

"Then go and ask your particular friend, Mr. James."

The boys had listened breathlessly to the conversation. They were still silent as Ralph Warden turned to leave the spot.

"If what you say is true," they heard Ned say, in a strangely agitated tone, "there is far less disgrace in the fact than in your vindictive attempt to humiliate me. If I am a charity student, I will not remain so long, Ralph Warden; no, not while industry and honest endeavour can keep me from being what, to your shame, you term me—a beggar!"

With head erect, compressed lips and pale face, Ned Darrow left the campus. He did not pause to analyze his emotions, or to give way to them.

Straight to the office, attached to the recitation-room, he went.

When Ralph Warden had termed Ned a favourite of James Ballentine—a sort of clerk and under-master at the academy—he was not far off in his surmise.

There were many reasons for this. Mr. James' position in the school was far from being a pleasant one. He was under considerable restraint from his brother, and his easy-going manners and simple, unsuspecting mind had made him the object of more than one practical joke at the hands of the students.

A placid, quiet sort of a man, Mr. James exhibited but feeble will-power in guiding the boys. In fact, he rarely interfered with their pranks. Weaknesses and characteristics of excellence were passively displayed to the casual observer, but Ned Darrow was in Mr. James' confidence, and the fact that he knew some of his failings, and, young as he was, had become a companion and counsellor of his more mature friend, constituted a bond of union between them.

"Oh, Mr. James! can I see you a moment?"

The nervous under-master turned sharply, disagreeably startled at Ned's abrupt call, but a smile of genuine pleasure crossed his sallow face as he recognized his young friend.

"I know what you want!" he cried in a playful tone. "Want to pump me about the vacation trip. It won't do, Ned, you'll have to be patient—why, lad! what's the matter?"

He stopped his bantering talk suddenly, as he noticed his companion's pale and serious features.

"I want to ask you a few questions, Mr. James," spoke Ned earnestly.

"Sit down, Ned," he said. "Now, then, what's the trouble, for you look as if you'd lost the last friend you have in the world?"

"Not so bad as that, Mr. James," replied Ned, with a vain attempt at a smile.

"What is it, Ned?"

"I want to know two things," spoke Ned, in a steady tone of voice. "Am I a charity student at the academy? Is it true that my tuition has not been paid for the last six months?"

A startled, confused look stole into the under-master's face. For some moments he was silent. His eyes sought the ground, evading Ned's earnest, steadfast glance as evidently he would have avoided a reply could he have done so.

Then, with an apparent effort, he replied in a low, unsteady tone—

"Yes, Ned, it is true."

Ned Darrow was slightly overcome by the unexpected reply of his friend, Mr. James, and sat staring blankly at him for some moments.

"You say it is true," he found voice to utter after quite a lapse of silence. "Oh! Mr. James, why did you not tell me this before?"

The under-master fidgeted uneasily. His face was divided between an expression of restless indecision and sympathy for Ned.

"Because I did not want to spoil your vacation, Ned," he answered finally. "Who told you? What meddling tale-bearer has revealed a secret that was nobody's business but my brother's?"

"It was Ralph Warden."

Mr. James frowned. "I learned it from his father, eh? Well, all I've got to say is that Squire Warden is in poor business——"

"Don't, Mr. James!" interrupted Ned. "It don't matter, if it's true, who knows it. There's no disgrace in it, that I see, only it's better I should know where I stand. Now, tell me all about it."

"To begin at the first," he said finally, "as you know, two years ago your brother, William Darrow, after the death of your widowed father, placed you here at school. Your tuition was paid in advance, and your brother went to the far West. There he invested his means in business, and your bills were paid up to six months since."

"And then," murmured Ned softly, "my brother died."

"Yes, on his way back to Ridgeland, shattered in health, a broken-spirited, disappointed man. His body was sent here, and he was buried in the churchyard of the village beside his parents."

"But I thought there was some money?"

"Sufficient to pay the funeral expenses—nothing more."

"And you have kept me here at school without compensation?"

"Yes, Ned."

Tears of gratitude stood in Ned's eyes, as he grasped his companion's hand.

"Kept you here, Ned," he continued, "intending next fall to either make you a proposition to do some office work as pay for your tuition——"

"Which I would willingly do——"

"Or find you employment where you could win your own living. Your brother *did* leave something else, Ned—a letter and a deed."

Ned looked interested. "A letter and a deed," he repeated curiously.

"Yes. The deed conveyed a lonely stretch of barren ground on the Pacific coast, near a settlement called Sandy Flat. The letter related his Western experience. He had made money in the West, and had met there a half-cousin, his only relative except yourself."

"Do you know his name?"

"Yes, it was given in the letter. It was John Markham."

"I have heard of him, but never saw him," remarked Ned.

"It was an evil day when he met your brother," said Mr. James ominously. "Because he proved his ruin. He was a heartless, unprincipled schemer. He formed a conspiracy against your brother, while pretending to be his friend, and robbed him of the money he had worked so hard to earn."

"How did he do that?"

"He and some others purchased some gold and buried it in different places in a worthless hundred-acre piece of land in Sandy Flat. They then induced your brother to visit the place. They dug up the gold. He believed their stories about the fabulous wealth it might produce. He paid all his money and secured a deed. The next day the conspirators disappeared, and your brother learned that the land was worthless."

(To be continued.)