

JULY 8, 1898.

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## THE BOYS IN THE BLOCK.

BY MAURICE F. EGAN, LL. D.

III.

The washing was almost over when Ned Smythe, in a despondent frame of mind, reached home. John was trying hard to master a tough sum in fractions, for, although he was nearly twenty-one years of age, he had never had time to go to school for more than a few months in all his life. He was now a porter in a commission office, down-town; he was as industrious as he was ambitious, he wanted to be something more, and he knew that to rise he must educate himself. So he worked with all his might when he had time. It was a slow task without a teacher. Besides, he had his share of the household work to do, which consisted of the sewing and mending of the family. John could sew like a sailor. A tailor might have smiled at some of his seams, but they were strong. John had not served a year on the bark *Curlew*, bound from New York to Havana and back, for nothing. He could use his hands more skillfully than any landlubber.

John was big and stalwart. A healthy, honest fellow, with wide open eyes that looked straight at the world. Larry, who was washing his last pair of stockings, looked sleepy. He was a chubby boy, always with a tear in his clothes, no matter how diligently John might mend.

The room in which the boys cooked, talked, ate and read, when they did read, had a neat square of bright carpet in the centre of the floor. It contained a big cooking stove, a table and several chairs. The walls were papered with pictures cut from illustrated papers. Their sleeping room was much smaller.

Their rooms were clean and warm—in contrast to those of many of their neighbors, where dirt and warmth seemed to be inseparable.

Ned opened the door and said—

"How d'ye do boys!" and sank into a chair by the fire.

"I say," Larry said, "did you get 'The Bandit of the Pyrenees' from Tom Keefe? He said he'd lend it to us."

John raised his head from his book of arithmetic.

"Look here, Larry, I told you should not read books like that. And, Ned, I hope you will not encourage him to break my rule."

"Very well," Ned said, briefly.

"I guess you read them yourself when you were my age," Larry burst out. "If you hadn't read too many novels, you'd never have gone to sea."

"That is true, Larry," John answered, with that mixture of gentleness and firmness which had enabled him to control these hot-headed lads, "that is true. If I had minded wiser people, I would not have suffered as I did. I came home, after my last voyage in the *Curlew*, with a broken arm. For weeks I could get nothing to do, for nobody wanted to hire a boy who could use but one arm. I learned how foolish this reading of bad novels is."

"They're not bad," snapped Larry who had let his iron stay so long in one place that there was a warning smell of burning stockings. "I never saw a bad word in any of them. The good people always get the money, and kill the bad people in the end."

"You'd better stick to your Catechism, I say," answered John.

"I am not going to work all day and have no fun at all. I am fond of reading, and I like good, stirring novels."

"You had better study something useful."

"I want fun for awhile."

"I don't," put in Ned. "John is right. Tom Keefe and I have been having fun, and I never felt so mean in my life."

John turned up the light and looked anxiously into Ned's face.

"No scrape I hope—and after catechism class, too."

"That's the worst of it. Father Raymond told me to meditate on the duty of loving my neighbors as myself, and he said, too, that Italians and everybody were our neighbors, and then I went out, and I'll tell you what I did."

It was an admirable trait in the Synthes that they were entirely frank. They had no secrets from one another. They would tell unpleasant things and look for advice, sympathy, or even a scolding with complete indifference. John had taught them to be frank.

John shook his head gravely when Ned had finished.

"It's too bad," he said.

Ned moved uneasily in his chair.

"I didn't think," he said.

"But you and Tom have hurt both Beppo and Guiseppe, just the same as if you had thought."

"I know that," said Ned.

"I'll drop in and see the Testas tomorrow night."

"Don't, John," said Larry, "they will put a stiletto into you."

"I see you have learned a great deal out of your novels, Larry. Now, Ned, you said, 'when mother was alive, she used to take an interest in the Italians that lived near us. She was just as poor as they were, but she knew how to be neat and clean, and make things comfortable. She and the Italians were great friends. They helped them all she could. They're Christians like us,' she was always saying, 'and we must show some Christian love for them.' And she did. She would send a bunch of our red geraniums to help take the chill of death off a little child that lay in its coffin, or she'd send some other neighborly thing within her reach. And whenever there was a marriage or a christening, the Italians would always ask her to be

present, and send in some sweetmeats for us children, or a bottle of wine. They were not a bad lot. And I think that if we really mean to profit by the lessons of the catechism, we ought to put them in practice. To go and talk about love for one's neighbor, and then go to chase one's neighbor until his neck is nearly broken, is not a way of living honest and Christian-like."

"Preach on, preach ever," said Larry, yawning.

John's cheeks reddened.

"You ought to have more respect for John," said Ned.

"Preaching or no preaching, he has kept a comfortable roof over our heads."

Larry only grinned. He loved John, but he did not like to show it.

Ned went to bed with a heavy heart. He did not fall asleep as usual. He thought about Beppo's misfortune, until his brain seemed to be nothing but confusion. And then Guiseppe's question about the apples worried him. What would Father Raymond say?

Ned had a miserable time, but at last he fell asleep.

John was not hard on the boys. He allowed them as much money as he could for themselves, so Ned and Larry had, unless the times were unusually hard, a little hoard of their own. Larry never had his long; but Ned added something every week to his little sum, which he kept in an old stocking tied under the bed. He had saved nearly six dollars. He had made many plans about this money. He thought of buying John a pair of heavy winter boots; of getting a little stand and beginning the cigar business, in connection with a chair and a box for blacking boots; of having a cutaway coat for Sunday, like those worn by some of the more aristocratic boys in the block; and of playing an accordion.

This last thought had a sweetness all its own. Ned had often imagined himself in the act of pushing and dragging "Sweet Violets" from the instrument he loved. He felt, however, that he must give up even this beautiful dream. On the next morning he went over to see Tom Keefe.

Tom was getting ready to go to work. But before starting he had to wash the faces of his three little brothers, and help his mother to clear away the breakfast things. Tom lived with his father and mother on the third floor of a house in the block, not quite so crowded as the one in which Ned lived. His parents had three rooms, and they kept the place as snug and comfortable as they could.

It was impossible to avoid hearing the bad language of the evil people who lived in the house, and in the neighborhood; and it was no uncommon thing to meet a drunkard reeling upstairs. But Tom's father and mother did the best they could to keep their children pure. They sent the younger ones to the Brothers' school, and made the eldest—Tom—go regularly to Father Raymond's class. Every night after supper all the family said the rosary, and on Sunday nights, Tom, who had a good voice, sang a hymn, assisted by the whole family. Tom's father liked to have his family around him on Sunday nights. Sometimes the Smythes dropped in, and a concert was the order of the night. Tom's father and mother believed that the best way to keep him and his brothers out of the streets was to make their home cheerful.

Tom's mother was tying up a package of luncheon for him, when Ned entered and said, "good morning."

Ned waited until the luncheon was ready and started out with Tom. Tom was an errand boy in an office down town.

"I came to ask you to go over to the Testas' with me."

Tom shook his head.

"Not at all—I don't want to go near them. They will not want to see us."

Ned pulled six silver dollars from his pocket.

"I am going to ask Beppo to buy a new violin with these."

Tom started in amazement.

"But how about the accordion?"

"I'll have to do without it, that's all. Will you come to the Testas' with me?"

"All right," said Tom.

They found Beppo and Nina seated on the floor, trying to put the violin together.

Nina had been crying. Beppo was still crying.

The visitors stood timidly on the threshold. Nina saw them, but her eyes flashed, and she turned her back to them. Filippo had slightly raised himself on his pillow. He watched the efforts of the children, and shook his head mournfully.

"No more music from that violin!" he said.

Ned walked up to the two and laid his six silver dollars on the floor, near the violin. Beppo started from his knees.

"What for?" he asked.

"To buy another fiddle—that all," answered Ned, shamefacedly.

"Impossible," said Filippo, from the bed, "one could never buy a violin like that, with all the money one could earn. It was a treasure."

Ned sighed.

"Well," he said, "I can't do any more than offer you all I have."

Nina pushed the money away from her.

"I would not take it, Beppo. I would starve first. These boys hate us!"

Ned took up his money.

"I see it is no use," he said. "I suppose I may as well buy an accordion after all."

Beppo raised his head.

"Nina is wrong, I can see that you do not hate us. But it needs much money—ah, so much money!—to buy

a good violin." As Beppo said this, he seemed to sink into utter despair.

"Nonsense!" exclaimed Tom. "Don't give up so easily. Never say die. Why can't you hire a fiddle. Old Altieri in the cellar has two. Give him fifty cents a week, or less, and he'll lend you one."

Beppo and Nina looked at each other in sudden hope.

"He speaks well," said Nina, looking favorably on Tom. "I did not think he had so much sense."

"Ah, yes," answered Beppo, "but we have not the fifty cents. Ah, no, we have not the money."

"There it is," said Ned, promptly, thrusting his six dollars in Beppo's hand.

"He will pay you back," said Nina, proudly. "As you do not really hate us we will take your money; but we will pay you back. See, I will mark it down."

Nina lit a match, let it burn for a few seconds, and wrote something in Italian on the white wall, which was used very often for this kind of book-keeping.

"Now let's go," said Ned, afraid that Filippo or Beppo might thank him. He did not expect thanks from Nina. She seemed inclined to look on the transaction as a strictly business one.

"We shall pay you back," said Nina, proudly.

TO BE CONTINUED.

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