more surprised at the stranger's knowledge of his family history.

"And his name is Ned, if I don't assume too much?"

"It is."

"Does he go to the school you spoke of?"

"Yes."

"Likely to be found there any time. I suppose?"

"He lives there."

"Good. That's all I wanted to know. That'll do, lad: I'm much obliged."

The stranger hobbled his head with rough courtesy, and Ned, glad to receive the signal of dismissal, moved from the spot with a feeling of relief.

"What new mystery is this?" soliloquized Ned, perplexedly. "Did I do right not to learn the object of

that man's questions? What can his strange interest in our family matters mean?"

Pondering deeply, Ned stood silently speculative for some time after he climbed the fence and gained the road.

It had grown almost dark. Suddenly the sound of a boisterous voice aroused the thinker. Looking down the road a few rods, he discerned the cause of the commotion.

Two men were coming towards him. The one he recognized as a farmer named Dale, who resided at the edge of the town. He bore a small jug in one hand and was talking vehemently to a companion.

Ned's heart came into his mouth, as the saying goes, as he glanced at that companion, for both men walked unsteadily, and the near proximity of the tavern, to Ned's quick mind, accounted for the boisterous tones and irregular gait manifest in the appearance of both.

"It is Mr. James!" whispered Ned in a half-frightened tone. "He has been to the tavern again. What will Professor Ballentine say?"

The two men came to a stop near Ned, as they reached a path that led toward farmer Dale's home.

The latter was discussing some agricultural theme excitedly. Mr. James was listening silently, but his eyes wore a dull, heavy expression, and his body swayed somewhat unsteadily.

"Well, good night, Mr. James. Just study over my new theory on the rotation of crops, in this climate, and see if I ain't right." Ned heard Mr. Dale say, as he started homewards.

The under-master waved an adieu, and then as his late companion left him, sat down on the rock.

Ned, stealing softly to his side, saw him lift his hand to his head in a confused, bewildered manner.

Mr. James looked up in a dazed sort of a fashion. Then his face showed a token of embarrassment.

"Oh, it's you, Ned? I'm not feeling very well, lad. You run along to the academy."

"Not without you, Mr. James."

The voice of the last speaker was serious, but it quivered with suppressed emotion. The under-master had spoken in a muffled, difficult tone.

"Why won't you go without me, Ned?" inquired Mr. James, again sleepily resting his head on his hands.

"Because you are in trouble. Mr. James, you know what I mean. You know that I, as well as the Professor, know of your—of your last trouble," concluded Ned, hesitatingly.

His words seemed to arouse Mr. James.

"You're right, Ned," he said drearily. "My brother told me three months ago, when I was foolish enough to drink some wine at a party, and it flew to my head, that he couldn't have me here if I repeated that. I have repeated it, Ned, to-night, but I ain't so much to blame. You see, I met farmer Dale. He insisted on a glass of spirits, Ned. I didn't want it, but you know my weak will. I didn't believe it would affect me so. It's mixed my head up in the strangest manner. I can't stand anything, since my sunstroke."

Ned Darrow gazed pityingly on Mr. James, as the latter arose, dizzy and unsteady, to his feet.

"You must get me to my room unperceived by the boys," he said faintly, to Ned. "I'm deathly sick, and my brother wouldn't believe that one little glass of spirits caused it all."

The under-master had not exaggerated his condition, and it was with no little trouble that Ned got him to the academy grounds, and thence to his room.

(To be Continued.)