

POPPY OTT'S
SEVEN LEAGUE
STILTS

BY LEO EDWARDS

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HERE "MR. SPECKLEBERRY" BLEW UP. ([Page 44](#))

POPPY OTT'S SEVEN LEAGUE STILTS

By
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THE POPPY OTT BOOKS
THE JERRY TODD BOOKS

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TO
MOTHER AND DAD

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POPPY OTT'S SEVEN-LEAGUE STILTS

CHAPTER I POPPY AND I DO SOME TOOTING

Poppy Ott had me guessing. Every time I went to his house I caught him with his nose in a thick-backed book. Or if he wasn't up to his ears in the new book he was fiddling with a home-made drawing board. Curious to know what he was doing, I tried to get a peek at his work. But he kept his drawing board hid. Nor would he let me see his book until I cornered him about it one day.

“What is it,” says I, “an arithmetic?”

“What's what?” says he, pretending not to understand what I was driving at.

“The book that you're packing away on the inside of your

head,” says I.

“Oh! . . .” says he, looking out of the window at a yellow tomcat. “Isn’t it a nice day?”

“Of course it is,” says I. “But I wasn’t talking about the weather. I was talking about the book that you hurried out of sight when you saw me coming. What kind of a book is it?”

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He grinned. For he saw that I had him cornered. But instead of answering me he picked up a copy of a weekly magazine.

“Just notice the hundreds of advertisements,” says he, letting the pages run through his fingers.

“What of it?” says I, wondering if this was another trick of his to sidetrack me.

He stopped at a full-page radio advertisement.

“What do you suppose it costs the advertiser,” says he, “to get an advertisement like that printed in one issue of the magazine?”

“A hundred dollars?” says I.

He looked at me as though I had said something dumb.

“A hundred dollars! Jerry, it costs *five thousand dollars.*”

“Back up,” says I.

“It’s a fact. I’ve been reading about it.”

“Ah-ha!” says I, sort of triumphant-like. “So that’s what you’ve been studying, hey? An advertising book!”

I wasn’t surprised. For he’s naturally a deep kid. And I could understand easily enough how an advertising book would strike his fancy.

“I’ve always been interested in advertising,” says he earnestly. “I like to read the advertisements in the magazines. With so much money being spent on advertising each year—millions and millions of dollars—it seems to me that there ought to be some fine chances for a young fellow in the business. And it’s work I’d like to take up. I’m quite sure of that.”

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“You’re a funny kid,” says I.

“Funny!” says he, looking at me.

“An old advertising book wouldn’t interest me,” says I.

“Besides, this advertising stuff that you’re spouting about is a man’s work. And you’re nothing but a boy.”

“I’m growing up fast,” says he, in his steady, thoughtful way.

“And a fellow has got to look ahead if he’s going to amount to anything.”

I yawned.

“Let’s go swimming,” says I. “That’s more fun than studying advertising.”

“Wait a minute,” says he, as I started for the door. “I want to show you something.”

He got out his drawing board then in further confidence in me.

“What is it?” says I, squinting at his work.

“An advertisement,” says he proudly.

I didn’t make fun of his work. For I didn’t want to hurt his feelings. But it’s a fact I didn’t know whether the picture that he had drawn in his advertisement was a cow or a nanny goat. Furthermore, I didn’t care.

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He seemed to read my thoughts.

“I’m not very good at drawing,” he admitted. “However,” he added quickly, “that isn’t important in advertising work. What really counts is the *idea*. Once you have the idea it’s easy enough to explain to an artist what you want done.”

“And do we go swimming now?” says I, acting bored.

He laughed and dug me in the ribs.

“Jerry, I like you. . . . Sure thing we’ll go swimming, if you want to. Come on, old funny-face.”

On our way through town Lawrence Donner tried to shove us off the sidewalk in front of his father’s shoe store. He’s a mean kid. And it makes me disgusted the way he brags about the big fortune that he’s going to get when his rich uncle dies.

I suppose it's all right to inherit money, but I don't think a fellow should run around talking about it ahead of time. That looks disrespectful to me. And if I ever get to be a rich old man, and it comes to my ears that my younger relatives are waiting around for me to die so that they can ram their greedy hands into my fat money box, believe me somebody is going to get fooled.

Lawrence Donner, Sr., the shoe-store proprietor, is a 5 younger brother of the old retired manufacturer who lives in the lonely three-story brick house on Main Street. I have been told that Mr. Herman Donner is very wealthy. In Dad's boyhood the big brick house was looked upon as one of Tutter's finest residences. But to-day the place is run down and out of date, like its shambling, old-fashioned owner. And the rambling carriage factory that once gave steady jobs to several hundred men now stands idle, its machinery rusting and its water wheel rotting away. One time I asked Dad why things were so dead around the Donner carriage works. And he explained to me that there was no market for carriages. People were buying automobiles instead, he said. Consequently the factory had been compelled to close down for want of orders.

While Lawrence's father isn't rich, like his older brother, he has a good, paying shoe business, though how he can hold the trade is more than I can understand, for everybody in Tutter knows that he's tricky. Mother won't go in his store to buy a penny's worth. I don't go there either. When I need anything in the shoe line I go to Mr. Harper's store, on the other side of the street.

Lawrence is the only kid in the family. And, bu-lieve me, he sure has a big opinion of himself. You should see him at school petting his pretty Glo-co pompadour and fussing with his necktie. He has the conceited idea that all of the high-school girls are wild over him. Every time I see him doing his sheik stuff I feel like soaking him with a ripe egg. For he's a snob and a smart Aleck. More than that, he's a great big bully.

Dressed up in style this morning, wearing long white trousers and a silk sports shirt set off with a flashy red necktie and green silk socks, he looked us over when we were passing his father's store as though we were hunks of dirt.

"Hello, trampy," says he to Poppy, sort of sneering-like.

"Soak him one," says I to my indignant chum.

But Poppy held back, though his eyes flashed fire.

"I *would* like to take a crack at him, Jerry. But I don't want to start a fight and have the people think I'm a rowdy."

Here the shoe-store king motioned for us to move on.

"You don't own the whole street," says I, scowling at him.

"Git," says he, important-like.

Poppy got my ear.

"Jerry," says he, excitedly, "take notice of what he's doing. He's putting up a sign."

“Huh!” says I, growling. “I’m not interested in his old shoe sale.”

“But don’t you catch on? It’s a scheme of his to cut in on Mr. Harper’s sale. Read the sign.”

I did. Here it is:

BE WISE! BUY YOUR BOYS’ SHOES ON THIS SIDE OF THE STREET AND GET BIGGER BARGAINS. FOR WHAT WE SAVE IN NEWSPAPER ADVERTISING GOES INTO *YOUR* POCKET.

“Last night,” says Poppy, who can stow away more stuff in his head than any kid I know of, “Mr. Harper had a full-page advertisement in the Tutter newspaper telling about his new low prices on boys’ shoes. He’s having a sale today. The Donner kid saw the advertisement. See? And this sale of his is a scheme to cut in on the other store.”

“I like Mr. Harper,” says I, after a moment.

“So do I,” says Poppy warmly. “I’ve worked for him and I’ve found out that he’s a good man.”

I remembered then that Lawrence’s father was in New York City on business. I had read about it in the Tutter newspaper.

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“Hot dog!” says I. “If we could only think up a scheme to switch all the shoe customers into Mr. Harper’s store. That would put a crimp in young Donner.”

“I’d like to see Mr. Harper get the business,” says Poppy earnestly.

Here a thought popped into my head.

“Say!” says I, excited. “How about that advertising stuff of yours? Can’t you use it now?”

The other’s eyes danced.

“Gee! I wish I could.”

“Go ahead,” says I, crazy to get him started. “I’ll help you.”

Well, he did some quick thinking. And pretty soon he let out a tickled yip.

“Jerry! . . . I’ve got it!”

“Hurray!” says I.

“Have you got any money?”

“Sure thing,” says I, jingling my wealth.

“Fine! Don’t ask me any questions, but run down to the variety store and buy a dollar’s worth of ten-cent horns. Or, if you haven’t got a dollar, buy as many horns as you can. Get some real loud ones. And hurry back.”

Well, I didn’t know what his scheme was. But I had a lot of confidence in him. For he’s smart. Besides, I was willing to lend a hand to any kind of a fair scheme that would fix young

Donner. So down the street I went on the gallop. And soon I was back in the shoe store with eleven ten-cent horns.

Poppy met me at the door. He had been talking to the proprietor. Everything was hunky-dory, he grinned. Giving my horns the quick once-over, he hung them up in the front part of the store. Sort of on display. I saw then that in the short time that I had been away he had printed a paper sign. Here it is:

TOOT! TOOT! BUY YOUR SHOES HERE, BOYS, AND GET A
SWELL HORN *FREE!*

“Now,” says the world’s coming advertising genius, handing me one of the horns, “take this outside and do some tooting.”

Say, maybe you think we didn’t have a barrel of fun that morning! Every time we saw a man or woman heading for the Donner store with a kid in tow we tooted our heads off. And then, in almost every case, the kid made a bee-line for our store. Our free horns were a big attraction, I want to tell you. 10

A jolly, easy-going man, Mr. Harper wasn’t taken up with our scheme at first, though, in his interest in Poppy, he had consented to let us go ahead and try it out. So you can imagine how surprised and pleased he was when the customers began pouring into his store.

Well, the more business we got for him the harder we tooted. Once I did the tooting all alone While my chum ran down the

street to the ten-cent store for more horns. When he came back his arms were loaded. He told me, with a broad grin, that he had bought up all the horns the storekeeper had.

Young Donner, of course, was wise to what was going on. He ridiculed us at first, calling us names across the street. But we kept on tooting. And when he saw that he was losing out he began to prance around like a mad bull.

“Say,” says he, coming across the street, his pretty face all clouded up, “if you kids don’t beat it I’ll have you arrested.”

“Don’t answer him,” says Poppy, red in the face, “but toot as hard as you can toot.”

So we tooted. I even shoved my horn in smarty’s face and tooted. He tried to grab the horn away from me, but I was too quick for him. Boy, it tickled me to get the best of him. Angrier than ever, he ran down the street to the police station. But we knew he was bluffing, so we weren’t scared. Anyway, we had Mr. Harper back of us.

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We learned afterwards that the other shoe store, in seeking to pattern after our clever scheme, had tried to buy a supply of horns like ours. But right there is where the swelled-up young proprietor got left, for, as I say, Poppy had been ahead of him and had bought up all the horns in town. Long before noon we could hear kids tooting in every direction. Mr. Harper gave each of us a dollar. We were smart boys, he said. And he hired Poppy to work in the store that afternoon.

“Hot dog!” says I to my chum, when we were walking home to dinner. “This is fun.—I’d like to do it every day in the

week.”

There was a dreamy far-away look in the other’s eyes.

“Yes,” says he, “this is fun. But I want to do something bigger than this, Jerry. I want to handle *millions* of dollars. I won’t be satisfied until I have the biggest advertising job in the country.”

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“You’ll never get it in Tutter,” says I, thinking of the town’s small population.

“Probably not. But a fellow can get a start here.”

I laughed as I thought of how we had trimmed young Donner.

“If you want to go into the advertising business,” says I, “why don’t you get a patent on your horn scheme? It sure earned a lot of money for Mr. Harper. And it ought to work just as well in other stores.”

“Giving away premiums to boost sales is an old scheme,” says he, “so I couldn’t get it patented, even if I wanted to. Still,” he added, reflective-like, “I might be able to work the old scheme in a new way. I’ll think about it.”

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CHAPTER II

POPPY'S ADVERTISING NOVELTY SCHEME

After that a billboard was a hunk of chocolate cake to Poppy. He'd stop and feast his eyes on it and act as though he was going to take a bite out of it. Polarine cans and scouring-powder cartons pictured on the billboards were a beautiful sight to him. Once I had to take him by the head of the hair, as the saying is, and drag him away from a garbage can that had something or other posted on the side of it. Advertising! Having had a taste of advertising in the successful shoe sale, all he could think about now and all he cared to talk about was advertising. He got up some advertisements of his own, too. And they were pretty clever. However, I didn't brag on them. For I didn't want to make him any worse than he was. What he needed was some one to squash him instead of praise him.

"Well," says I the following Tuesday, "have you got it figured out yet how we're going to work that horn scheme of yours and get rich?"

This inquiry was a merry little scheme of mine to kid him along. But he never tumbled. The poor fish!

“I’ve given the matter a lot of thought, Jerry,” says he earnestly.

“So I noticed,” says I, remembering how he had been walking around with his head in the clouds.

“And I’ve come to one conclusion.”

“Spill it,” says I. “I’ve got two good ears. And they’re both uncovered.”

“If we’re going to make a success of the scheme—a big success, I mean—we’ve got to have a better premium than a horn.”

“How about a drum?” says I helpfully.

But my brilliant suggestion didn’t receive thunderous applause.

“No,” says he, shaking his head. “A drum is no better than a horn. Both are common toys. As I see it, we’ve got to have something *exclusive*.”

“That’s an awful big word,” says I.

“I mean,” says he, “that we’ve got to have a premium that no one else can sell to storekeepers except us.”

I looked at him curiously. And at the moment it seemed to me that I liked him better than ever. There was something about him that *made* me like him. It was his earnest enthusiasm, I guess. I suddenly wondered, in deeper

appreciation of him, if great business men like Edison and Ford hadn't acted like this when they were boys.

"You talk as though we're really going into business," says I quietly.

"Why not?" was his reply.

"Well," says I, shrugging, "I suppose we can, if *you* say so."

He strutted around in fun.

"Advertising specialists, Jerry! That's us."

"Fine!" says I, joining him in his nonsense. "I've always wanted to be an advertising specialist, only I don't know what it is."

"No?" and he laughed sort of contented-like. "Well, here's my scheme. First we invent a new kind of toy. See? Then we patent it and start manufacturing it. And then—"

"Wait a minute; wait a minute," says I, stopping him with my hand. "What did you say we were going to be?"

"Advertising specialists."

"But how can we be advertising specialists," says I, puzzled, "when we're inventors and manufacturers?"

He grinned.

"We're inventors and manufacturers and advertising

specialists all rolled up in one.”

I drew a deep breath.

“I’m glad you’re talking through your hat,” says I.

“But I mean it, Jerry. Honest I do.”

“Then you better count me out of it,” says I. “For this advertising specialist stuff is too deep for me. My talents run to pitching horseshoes and chewing gum.”

“Shucks, Jerry! We’re going to have fun.”

“Maybe.”

“Besides,” says he, all wound up, “think of the money we’re going to make.”

“Oh! . . .” says I, perking up. “We’re going to make money, hey?”

“Oodles of it.”

“Hot dog!” says I. “Now you’ve got me all excited.”

“Of course,” says he, as an afterthought, “we won’t get rich the first month or two.”

“What a disappointment!” I groaned.

“It’ll take us some time to build up our business.”

“That being the case,” says I, in further nonsense, “the sooner

we start twisting the cow's tail the sooner she'll kick the bucket over."

"Our first job," says he, "will be to invent a new kind of toy."

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"For boys?"

"Principally. But we mustn't forget about the girls."

"Boys like noisy toys," says I. "So let's invent a new kind of horn. You put the big end of the horn in your mouth instead of the small end. See? That's the new feature. And when you gurgle, the horn makes a noise like a jellyfish eating soup."

"Jerry, you're crazy."

"Of course I am," I laughed. "How could you expect me to be any different when I hang around with you?"

"Your horn idea is rotten."

"Go ahead and knock on it," says I. "You can't make me sore. The trouble with you is that you're jealous because I'm a smarter inventor than you are."

"We've got to get something simpler than a horn," says he, thinking. "Something we can manufacture ourselves."

"And after we get it invented and manufactured—then what?"

"We sell it, of course."

“To kids?”

“No, to storekeepers like Mr. Harper. We’re advertising specialists. See? That’s our business. And we tell the customer that we’ve got a scheme to help him sell more shoes. ‘Mr. Harper,’ we say, ‘here is a brand new toy—a double-jointed whirligig. The kids are crazy over it. They all want it. But they can’t buy it. No. The only way they can get it is by trading at your store. We don’t sell our goods to toy shops—we just sell to merchants like you. And if you give us an order your competitor across the street will be left out. For we won’t sell to him if we can sell to you. Boys will know that *your* store is the only place in town where they can get a double-jointed whirligig free. So you’ll get all the kid shoe business.’”

I let him run down.

“When did you memorize all that junk?” says I.

“Oh, I’ve been thinking about it.”

“You must have been dreaming about it, too.”

“Maybe I have,” says he, grinning. Then he went on: “We get an order from Mr. Harper. See? And then—”

“Is he the only customer we’re going to have?”

“Of course not. We’re going to sell our premiums all over the country. From coast to coast. I just used his name as an illustration.”

“I’ll tell the world,” says I, heaving a full-grown sigh, “that we’re going to have our hands full. For first we invent a double-jointed whirligig. And then, having manufactured it, we tour the country selling it. When are we going to eat and sleep?”

“After we get going, Jerry, we’ll do our selling with advertising. That’ll make it a lot easier for us.”

“So we’re going to send out advertising, hey?”

“Sure thing. As I say, that’ll be our way of getting business. Like the mail-order catalogues.”

“What kind of advertising are we going to send out?—billboards?”

“You poor fish! I’ll use your head for a billboard if you don’t talk sense.”

“All right,” says I, grinning. “We get a lot of orders. And then what?”

“We ship the goods and collect the money, after which we split the profits fifty-fifty.”

“Which means,” says I, “that if we make a million dollars you get half a million and I get half a million.”

“Exactly.”

“Or, if we make ten million dollars, I get five million and you get five million.”

“Don’t be crazy, Jerry.”

“I’m just trying to keep up with you,” says I.

But old sober-sides didn’t see anything funny in that.

“I’ve always wanted to go into business for myself,” says he. “And there’s no business I’d rather be in than advertising novelties.”

“Advertising novelties?” says I, looking at him. “I thought you said a moment ago that we were going to manufacture toys?”

“If we sold our double-jointed Whirligig to the toy stores it would be called a toy. But used the other way, as a premium to boost sales, it’s an advertising novelty. For it advertises the store giving it away. That’s the purpose of it.”

I laughed.

“The Tutter Advertising Novelty Company,” says I, giving our new company a name. “Poppy Ott, president, and Jerry Todd, vice-president.”

“I’ll be the general manager, too,” says the chief Whirligigger, “and you can be the secretary and treasurer.”

“That sounds big,” says I.

“The secretary and treasurer,” says he, “is the man who handles the money.”

I scratched my head.

“But how can I handle the money,” says I, “when we haven’t got any to handle?”

“Oh, we’ll have plenty of money when our customers’ checks begin coming in.”

I saw a flaw in his brilliant little scheme.

“But if we’re going to run a factory and manufacture stuff,” says I, “we’ve got to have money before we collect from our goods.”

“We’ll borrow what money we need from the bank. All manufacturers do that.”

I let out a crazy yip.

“*Us* borrow money?” says I, ridiculing the idea. “Say, you’re loony. The banker wouldn’t lend us fifteen cents.”

“He will,” says Poppy, confident-like, “if we can show him that we can make the money grow. For it’s a bank’s business to lend money to reliable business men.”

I was dizzy now. He had me all tangled up.

“But we’re just boys,” says I, trying to picture myself in business with him. “And if we go to the bank to borrow money they’ll laugh at us. They’ll think we’re cuckoo.”

The president and general manager of the Tutter Advertising

Novelty Company showed in a cool look that he was out of patience with me.

“Jerry, I do wish you’d forget this talk about ‘we’re just boys.’ You sprung it the other day. Yet we turned a neat advertising trick for Mr. Harper, didn’t we? So why can’t we do something bigger in advertising? *I believe we can. In fact I know we can. It’s simply a matter of using our heads.*”

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I couldn’t get away from the thought of us borrowing money at the bank.

“And you really think,” says I, “that the banker will lend us money?”

“I don’t see why he shouldn’t. But don’t get the idea that we’re going to borrow a thousand dollars the first crack out of the box. Hardly. We’ve got to start our business in a small way and prove to the banker as we go along that we’ve got something worth supporting. Probably we won’t be able to borrow more than twenty-five dollars to start with. We’ll build fifty dollars’ worth of whirligigs with the money. As soon as we collect from our customers the banker gets his twenty-five dollars back, with interest. Then we borrow fifty dollars and build a hundred dollars’ worth of whirligigs. See how we grow? Every week we get bigger and bigger.”

I shook my head.

“It sounds fine,” says I, “but I want to see it to believe it.”

“There’s just one thing that puzzles me,” says he thoughtfully.

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“Yes?”

“As yet I haven’t been able to figure out what we’re going to manufacture.”

He got a disgusted stare from me then. Of all the crazy day-dreamers!

“And what’s more,” says I, losing all faith in his scheme, “you never will be able to figure it out.”

“What day is this?” says he, after a moment.

“Tuesday,” says I.

“Um. . . . It might hustle us to get our business going full blast by next Monday. Still, a fellow never knows what he can do till he tries.”

I got up then and started for home. For I was convinced that he was a hopeless case. Yes, sir, he was plum cuckoo. It was that blamed old advertising book! It was getting the best of him. I wondered if I hadn’t better snatch the book and chuck it into somebody’s cistern.

CHAPTER III

THE SEVEN-LEAGUE STILTS

The following morning I meandered down Elm Street to Poppy's house to see if his night's rest had benefited him any. For sometimes sleep does drive the cobwebs out of a fellow's head. However, I was prepared for the worst.

"Well," says I, coming into the back yard where the world's youngest advertising specialist was hard at work in the shade of a crab-apple tree, "how's the Whirligig business this morning?"

He stopped working and skimmed the sweat from his dripping forehead. I saw then that he was sandpapering a strip of Georgia pine. Another similar strip stood against the tree.

"Jerry," says he, "what is it that a boy wants that he can't buy in a toy store?"

"A baby elephant," says I promptly.

"Aw! . . ." he scowled. "Can't you ever talk sense?"

"Not when I'm talking to you," says I, after which clever little come-back I let out my neck at the wooden strip that the president and general manager of the Tutter

Advertising Novelty Company was favoring with his valuable attention. “What is it?” says I. “The left lung of one of the double-jointed whirligigs that we’re going to peddle from coast to coast?”

“You haven’t answered my question yet,” says he, steady-like.

I screwed up my forehead.

“And you say it isn’t a baby elephant?”

“An elephant isn’t a toy—it’s a pet.”

“A toy,” says I, thinking. Then I looked at him. “Have I got one?”

“Sure thing. But you didn’t buy it.”

“Who did buy it?—my folks?”

“No one bought it. You made it.”

I laughed.

“Mother says the only thing *I* make around our house is a racket.”

“Guess.”

“A sling-shot?”

“No.”

“A doghouse?”

“No.”

“I give up.”

“Stilts,” says he, grinning.

“I said stilts.”

“Like fun you did—you big bluffer!”

I saw then what the two wooden strips were for. He was making a pair of stilts.

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“There never was a boy,” says he, tuning in on some more of his business stuff, “who didn’t like to walk on stilts. You know that. Stilt walking is fun. But, strange to say, no one interested in toys for boys ever thought of manufacturing stilts for the trade. At least *I* never saw a pair of stilts on sale. Did you?”

“A boy would rather build his own stilts,” says I.

“You really think so?”

“I know so.”

“But you’d rather have a store coaster wagon than a home-made one, wouldn’t you?”

“Of course.”

“Why?”

“Because the store coaster is better made.”

“That’s it exactly,” and he clinched the point with a bob of his head. “People who make a business of manufacturing coaster wagons can do a much better job on a wagon than a boy can. And so it will be with our stilts. Home-made stilts won’t look good to a boy after he sees our Seven-League stilts.”

I gave him a quick look.

“Where did you get that name?” says I.

“Oh, it just came to me.”

27

I sat down then.

“Poppy,” says I, quiet-like, “I’m going to open up my heart to you and tell you something.”

“Yes?” says he, looking at me curiously.

“I’m going to make a confession to you.”

“Shoot,” says he, grinning.

“Yesterday I thought you were cuckoo. But to-day I think you’re only half cuckoo.”

“Thanks,” says he, laughing.

“Furthermore,” says I, “I’m beginning to wonder, in my

growing appreciation of your talents, if it isn't *me* who's cuckoo instead of you. Seven-League stilts! That's a peachy name. It took brains to think it up. Yet you did it without my help!"

His eyes were shining like peeled onions in my warm praise. And seeing how earnestly he took me, I became ashamed of myself for having poked fun at him. I told myself that I wouldn't ever do it again. I'd have more faith in him after this. For he was one pal in a million.

"We'll paint them a bright red," says he, running his fingers lovingly up and down the two strips. "For red is a boy's favorite color."

"They'll look swell," says I.

"Won't they though!" he enthused, his eyes dancing. "And we'll letter the name on the side—Seven-League Stilts."

28

"How did you happen to think of that name?" I asked him again.

"Oh, I lay in bed last night sort of checking off in my mind the different kinds of toys boys had. First I checked off my own stuff. Then I went through your stuff. Stilts! There, says I, thinking of your stilts, is a toy that we can manufacture. Easy. It's just the thing we need for our advertising novelty scheme. Red stilts, with a catchy name. I remembered then about the ogre's seven-league boots. You've heard the story—every kid has. Seven-League Stilts! No trouble to remember *that* name, I told myself. And it was a name that

fitted the article, too.”

I laughed.

“Maybe we ought to call our company the Tutter Stilt Company.”

“No,” says he, shaking his head, “I think the other name is the best. For later on we may want to bring out other toys. And if we called ourselves the Tutter Stilt Company the trade might get the idea that stilts were the only thing we manufactured.”

Here I was shown the adjustment that the stilt builder had rigged up for raising and lowering the steps.

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“That’s a new wrinkle,” says I, examining the contrivance. “I made my steps rigid.”

“So you see, Jerry,” says he quickly, “how easily we can build better stilts for boys than they can build for themselves. For we can work to a patented design.”

“What?” says I. “Get a patent on a pair of stilts? Why, stilts are as old as the hills. And you can’t patent old things, can you?”

“I don’t know very much about patents,” he admitted. “But it would seem to me that we ought to be able to get a patent on our step lock. For that’s a new feature.”

“We’ll be out of luck,” says I, after a moment’s thought, “if we can’t get a patent. For as soon as our business starts earning money some other manufacturer will copy after us.”

“The thing to do, I guess, is to see a lawyer. However,” he added quickly, “we won’t do that to-day. It’s more important to finish this job.”

The step lock that the woodworker had rigged up for his stilts was a sort of two-bolt arrangement. By loosening the bolts the stilt steps could be raised and lowered. The bolts were locked in the steps and there were holes in the stilt shafts for the bolts to go through. So that you will understand just what I’m talking about I’ll draw it out for you on the next page.

30

Well, we finished the stilts that morning and painted them. Boy, they, sure did look nifty. I could hardly wait for them to dry, so anxious was I to try them out.

“To-morrow morning,” says Poppy, in planning things, “we’ll go over to Ashton and get our first stilt order.”

I laughed.

“It won’t be much of an order,” says I. “For we’ve got only one pair to sell.”

“Oh,” says he quickly, “we won’t sell *this* pair.”

“No?”

“This is our selling sample.”

“What do you mean by that?”

“We carry the sample along to show the storekeepers what

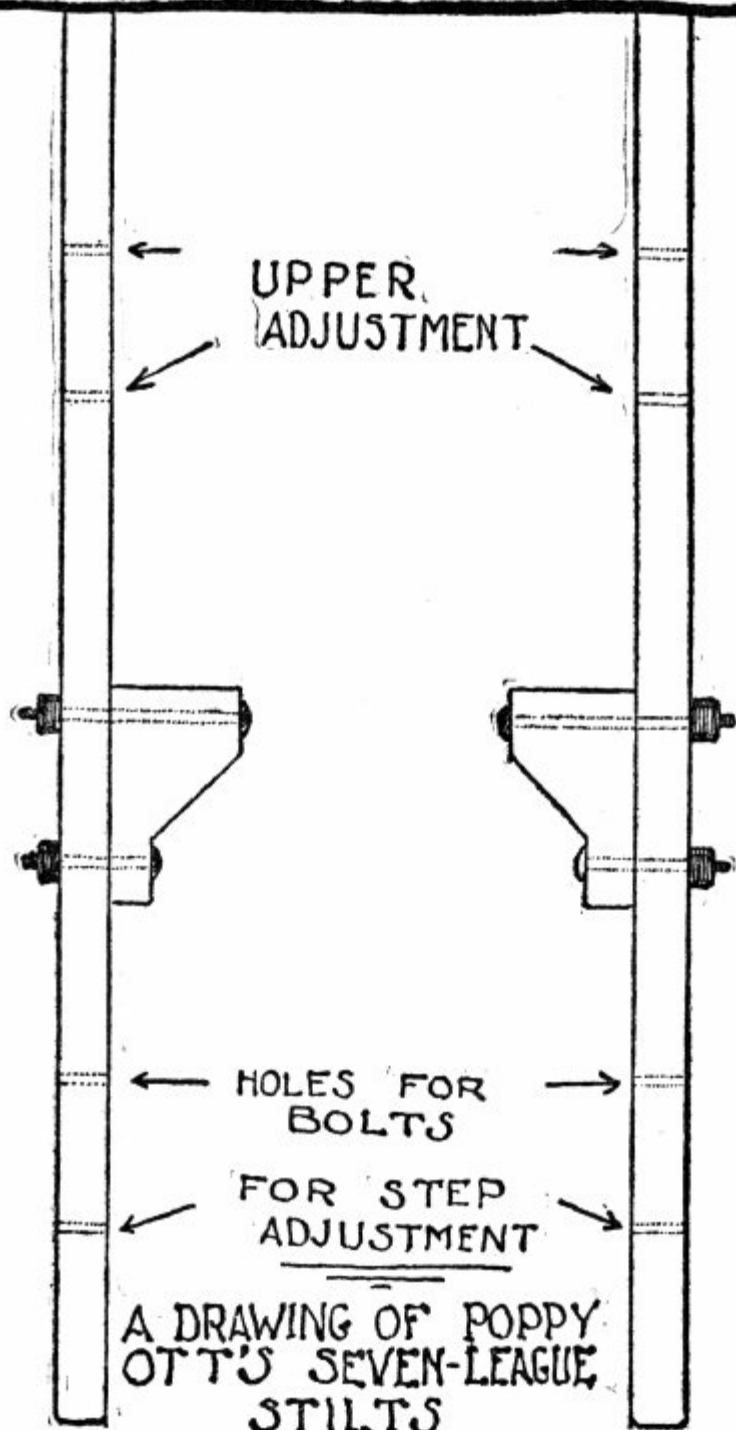
our stilts are like. See? And they order from the sample.”

“It sounds easy to hear you tell it.”

“If we can get an order, Jerry, it is going to help us at the bank.”

“I get you.”

“And two orders, of course, will be better than one. So, while we are at it, we may go on to Steam Corners and try our luck there. Later on, as I say, we’ll stay at home and manage the business and do our selling with advertising.”



“Why not go on to Chicago,” says I, grinning, “and get *three* orders? Maybe the Boston Store will buy a whole carload of our stilts.”

That started him to day-dreaming again.

“Jerry, I like to think of the time when we’ll be getting carload orders.”

“I was just joking,” I told him quickly.

“I know you were. But just the same the day is coming when we will be selling our stilts in carload lots.”

“How many pairs to the car?” says I.

“Oh, ten or twelve thousand.”

“And how much a pair?”

“Fifty cents.”

I did some quick figuring.

“Six thousand dollars,” I whistled.

“Sounds like a lot of money, hey?”

“It’s a fortune,” says I.

“You must remember, though, that the six thousand dollars isn’t all profit. The wood for the stilts will take a pile of

money. And we'll have to pay our men."

"What men?"

"The workmen in our factory."

"I didn't know that we were going to hire workmen."

33

"You poor fish! Do you think for one minute that we could build six thousand pairs of stilts ourselves? It would take us a dozen years."

I was beginning to get dizzy again.

"I'm afraid I wasn't cut out for a business man," says I. "So you had better call it your business and let me be the office boy."

"Not so you can notice it. This is a fifty-fifty proposition. If we go up, we go up together. And if we go down—"

"They telephone for the ambulance, hey?"

"I shouldn't have said that," came quickly. "For we aren't going to fail. I won't think of failure for a moment."

And now, while our stilts are drying, as it were, I'll tell you who Poppy is and where he came from. Nicholas Carter Sherlock Holmes Ott! That was the name they hung on him when he was born. It was his father's work, he told me. The other name—Poppy—he got from peddling popcorn.

In another book, POPPY OTT AND THE STUTTERING PARROT,

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I wrote down how we solved the weird mystery of Cap'n Tinkertop's strange black parrot. Poppy was the leader in the surprising adventure. I was his chief lieutenant. If you have read any of the "Jerry Todd" books you know who *I* am. Yah, I'm the wonderful (?) Jerry Todd himself.

After me, on Poppy's illustrious detective staff, came the invincible Scoop Ellery—a good kid to know, I should whisper to you, for his father runs a general store in Tutter, which means a lot of free chewing gum for the honorable young Mr. Todd and his gang. After Scoop came Peg Shaw and Red Meyers, the concluding members of Detective Ott's staff of—ahem!—near-famous sleuths. However, in this story you can practically forget about the other three fellows, for at the time this happened they were earning spending money on Red's uncle's farm hoeing rubber plants—or maybe it was pumpkins. Anyway, that isn't an important point.

To go back to Poppy, Red and I ran across the strange boy one summer morning in a shady place on the edge of town where tramps hang out. Dressed raggedly, with dirty bare feet, we thought at first that he was a kid tramp. But we took a liking to him, even though he was dirty and shabbily dressed. Later on we came to know his father, a queer-acting, absent-minded old man who had the silly idea in his head that he was a second edition of the world-famous Sherlock Holmes. I could tell you some very funny things about Mr. Ott in connection with his silly "detective" work. As a sleuth he sure was a lemon. In working on the black-parrot mystery we put it all over him. The two Otts, father and son, owned a rickety bungalow wagon. The wagon went to pieces in Tutter, or, rather, Poppy knocked the wheels to pieces so that he

could stay in our town and go to school with us. To-day the Otts, in better circumstances, live in a small house in Elm Street, close to the idle carriage factory. We like to go to Poppy's house. We always have fun there. A widower, and his own housekeeper, Mr. Ott never kicks on our racket. If we want to pop corn we go ahead and pop it—it's all right with him. Or we can do any kind of cooking or play any kind of a game in the house that we choose. When he gets his nose buried in a detective book (and it was in honor of his two favorite detective heroes that his son had been given the stretched-out name of Nicholas Carter Sherlock Holmes Ott) he forgets everything else. We could tear the house down, I guess, without him noticing that anything out of the ordinary was going on.

For a while after coming to Tutter to live the old detective worked in a brickyard. But he didn't like that job. And learning that a gardener was needed at the big brick house on Main Street, he went there to work.

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It was partly through Mr. Ott that we came to know Mrs. Fillingham. And it was through the carriage manufacturer's elderly housekeeper that we later heard the old spiritualist's weird story.

Br-r-r-r! Talk about a spooky mystery! I bet you'll shiver when I come to it.

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CHAPTER IV

OUR TRIP TO ASHTON

There are a number of small towns scattered about Tutter. One of the most important of these towns is Ashton, the county seat. If you have read my book, *JERRY TODD AND THE OAK ISLAND TREASURE*, you know what kind of a town Ashton is. For it was there, as you will remember, that we put on our big magic show and later on got into trouble with the law through dropping a greased pig into a room where the marshal, who was against us, was playing poker with our other chief enemy, the town bill poster. Golly Ned! We sure had fun that night.

I thought of the greased-pig trick the following morning as I got into my Sunday clothes. And I wondered curiously if Poppy and I would scare up some new kind of excitement in our trip to the county seat.

I found my chum dressed up as slick as a button.

“I’ll tell the world,” says I, strutting around in my good togs, “that there’s real class to the officers of the Tutter Advertising Novelty Company. Any one would think to look at us that we were going away to get married.”

“Good clothes,” says Poppy, “always helps a salesman in his

work. For a great many business firms size up a man by his appearance. And if he looks seedy they conclude that he is a failure and therefore a poor person to do business with.”

“When do we start?” says I.

“There’s an interurban car leaving here at eight-thirty. It gets to Ashton at nine-fifteen. By snappy work we ought to finish in the first town and get over to Steam Corners by eleven-thirty. Then, if we hustle, we can catch the one-thirty car for home, getting here before the bank closes.”

“Do you know anybody at the bank?” says I.

“I know the president when I see him.”

“Old Mr. Lorrington and Dad are great friends,” says I.

“Isn’t there a younger man in the bank by the same name?”

“That’s the president’s son,” says I. “Mr. Thomas Lorrington, Jr.”

Poppy went to the mirror and took a last careful squint at himself.

“Wait a minute,” says I, standing back and cocking my eyes critical-like at his smoothly combed head.

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“What’s the matter?”

“There’s one hair out of place,” says I, patting it down. Then, before he could swat me, I gave his rubber necktie a yank and

let it fly back.

“For the love of mud!” says he, scowling. “If you’re going to keep up this horseplay you’d better stay at home.”

“What’s the idea of being so stiff-backed?” says I, strutting around in fun. “We aren’t going to sing at a funeral.”

He flicked a particle of dust from the sleeve of his coat.

“Carry a little dignity around with you, kid. Remember that you’re the secretary and treasurer of the world’s foremost stilt concern.”

“Yes, Mr. President and General Manager,” says I, bowing.

Well, it was close to car time now. So we grabbed the complete output of the world’s foremost stilt factory and skittered down the street to the interurban waiting room, where we enriched the traction company to the extent of thirty-five cents apiece.

Just before we drew into Ashton young Donner whizzed by us in his father’s red sedan. Boy, he sure was cutting the wind.

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“We ought to have rode over with him,” I laughed, “and saved our car fare.”

Poppy snorted.

“*Him* give me a free ride? Hardly!”

“What’s the matter?” says I, grinning. “Doesn’t he like the way you part your hair?”

“He’s had it in for me ever since that shoe sale. And when I meet him in the street he almost glares a hole through me. His father acts the same way, too.”

I shrugged.

“We should worry. The Donners aren’t the kind of people to have for close friends, anyway.”

Here our private coach merrily swung around a curve and sat down to rest in front of the Ashton waiting room.

“There’s Donner’s car now,” says Poppy, pointing to where the red sedan was parked at the curb, a few feet away. “I wonder what he’s doing over here.”

“A trip to the county seat isn’t anything unusual for a snappy little business man like him,” says I.

We met smarty face to face when we were getting off the car. And did he ever stare at us! I guess he thought we were lost. The poor fish! I wanted to make a face at him. But patterning after my dignified associate officer I marched to the sidewalk with my nose in the air. Nor did I turn and look back. I had the feeling, though, that the enemy had stopped in his tracks and was following us with puzzled, angry eyes.

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Practically all of Ashton’s stores are on one long street, running north and south. So it didn’t take us very many minutes to size up the shoe-store situation.

“Let’s go in here,” says Poppy, stopping at a store in the middle of the block.

“There’s another shoe store across the street,” says I, pointing.

“This one is the biggest. So let’s start at the top and work down.”

A bald-headed man with two stomachs and three chins waddled into sight to wait on us.

“Is this Mr. Heckleberry?” says Poppy politely, remembering the name that was spread around on one of the store windows.

The wheezer seemed to tell at a glance that we weren’t regular shoe customers.

“Um . . .” he grunted. “What do you want?”

“Mr. Heckleberry,” says the head and brains of the Tutter Advertising Novelty Company, “what would you say if I were to tell you a trade secret that would enable you to get ninety-nine per cent of the juvenile shoe business in Ashton?”

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The storekeeper hadn’t expected to hear any such speech as this.

“Huh? What’s that?” says he, showing his surprise.

“We have a scheme,” says Poppy, starting to unwind his selling sample, “that will fill your store with boy shoe customers. It’s a premium scheme. See? Seven-League Stilts!

The greatest trade booster that the retail shoe business has ever known.”

The prospective stilt customer got so cold all of a sudden that the icicles came out all over him.

“Um. . . . I hain’t int’rested in trade boosters,” he scowled.

But Poppy kept right on.

“Seven-League Stilts!” says he, getting into high gear. “Red as an apple; light as a broom handle; strong as steel. Designed by boys for boys. See the workmanship! Why, any regular kid will be tickled pink to own a pair of stilts like these. And can a boy *buy* these stilts? No, sir! They aren’t on sale in any toy store. But Mr. Heckleberry has them! And he *gives* them away. With each shoe purchase of five dollars, a pair of stilts free. With each ten-dollar purchase, two pairs of stilts free. With each fifteen-dollar purchase—”

Br-r-r-r! There was an awful draft from the north pole.

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“I tell you I hain’t int’rested in your stilts,” snapped old icicles. “So shet up an’ git out.”

But Poppy heroically stuck to the ship.

“If I were running a shoe store,” says he, “and some enterprising young advertising specialist came along with a clever scheme to help me sell more shoes, I think I would listen to him and profit by his advice.”

That brought out old roly-poly’s temper.

“I tell you I hain’t int’rested in your stilts,” he thundered. “So pack up your truck an’ git out of here, an’ do it quick.”

“Mr. Heckleberry,” says Poppy, with dignity, “it grieves me to see how very little confidence you have in boys. 44 We certainly don’t amount to much in your estimation. I dare say that if this proposition of ours had been presented to you by a man you would have been interested in it. But, as presented to you by two ordinary-looking boys, you think it’s a bunch of junk. I sure do wish that you were better informed on boys. Really I do. Being a boy myself, I hesitate to tell you all the smart things we can do, because I wouldn’t want you to get the idea that I was trying to throw bouquets at myself. It is a fact, though, that outside of raising whiskers there isn’t anything a man can do that the average boy can’t do. ‘B’ stands for ‘boys,’ and it also stands for ‘business,’ which is just another way of saying that where you find live business you’re bound to find boys. Why, sir,” and there was a lot of arm flourishing now as the earnest orator opened wide the throttle of his gab, “boys are the very backbone of business. The only industries that boys don’t help to run are old men’s homes—and who wants to go to a place like that! As for having worth-while ideas, do you know, Mr. Speckleberry, that it was a *boy* who made the first practical steam engine self-operating? And it was a boy who—”

Here “Mr. Speckleberry” blew up.

“I don’t care a continental ’bout you an’ your confounded steam engines,” he roared. “An’ I hain’t int’rested in your stilts, nuther, as I’ve told you a dozen times. So git out of here before I throw you out.”

“Am I to conclude then,” says Poppy seriously, regarding the other in pained disappointment, “that it is your final and definite decision *not* to put this trade-boosting, business-building, money-making scheme of ours to work in your store?”

Old fatty started to dance a jig.

“If you say another word,” he shrieked, fanning the air with his fists, “I’ll wring your confounded neck. GIT OUT!”

“Yes,” came a familiar insolent voice from behind us, “git out and make room for somebody who knows how to talk business.”

The fat proprietor’s face lit up when he saw who was speaking, and, in a hurry to get to the welcome customer, he sort of heaved Poppy and me out of his way along with the other rubbish.

“Good mornin’, Mr. Donner,” says he, bowing and scraping. “I’ve bin lookin’ fur you an’ your pa fur the past two hours.”

“My father couldn’t come over this morning,” says Donner, after a sneering look at us. “However, you and I can talk business just the same. For my father knows what your stock is. And you know what we’re willing to pay.”

Old duck-foot purred like a cream-fed tomcat.

“Um. . . . Jest step into my office,” he invited. “This way, please.”

It was a cold turn-down for us, all right. And I bet you that the storekeeper's fat ears burned at the mean things I said about him when we were in the street. But Poppy, mind you, was all smiles. Yes, sir, he was just as chipper as though he had gotten a million-dollar stilt order.

"Old dough-face!" says I, gritting my teeth.

"What's the matter?" came the easy laugh. "Don't you like Mr. Googleberry?"

"*Like him?*" I howled. "After the way he used us?"

"*I love him,*" purred Poppy.

What made our defeat the more humiliating to me was the thought that young Donner would blab it all over Tutter.

"Let's go home," says I, discouraged. "We'll never get a stilt order in this town."

"We'll never get a stilt order in any town," says Poppy quickly, "if we don't work for it."

I stared at him.

"Haven't you had enough?" I growled, out of sorts with myself and with everybody else.

"Enough? Why, kid, I haven't got started."

"All the stilt orders *we'll* get," says I, "you can stick in a cat's eye."

But the other one was buried too deep in a new train of thought to pay any attention to me.

“Say, Jerry,” says he, after a moment, “did you notice what young Donner said?”

“What that bird says doesn’t interest me,” I growled.

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“I bet a cookie that he and his father are going to buy out old fatty’s shoe stock. And if they do they’ll probably have a big sale. See? For they’ve done that in other towns near here.”

“Well, what of it?”

“Let’s suppose that we’re in the shoe business here. Donner comes in, and buying out our chief competitor, starts a big ‘clearing-out’ sale. Very well. What are we going to do?—sit still and let the other fellow flood the town with shoes? Or are we going to have a sale of our own?”

I caught on.

“You think the other shoe man will jump at our stilts?”

“I don’t know as he’ll *jump* at them,” came the grinning reply. “But if he happens to hint around that he’d like to buy a gross or two I guess we can accommodate him.”

I started across the street.

“Wait a minute,” the leader stopped me. “Let’s find out first of all if Mr. Speckleback, or whatever his name is, really intends selling his shoe stock to the Donners.”

“He’ll never tell *you* his business,” I grunted.

“Probably not. But there’s more than one way of finding out such things.”

Puzzled to know what the leader’s scheme was, I followed him down the street to the office of the local newspaper.

“I think I have some news for you,” was the way he got the attention of the spectacled man behind the counter.

“Yes?”

“Lawrence Donner, Jr., of the Donner Shoe Company of Tutter, is in town. I have reasons to believe that he and his father are intending to buy up the stock of the Heckleberry company.”

“Thanks for the tip,” says the man. “I’ll look into it.”

“If the deal goes through the Donner Company undoubtedly will put on a big sale here. So you ought to get some money out of them for newspaper advertising.”

The man’s face broke into a grin.

“And if I sell them a couple of pages,” he inquired in fun, “do I have to pay you a commission?”

“No,” says Poppy, shaking his head. “But you can do us a favor, if you will.”

The newspaper man laughed when he had been told who we

were and what our scheme was.

“Boys in business, eh? Well! Well! This is something new in my experience. However,” he added seriously, “I can see no reason why you can’t succeed with your stilts—in a moderate way. Certainly you have my best wishes. And any time you’re in town drop in and see me.”

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“What I wish you’d do for us,” says Poppy, “is to telephone to Mr. Heckleberry, as a reporter, and find out from him if the deal has gone through. If it has, we’ll get busy and call on the other shoe man.”

After a brief conversation over the telephone the newspaper man turned to Poppy with a grin.

“You were a good guesser,” says he. “Heckleberry tells me that he has sold his entire stock. And the big sale that you anticipated starts tomorrow morning at nine o’clock.”

“Thanks,” says Poppy warmly. Then he gripped my arm. “Come on, Jerry,” says he. “If we’re going to give young Donner’s wings another cropping we’ve got to snap into it. We haven’t a moment to spare.”

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CHAPTER V. OUR FIRST ORDER

The next merchant that we called on wasn't anything like old fatty. I guess not! I liked Mr. Kelly as soon as I set eyes on him. He seemed more like a big overgrown boy than a man. He was tall, with big bones in his cheeks, and he had merry blue eyes. What made him seem like a big boy was his tousled hair. Being a business man, he probably combed his hair when he started out in the morning, for he naturally would want to look all right to his customers, but his habit of running his fingers through his hair soon took away all the neat work that the comb and brush had done.

“Good morning, Mr. Kelly,” says Poppy, upon our entrance into the store.

“Howdy, b'ys,” came the spirited, friendly greeting. “What kin I do fur ye this mornin'?”

“Mr. Kelly,” says Poppy seriously, going at things in a new way, “do you have any faith in boys?”

The Irishman's eyes sparkled.

“Sure, there niver was a b'y I didn't take a shine to,” says he warmly, “though I'll have to admit that some of

the tricky little devils almost drive me crazy at times.”

“Do you believe that boys have brains?” Poppy followed up.

“Brains?” A puzzled look crept into the man’s rugged face.

“What the devil be ye drivin’ at?” says he quizzically.

“Do we look like dumb-bells?” was Poppy’s further inquiry, standing soberly for inspection.

The merchant was more puzzled than ever.

“What is it that ye want, my lad? Tell me.”

“We have just come from the shoe store across the street,” says Poppy, in explanation of his queer words, “and the man in charge over there as much as told us that we didn’t know beans. I tried to argue with him. But he wouldn’t listen to me. He was too smart to listen to a boy! And more than that, he threatened to throw us out of his store if I didn’t shut up.”

The storekeeper scowled at mention of his fat competitor. But he didn’t say anything.

“We called on Mr. Heckleberry,” continued Poppy, “to tell him about a scheme of ours for boosting sales. But, as I say, instead of listening to us and profiting by our advice, he almost ‘boosted’ us out of his front door. However, it was a good thing for you, Mr. Kelly, that we went to the other store first, even if we did get turned down. For we found out something that you probably will be glad to know about.”

The Irishman was looking puzzled again.

“Ye talk in riddles, my lad,” says he quietly.

“Less than an hour ago,” says Poppy, “Mr. Heckleberry sold his entire stock to the Donner Shoe Company of Tutter. And to-morrow morning at nine o’clock the new management starts a big ‘clearing-out’ sale. Your newspaper man knows about the deal. And in to-night’s newspaper you’ll probably see a double-page spread telling about the big sale.”

“The divil ye say!” came the surprised exclamation.

“Mr. Kelly, we didn’t go to Mr. Heckleberry’s store first because we thought he would make a better customer for us than you. We’re from Tutter, and we knew nothing about either of your stores, though we thought from the outside of the other one that it was the biggest. He turned us down, as I say. Now we want to talk with you about our trade-boosting scheme. We think we can help you. And we further believe that you need our help. If you adopt our scheme I can’t promise you that you will get as much shoe business as the other store, for a ‘clearing-out’ sale always attracts a lot of people. They think they’re getting stuff awfully cheap. But you will get a lot of extra business. And I think you will get practically all of the juvenile business.”

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From friendly curiosity, the merchant was now regarding Poppy in warm admiration.

“Sure,” says he, smiling, “ye talk like a business man.”

“We *are* business men,” says Poppy quickly. “Or, rather, we are business boys. Advertising novelties is our line, only right now, at the start of our business, the only thing we

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manufacture is stilts. See, Mr. Kelly!” and the selling sample was flashed into sight. “Factory-made stilts! Beauties! Red as an apple; light as a broom handle; strong as steel. There never was a boy who didn’t like to walk on stilts. A lot of girls like them, too. Home-made stilts are as old as the ark. But now we have something better. Seven-League Stilts, manufactured by the Tutter Advertising Novelty Company. Designed by boys for boys. Mr. Kelly, can’t you imagine what will happen around here when the kids get wind of these stilts? Every kid in town will want a pair. Home-made stilts will be thrown away. Seven-League Stilts! ‘Ma! Pa! Buy me some Seven-League Stilts.’ That’s the way the kids will coax their parents for these new stilts. And how do we distribute them? Do we sell them? *No!* The toy stores don’t carry them. But Mr. Kelly has them. And *he* gives them away. Wonderful news to the kids! Free stilts! With each shoe purchase amounting to five dollars, a pair of stilts free. With each ten-dollar purchase, two pairs of stilts free. Why, Mr. Kelly, with an *exclusive* premium like this in your hands, the other store can cut its prices to half and you still will get your share of the business. For you’ll have all the Ashton kids working for you.”

As Poppy came to the end of his long-winded selling lingo, I suddenly discovered, from a draft in my brain box, that I was staring at him open-mouthed. He sure was a wonder, I told myself in open admiration. Could *I* have made a speech like that? Hardly! But it had been easy for him. The words had simply flowed out of his mouth. I was lucky, I told myself, drawn closer to my chum than ever, to have a partner who was as smart as he was.

The interested merchant had taken one of the stilts and was

looking it over carefully.

“Sure, lad,” says he, “ye have a good proposition, if the danged things don’t cost too much.”

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“They’re made good, Mr. Kelly, of the best yellow pine that we can buy. It would be poor advertising for you, and poorer business for us, to put out a cheap, flimsy article that soon would go to pieces. Notice how strong the step is. And to raise and lower it all you have to do is to loosen these bolts. See? Nothing to get out of order. Stilts like these ought to last for several years.”

There was a moment’s silence as the merchant continued his examination of the stilts.

“Um . . .” came thoughtfully. “What did ye say the price was?”

“Fifty cents a pair. Later on we’re going to have a printing machine for printing the dealer’s individual advertisement on each stilt—*Compliments of the Kelly Shoe Store, Ashton, Illinois*. But for the present we will have the advertisement put on with a printed sticker.”

The rugged forehead puckered up again.

“But kin ye git me some of the stilts in time to help me out ag’inst the other sale? You say it starts to-morrow mornin’ at nine o’clock. That doesn’t give ye much time to fill my order.”

“At nine o’clock to-morrow morning,” says Poppy, without a

moment's hesitation, "the stilts will be at your front door."

Well, right then is when the secretary and treasurer of the Tutter Advertising Novelty Company began to look around for a nice soft place to faint. Was Poppy cuckoo? He must be, I dizzily concluded, to promise the merchant a lot of stilts when we hadn't a factory or a foot of material or anything. All we had was an idea. 56

"As you can see," recited the crazy one, paying no attention to me when I kicked him in the shins as a hint for him to shut up and stay shut, "the big idea of the stilts is to get the boys and girls in Ashton to thinking about *your* store. When your stilts get into circulation you'll have every kid in town talking about you. *Your* store will stand out in their minds. And when there's talk in the family about buying new shoes, the youngsters will cry: 'Pa, buy my shoes from Mr. Kelly so I can get a pair of Seven-League Stilts.' That's the way it will work out, Mr. Kelly."

The merchant considered.

"And if I give ye an order fur six dozen pairs, will ye promise faithfully to have 'em here at nine o'clock to-morrow mornin'?"

Poppy quickly stepped out of reach of my feet.

"On my honor," says he earnestly. "And if you want me to, Mr. Kelly, I'll get up an advertisement for you to put in to-night's newspaper telling about the free stilts." 57

Afflicted with a sudden case of weak knees, I backed up and

sat down on one of the store benches. I didn't feel right in my stomach, either. That blamed Poppy Ott! There was no telling what he was liable to do next. I was worried sick. It wasn't right, I told myself, for him to take stilt orders that we couldn't possibly fill. It would just mean grief for us in the end. And that wasn't good business.

He came over and sat down beside me with a pencil and paper. But I had no chance to reason with him, for he wouldn't talk to me. He was getting up the merchant's newspaper advertisement. I squinted at his work. Here is the advertisement that he wrote:

58

BOYS!!!

We are giving away Seven-League Stilts at our store. Great big stilts for husky, full-of-pep boys. Five feet tall they are, and you can raise the steps as high as twenty-eight inches or drop them as low as ten inches. The Seven-League Stilts have a locking device that makes the adjustment of the steps an easy matter.

You Will Want a Pair of These FREE Stilts

Yes, sir, you surely will want a pair of these all-red and ready-to-have-fun-with stilts. And to get a pair absolutely FREE, all you have to do is to bring Mother or Dad to our store and buy five dollars' worth of footwear. With each five-dollar purchase you get a pair

of stilts as a present. With each ten-dollar purchase you get two pairs of stilts.

Hurry! Hurry! Hurry! Hurry!

Buy now—right away. If you wait two or three days the stilts may all be gone.

THE KELLY SHOE STORE

Poppy looked at his watch when we were in the street.

“Eleven o’clock,” says he.

“Let’s have dinner,” says I. “I need it. My strength is all gone.”

“Dinner your granny! Quick, Jerry,” and taking my arm, he started dragging me along. “There goes the Steam Corners car.”

“What?” I squeaked. “Aren’t we going home?”

“I’ve got to get another order first.”

“I can’t run,” says I weakly. “My knees wobble.”

“Come on,” he cried, pulling at me.

“Let’s go home,” I begged, letting him see how troubled I was over him. “Please, Poppy. I think you ought to go home. Honest, I do. I mean it, Kid. Your head isn’t quite right. Be

good now and do as I say.”

Laughing, he dragged me into the interurban car, and soon a lot of unfamiliar scenery was skittering past the window.

“Mr. Kelly’s order came to thirty-six dollars,” says he, showing me the signed paper. “Now if we can do as good in Steam Corners, or better, I have a hunch that we’ll come out all hunky-dory at the bank.”

My head was still dizzy.

“But how can we manufacture six dozen pairs of stilts over night,” says I, raking my hair, “when we haven’t got a factory or anything?”

“Oh,” says he, with an unconcerned flourish of his hands, “that’s a mere detail.”

“We can’t do it,” says I. “It’s impossible.”

“Nothing’s impossible,” says he. Then he got out his pencil and started figuring on the back of the order.

“Are you going to cancel it?” says I, in sudden hopefulness. That would be an easy way out of our predicament, I figured.

60

“Cancel it? Cancel what?”

“The order that you got from Mr. Kelly.”

“Do you think I’m crazy?”

“Poppy,” says I seriously, “do you really want me to speak the truth?”

“Oh, I know what you’re going to say.”

“I’m worried about you, Poppy. Honest, I am. There’s something out of kilter in your head. And you should have went home with me, as I begged you to.”

“Jerry,” says he, changing the subject, “how high can you count?”

“How high do you want me to count?”

“Do you see those telephone poles?” and he pointed out of the window.

“Of course.”

“Well, amuse yourself counting them as we ramble along. I’ve got work to do.”

CHAPTER VI IN THE BANKER'S OFFICE

“Here’s where you get licked,” says I to Poppy, when our car rumbled into Steam Corners.

He put away his work.

“What do you mean?” says he, watching the fence pickets as they flitted past the car window.

“You’ll never get an order in this sleepy town,” says I.

“No?” Then he laughed. “Maybe I’ve got tricks up my sleeves that you don’t know about, kid.”

“You were lucky in Ashton,” I went on. “Everything was in your favor over there. But it can’t happen that way twice.”

As we left the car a gang of younger boys came into sight in the street.

“Lookit!” yipped the pug-nosed leader, getting his eyes on me. “Little Lord Fauntleroy has come to town.”

He was making fun of me because I was dressed up.

“Beat it,” says I, giving him a dirty look.

“White collar an’ everything,” he hooted, kicking up his heels. “*Some sheik.*”

“An’ lookit the red necktie!” piped up another one of the smart Alecks.

The mad look on my face tickled Poppy.

“They’re hard-boiled in this town, Jerry.”

“I’ll knock ’em cuckoo,” says I, scowling, “if they don’t dry up.”

“Shucks! You won’t gain anything by starting a fight.”

The pug-nosed leader had been listening.

“*Him* fight?” came scornfully. “Say, he couldn’t lick a greasy spoon.”

So far as I could see there wasn’t any cop in sight, so I started to peel off my coat. But the leader hadn’t any eyes for me now. He was watching Poppy.

“What you got?” says he, letting out his neck eagerly.

“Stilts?”

“Sure thing,” says Poppy, unwinding his selling sample.

The whole gang was interested now. And as no one was paying a particle of attention to me I angrily shoved my arms

back into the sleeves of my coat.

The red stilts were going from hand to hand.

“Gee!” says the leader. “Ain’t they peachy.”

“Go ahead and try them out,” offered Poppy.

“Where’d you git ’em?”

“Oh, we made them.”

“You and him?” and the leader pointed to me.

“Sure thing. Stilt-making is our business. How would you like to own a pair?”

“Can I have these?” came eagerly.

“No. These are specials. But we’ll make you a pair next week.”

“Make me a pair, too,” came quickly from another kid.

Poppy kept close to the leader.

“Who did you say runs the big shoe store across the street?”

“Mr. Winker.”

“Aw! . . .” spoke up another kid. “His name isn’t Winker. It’s Winnegar. But everybody calls him ‘Winker’ because he’s got a funny glass eye.”

Poppy laughed.

“A glass eye, eh? Which one?—right or left?”

“Left.”

“That being the case, I’ll make it a point to keep on the ‘right’ side of him when I demonstrate my stilts.”

“Are you going to make *him* a pair of stilts, too?”

64

“I figure on selling him six or eight dozen pairs for advertising purposes. To give away. See? So be sure and peddle the good news to all the town kids.”

“Aw! . . . You’re kiddin’.”

“Nothing of the sort,” says Poppy earnestly. “You go in his store next week and ask him for a pair. He’ll tell you how you can get them for nothing. And now I’m going over to his store and get the order.”

“Why did you show the kids your stilts?” says I, when we were on the other side of the street.

Poppy laughed.

“For two reasons. One was to head off a scrap and save you from getting a black eye. And the other was to get them interested in Seven-League Stilts. This shoe man with the glass eye may turn us down in spite of all that I can do to sign him up. All right. We’ll wait a few days and call on him again. In the meantime a hundred kids have come to his store

asking for free stilts. And what is the result? The merchant sees that the kids *are* very much interested in our stilts. He'll begin to want them. On the second call I'll go after him hard. It's his last chance, I'll tell him, to get exclusive rights on the stilts in his own town. And, to that point, now that it comes to me, I may hint around to-day that I'll go to his competitor if he doesn't give us an immediate order. For we've got to get the business, Jerry. We sure need it."

Mr. Winnegar was a funny-looking man. Sort of short and bow-legged, with baggy trousers. Being a couple of boys, he figured that he could easily freeze us out and shut us up. But Poppy didn't freeze out for two cents. I guess not. Say, you should have heard that kid! He talked stilts until he was blue in the face. The shoe man kept shaking his head "no," and every time he shook his head his glass eye wobbled. I wanted to laugh, but, of course, I held in. The man had a funny high-pitched voice, too. He absolutely was *not* interested in stilts, he told us, over and over again. The stilts would be a needless expense to him. It would be like throwing money away. But Poppy kept hammering away. That is what you call salesmanship, I guess. And in the end he got an order.

65

"You're a wonder," I told him, when we were headed for home on the one-thirty car.

He laughed.

"I didn't do anything that you couldn't have done, Jerry, or any other boy, for that matter. All it took was nerve."

66

“Let’s see the two orders,” says I.

He handed them to me.

“Seventy-two dollars,” says I, and then I gave a long whistle.

“Pretty good for one day’s work—what?”

“I’ll tell the world,” I cried. “Why, if we can do this good every day we’ll get rich in no time.”

He sobered down.

“I expect to do a lot better than this, Jerry, when we start sending out our advertising. We’ll get dozens of orders in every mail.”

I leaned back in my seat.

“Poppy,” says I, with a happy feeling, “I actually believe that this stilt business of ours is going to be a success.”

“Why, of course it is. I never have doubted that for a moment.”

“You sure are *some* kid,” I bragged, loving him with my eyes.

He began to fidget.

“Aw! . . . I don’t care how much you poke fun at me. But I feel foolish when you brag on me.”

I picked up the thought that had been troubling me.

“You slipped up on one thing, though,” I told him.

“Yes?”

“We’ll never be able to deliver those stilts to the Ashton dealer by nine o’clock to-morrow morning. For the afternoon is half gone. And we haven’t got a dollar’s worth of lumber or a factory or anything.”

“The bank will lend us money.”

“Maybe.”

“All we need is fifty dollars.”

“And you really believe that we can build the stilts over night?”

“There’s an old carpenter living in our block who has a little shop in his back yard. He’ll let us work there, and help us, if we pay him his price.”

During the remainder of the ride Poppy was on needles and pins, so anxious was he to get home. And no sooner had the car stopped at the Tutter waiting room than he was hotfooting it for the bank. I had a queer uneasy feeling in my stomach as I followed him up to the cashier’s window. A bank is a kind of cold place. Everything is run so stiff and formal and dignified-like. A boy can joke with a butcher or a grocer. But, bu-lieve me, I never had the nerve to pull off any funny stuff in a bank. I guess not! I would as soon have thought of cutting up at a funeral.

“Is the president in?” Poppy inquired of the young man in the cashier’s cage.

“Why, yes, I think so. Have you a message for him?”

“I would like to speak with him,” says Poppy, putting on all the dignity that he could.

There was a curious look in the man’s face. Because we were boys he couldn’t believe that our business amounted to much. So he didn’t like to call the bank president.

“Mr. Lorrying is usually quite busy at this hour of the day,” says he smoothly. “So I would hesitate to disturb him unless it was a very important matter.”

“It is a very important matter to us,” says Poppy earnestly.

“A business matter?”

“Yes, sir.”

There was a dry smile.

“And you’re quite sure that I can’t handle the business for you?”

“I think I had better see the president,” Poppy held off, in continued dignity.

“Very well. That is his private office over there. You’ll find seats inside of the corral. I’ll let Mr. Lorrying know that you are waiting to see him.”

“How do you feel?” I asked Poppy, when we were seated in swell leather chairs outside of the door of the bank president’s private office.

“Fine.”

“I feel like a two-cent piece at a golden wedding.”

“Why?”

“Oh, everything is so big and important around here, and we’re so small.”

“Shucks! I don’t feel that way.” He stretched his arms and put out his chest. “In fact I sort of have the feeling that I *own* this place.”

“For the love of mud!” I squeaked, wishing I was outside. There was no telling what that kid was liable to do! And I didn’t want to be made a monkey of in a place like this.

“I’m not so sure,” says he, looking around as though he was thinking of buying the place, “that I wouldn’t rather be a banker than a manufacturer.”

“You’re crazy.”

“It would be swell to own a bank like this.”

“If you don’t shut up,” I told him, fidgeting, “I’m going to beat it.”

He grinned.

“Say, Jerry.”

“Yes?”

“Didn’t you tell me this morning that you knew Mr. Lorrington?”

“He’s a friend of Dad’s.”

“What kind of a man is he?—a crab?”

“I should say not. He’s peachy.”

“Does he like boys?”

“He likes me. For every time he comes to our house he brings me candy. And once when he came back from Florida he brought me a baby alligator.”

“Um . . .” and the other grinned. “If he’s such a good friend of yours as all that maybe I ought to let you do the talking. Anyway, you should, for you’re the company’s financial man.”

“Good-by,” says I, starting to dig out.

“Sh-h-h-h! Sit down and behave yourself. I hear him coming.”

The door of the president’s office was suddenly thrown open and we found ourselves looking into the red face of a man who at the moment seemed to me to be as big as a giant and equally as ferocious. He had a big stomach and big hands and big feet. Everything about him seemed to be big. I suddenly

thought to myself how very small we must look to him!

“Well,” he boomed at us from the ceiling, “what do you boys want?”

71

I tried to get Poppy’s eye, to signal to him that I was ready to run if he was, but he didn’t pay any attention to me.

“Mr. Lorrying,” says he gravely, “did you ever walk on stilts when you were a boy?”

The banker stared.

“Did I ever—What’s that?” says he in amazement. “Did I ever walk on stilts when I was a boy? Of course I did,” the voice thundered. “Almost broke my confounded neck, too. Got a scar to this day where I fell and cut my elbow on an old crock. But if you’re selling stilts you’ve gotten into the wrong place, young man. This isn’t a toy shop—it’s a bank. And we’re able to do our work nicely around here without lengthening our legs with stilts.”

“Oh,” came quickly, “I didn’t come here to sell you stilts. That isn’t the object of my call, Mr. Lorrying. I came to tell you about a stilt invention of ours that we think will make us rich.”

Here the banker noticed me for the first time.

“Good afternoon, Jerry. How’s your pa’s warts coming along?”

“They aren’t coming,” says I, grinning, “they’re going.

72

For Doc Leland gave him something to put on them that's drying them up."

There was a deep grunt.

"Humph! Old Doc's powders aren't always a sure cure, for the other day he gave my wife some medicine for her sick cat and the cat died. . . . Now, young man, what is this nonsense of yours about getting rich?"

"Jerry and I have organized a company," says Poppy. "We're going to manufacture Seven-League Stilts. Like these. See? We got two orders to-day, one in Ashton and another in Steam Corners. Here they are. They total seventy-two dollars."

The banker looked at the orders, then handed them back.

"Well. . . . How does this concern me?"

"We want you to lend us money to start up our factory."

"What?" the voice thundered. "Lend money to you boys?"

Poppy stiffened.

"You lend money to men. And if we can show you that our scheme is all right, why shouldn't you lend money to us? These orders ought to prove to you that there's a big market for our stilts. Why, if we go about it in the right way, we ought to sell thousands and thousands of pairs."

A look of interest crept into the banker's face.

“Um . . .” says he, after a moment, regarding us curiously.

“Do you boys like gumdrops?”

Poppy hadn’t expected any such question as this. It rattled him for a moment or two.

“Why . . .” he fumbled. “Why, of course we do.”

“I just bought a boxful. They look pretty good. Suppose you boys come into my office and we’ll try ’em out.”

I followed my chum into the president’s office. And when the gumdrops were passed around I succeeded in not being overcome by bashfulness. Boy, if there’s anything I like it’s gumdrops.

“I used to eat chocolate drops,” rumbled the banker, “but my wife, who’s the boss at our house, made me switch to gumdrops when I got to tipping the scales at two hundred and fifty pounds. She said it was the chocolate candy that was making me fat. . . . Let’s see—what’s your name?”

“Poppy Ott.”

“And you got up this stilt scheme yourself?”

“Yes, sir. But Jerry and I are pals, so we’re going to be business partners.”

“Of course.” A whimsical look came into the big red face. “Do you know what I wanted to be when I was a boy your age?”

“No, sir.”

“I wanted to be a circus man. Menagerie stuff. I thought of it days and dreamed of it nights. Finally I decided to get up a circus of my own. In those days there wasn’t any elephants or monkeys running wild in the woods around here, so I did the next best thing and borrowed a neighbor’s cow and pigs. A few decorations, put on with a paint brush, accomplished wonders! As I remember we had a very exciting performance. And later on my pa made it exciting for me, for the cow-elephant got a bur caught under its tail and kicked out one whole side of the barn. However, the pleasing part is that I took in sixty-three cents. And to this day I’ve had the conviction that I would have developed into another P. T. Barnum if my parents hadn’t sidetracked me into a bank. So, as you can see, I know considerable of what a boy’s ambitions are like. And it doesn’t surprise me a mite to hear about this stilt scheme of yours. Now, I don’t know as I’ll lend you a penny. I probably won’t. However, you can talk for five minutes if you want to, and I’ll listen attentively—providing the gumdrops hold out. . . . Have some more, Jerry.”

At this point a girl tapped on the door and entered.

75

“Mr. Lawrence Donner and his son are outside, sir. They would like to see you in a hurry.”

“Um. . . . Have a gumdrop, Hattie. And tell Mr. Donner and his son that I’ll see them in ten minutes. I’m busy just now.”

Golly Ned! The Donner kid and his father had to wait on us! Maybe you think I didn’t feel big.

CHAPTER VII

THE MAN IN THE BRICK HOUSE

I'm not going to tell you here what happened in Mr. Lorry's private office, except to say that while Poppy worked his jaws talking stilts I worked mine eating gumdrops. If my chum had talked long enough I guess I would have cleaned out the candy box, for the gumdrops sure were swell. Just the right size, too. I could hold three of them in my mouth at once without any trouble at all.

At four o'clock the bank closed for the day, and getting into the banker's automobile, we drove with him down Main Street to the lonely brick house that I mentioned earlier in my story. As we turned into the winding private drive, sentinel-like pine trees growing beside the roadway peered at us as though questioning our right to be there. And when we had passed them I could imagine that they got their heads together in indignant council. I looked ahead. What a dark, spooky house, I thought. There was something about it that reminded me of the old manse in the Scotch cemetery.

Poppy's father worked here. But the old man wasn't in sight among the trees or on the lawn. Nor was there anybody on the big front porch when we drew up at the main door.

Having followed the banker up the porch steps, we stood behind him while he cranked the old-fashioned door bell, the jingling voice of which awoke queer hollow echoes within the house. A moment later a neat, gray-haired woman came quietly to the door.

“Good afternoon, Mrs. Fillingham,” bowed the banker politely. “Is Herm at home?”

“He’s upstairs, Mr. Lorrington.”

“Um. . . Haven’t seen him for a coon’s age. Hope he isn’t sick.”

The housekeeper seemed to hesitate before replying. And I fancied that a queer worried look flashed across her face.

“He’s able to be around, sir. Shall I tell him that you would like to see him?”

“If you please. We’ll wait out here on the porch.”

Poppy got my ear.

“Did you notice anything queer in the housekeeper’s actions, Jerry?”

“Is that woman the housekeeper?”

78

“Sure thing.”

“What’s the matter with her?”

“She’s scared.”

“Scared? Scared of what?”

“Spirits. She told Pa about it the other day. The old man who owns this place is a spiritualist. He thinks that he can talk with dead people.”

“Br-r-r-r!” says I, shivering. “Let’s beat it.”

“Don’t act silly. It’s just a crazy belief. There can’t be any truth in it.”

“Is the housekeeper a spiritualist, too?”

“No. But she admits that queer things have been happening around here lately. The other day she had Pa come into the house and listen.”

“Listen? Listen to what?”

“To old Mr. Donner. He was talking to his dead wife.”

“Could he *see* her?”

“Pa said he acted as though he could.”

“He must be cuckoo.”

“He has all of his wife’s things in a room on the third floor. The bed and everything is just the way it was when she died. He goes up there and talks to her by the hour, so the housekeeper says. When he eats he has a place set for

her at the table. And Mrs. Fillingham further tells about hearing queer sounds—ghostly raps on the walls and windows in the dead of night . . . clocks strike when they shouldn't. And all through the night, she says, she can hear footsteps going up and down the halls. Lately she has been locking herself in her bedroom with the lights turned on.”

“Br-r-r-r!” says I. “I'd hate to live here.”

“Do you believe in ghosts, Jerry?”

“Of course not.”

“Neither do I. But Mrs. Fillingham declares that she saw the ghost of the old man's dead wife one night last week. She told Pa about it. But don't repeat this, Jerry. For she doesn't want queer stories to get started about the old man.”

While Poppy and I had been speaking in a low breath, Mr. Lorrington had busied himself walking up and down the big porch looking at the blossoms in the flower boxes. Now he was called to the door by the reappearance of the housekeeper.

“If you will come this way, please.”

I hung back.

“Are you going inside?” I inquired of Poppy.

“Sure thing.”

I squinted into the gloomy hall.

“Gosh!” I shivered. “I don’t like these mystery houses. They give me the jimjams.”

The other laughed at me.

“What’s the matter, Jerry? Are you afraid that a spirit will creep up behind you and tickle you in the back of the neck with a feather?”

“I’d drop dead if it did.”

“Come on, you poor fish. There isn’t any danger.”

“But how about that ghost?”

“I thought you told me that you didn’t believe in ghosts!”

“I don’t.”

“Then what are you scared of?”

“Maybe this old Spiritualist is like the spider that kept its parlor door open for flies.”

“Shucks! He won’t harm you. Besides, you haven’t got enough legs to pass for a fly.”

“If he can talk with dead people, he may do something *queer* to us.”

“Rats!” and the other started off.

I wasn’t going to be left behind. So I went into the dark quiet

house with the others. The housekeeper was in the lead. Mr. Lorry was behind her, then Poppy, then me.

This was the biggest house that I ever had been in. Wide doors opened into big rooms with high ornamental ceilings, and on the way to the third floor I counted seven fireplaces. I learned afterwards that there were ten fireplaces in the rambling house. Think of that! It was some queer place, all right. 81

The furniture that I saw wasn't like the stuff that Mother has. It was very old-fashioned. The chairs that stood stiffly against the papered walls had crooked legs and queer curved backs. There were thick carpets in the halls and on the stairs. I had the feeling of walking noiselessly on air. Silence! The whole house seemed blanketed with it. I didn't like it. It gave me a queer shivery feeling.

Suddenly the silence was broken by a shrill, scornful, mocking laugh. The sound rang through the hall. Never in all my life had I heard such a laugh. My hair stood on end. And I guess I would have turned and ran out of the house if Poppy hadn't took hold of me.

“It's a parrot, Jerry. See?”

The banker spoke the green parrot's name as we passed it on its floor perch in the upper hall.

“Hello, Jake. How's Jake to-day?”

“Ha! ha! ha!” came the weird, rasping laugh. “Ha! ha! ha!”

“Can’t it talk?” I inquired of the banker, with an uneasy look at the queer bird.

“It can, but it won’t. It hasn’t talked since its mistress died.”

“Ha! ha! ha!” jeered the parrot as we passed it. “Ha! ha! ha!”

I looked back at the strange bird. As a rule I like parrots. I think they’re funny. But at the moment I told myself that I didn’t care to have anything to do with *this* parrot. I guess not! It was as weird as the spirits that lived in the same house with it.

We were now on the third floor. And shortly after passing the parrot the housekeeper showed us into a big airy room where an old gray-haired man sat at an open window. I recognized him instantly, though I couldn’t recall that I had seen him in the Tutter streets for many months. To me the wrinkled face now seemed sharper and the eyes brighter. Spirits! I shivered as the black eyes pierced me. And I was glad at the moment that I didn’t have to touch the man’s hand. It would be like touching the hand of a dead person, I told myself.

The two men exchanged friendly greetings.

83

“Anything wrong at the bank, Tom?”

“No, Herm. We’re all hunky-dory down there.”

There was a dry laugh.

“I thought maybe I had overdrawn my account and you had come here to rake me over the coals about it. . . . These boys

relations of yours?”

“No. This one with the freckles and the red necktie is Todd’s boy. You know who I mean—the man in the brickyard.”

“Yes, I know Mr. Todd.”

“And the other one is Poppy Ott.”

“Ott?” came quickly, and the black eyes were sharply questioning. “Did you say Ott?”

“My father works for you,” Poppy spoke up.

“Oh! . . .”

Mr. Loring cleared his throat.

“Herm, do you remember the last time I talked with you about your factory?”

A cloud passed over the thin face.

“Yes. . . I remember.”

“You got huffy as time because I roasted you for letting the plant stand idle. I told you if it was *my* plant I’d have a crew of men in there making furniture or something. It always hurts me to see an idle man or an idle machine. Anything that’s idle is waste. And waste is something I fight against.”

A thin hand came up.

“Tom—”

“Just a minute, Herm. Let me speak my piece. It won’t take me many minutes. What I was going to say is this: I know what you’re up against. There’s no market for carriages, so consequently you can’t build carriages. But you’ve got a whole factory full of woodworking machinery—planers and saws and what not. And there’s lots of things that you could build with these machines besides carriages.”

The old man shook his head.

“Tom, I looked into the furniture game. You know that. I didn’t like it. It was out of my line. It meant a new product and new dealers and new everything. The Atkinson company tried it when they dropped their carriage line, and failed. I had the feeling that I’d fail, too. Besides, I’m an old man. And I haven’t any ambition to branch out into new lines. I’ve done my life’s work, Tom. I’m content to rest.”

“Herm, you shouldn’t let yourself believe that you’re an old man. Look at me! I’ve got just as many years piled up on top of me as you’ve got. But do you see me sitting around telling folks how old and useless I be? No, sir! Not for one minute. I step lively, I do. I keep at work. Then, too, a thing that helps to keep me feeling young is my associates. Outside of yourself, Herm, all of my associates are young men. I even get out with the kids on scouting and fishing trips. There’s great sport in that for me. I like boys—when they behave themselves. For that I came here this afternoon with these two chaps. Now, as you probably surmise, I came to talk with you about your factory. As a business man, with the

town's best interests at heart, I'd like to see your factory start up. Standing idle as it is, and has been for the past three years, it gives the town a black eye. Visitors see it and wonder if we're all dead down here. . . . Herm, how would you like to manufacture stilts?"

There was amazement in the pinched face.

"Manufacture . . . *what?*"

"Herm, this Ott kid has got what looks to me like a real idea. I think enough of it to be willing to back it up with a couple hundred dollars of my own money. And what I want you to do is to agree to let us use a corner of your factory. Maybe in a few years we'll grow until we fill the whole factory, turning out stilts by the car-load. On the other hand we may go bust. A thing like this is always more or less of a gamble. But this scheme looks good to me. And, as I say, I'll put up the working capital if you'll give us factory space and agree to take an active interest in the business. We'll be partners, you and I and these two boys. We aren't going to plunge. We're going to pay our way as we go along."

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"Tom," came wearily, "I haven't any interest in manufacturing. I'd rather let things stand. And then, when I'm gone, my heirs can start up the factory, or sell it, as they see fit."

"Herm, the most fun you ever had was when your factory was running full time. I know! I haven't lived in the same town with you, playing checkers with you as high as four nights a week and handling your money for you as a banker, without

learning a lot about you. It wasn't until business dropped off that you began to get gray. It's idleness that has made you feel old. What you need is an interest. A manufacturing interest. Why, you old cod, you aren't half as old as you try to let yourself believe. Besides, I want to give these boys a chance. I think they deserve it. Do you know what they did? They went out in the county this morning and got seventy-two dollars' worth of stilt business. That's the kind of boys *they* are. They deserve all the help we can give them. Stilts! Why, man alive, we can have a barrel of fun working with them. . . . Come on, Herm. Let's go over to your factory and pull down some of the cobwebs and see what we can do in the way of getting set to manufacture stilts. And to-morrow I'll draw up regular partnership papers."

"Tom—"

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"Here's your cane, Herm. Come on."

Starting to get out of his chair, the old manufacturer's face suddenly underwent a startling change. It seemed to freeze. After what Poppy had told me downstairs I was scared out of my wits. There was something behind me. I couldn't see it. But the old spiritualist could. For he was staring at it over my shoulder.

"Herm! . . ." came in quick alarm from the banker. "*Herm!* . . . What's the matter?"

"Martha—" The name was whispered by lips that were deadly white. "Martha—"

Low as the name of the dead wife had been spoken, the parrot

had heard it. And now the bird's terrible laughter rang through the house. Boy, was I ever scared!

The next moment the old man was on his feet. There was warmth in his face now. And as we went down the stairs he hummed to himself. Of the four of us, no one was more eager to get over to the factory than he.

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I was mystified by what I had seen. And so was Poppy, I guess. As for Mr. Lorrington I saw that he was troubled.

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CHAPTER VIII

THE BEGINNING OF A MYSTERY

Well, we had a real stilt business now. We had a factory with machinery in it, and we had money in the bank to pay our bills. Poppy's dream had come true.

Of course, things hadn't worked out exactly as we had planned in the beginning. For instance, there were four partners in the business instead of two. But that was all right. It really was a good thing for us that we had two experienced men in our company. It wasn't a kid business now! It was a real business. And having men like Mr. Lorrington and Mr. Donner back of us, to sort of tell us what to do and what not to do, we wouldn't be so liable to blunder and go wrong. Poppy is a smart kid. He has a lot of wise stuff in his head. But, even so, he doesn't know everything. Not by a long shot. And the chances are he would have made some pretty bad mistakes if he hadn't had some one besides me to help and advise him.

We were crazy over Mr. Lorrington. Golly Ned! We would have done anything for that man. For see what he had done for us! If it hadn't been for him we never would have had the chance to start up our stilt business in the old carriage works. For Mr. Donner wouldn't have paid any attention to us

if we had gone to him alone with our proposition. Let two boys start up a business in his factory! The suggestion wouldn't have gotten a moment's consideration from him.

Yes, it was a mighty lucky thing for us that Mr. Lorrington had taken an interest in our scheme. For it was only through the banker's influence over the old manufacturer that the latter's idle factory had been opened up to us as a place in which to do our work. We realized this. And, as I say, we were chock-full of gratitude toward our big partner. He sure was the berries, we said. Every time he came around where we were we kind of got close to him to let him see how much we thought of him.

And we liked Mr. Donner, too, though at first, as I have written down, I was a bit scared of him myself. It gave me a creepy graveyard feeling to be around a man who could talk with dead people. I kept thinking of my own safety. If he had dead people hanging around him, what was to hinder one of them from creeping up behind us when I was with him and running its ghostly hand down the back of my neck? Br-r-r-r! Or, worse still, the dead thing might take a crazy notion to drop *him* and start following *me* around. Believe me, I didn't want anything like that to happen. I guess not! So, as I say, I sort of steered shy of the old spiritualist at first.

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But after a few days I got over that feeling. For I saw that he was all right. In his new interest in our stilts he seemed to forget all about his spirits. Or if he talked with them he did it when he was alone in his room. Certainly when he was in the factory he acted all right.

Well, to pick up my story where I left off in the preceding chapter, we spent an hour or more in the old carriage factory that afternoon deciding where we would start doing our work. We would need a planing machine, Poppy said, and a saw and a driller. The factory was full of such machines, and their owner told us that we could pick out the ones we wanted to use and move them around to suit ourselves. He said further that instead of running all the machinery with the old water wheel we could put in an electric motor, fed by city current, and run only the three or four machines that we needed in our work.

Poppy was in his glory. Say, you never saw a busier kid. He was here and there and everywhere. He had it all figured out where the machinery ought to go. First in line came the machine that sawed the boards into strips. Then came the planing machine, and then the driller. Instead of painting the stilts with a brush, we would dip them in a paint tank, he said, for that would be quicker. Everything had to be done quick, according to his notion. The quicker we built the stilts, he said, the more money we would make. Low production costs! That was the thing to work for. He even talked about the big automatic machines that we would own some day, which would swallow logs at one end and turn out finished stilts at the other end. I didn't take stock in everything he said. His stilt machine sounded like a crazy daydream to me. Still, it was fun to listen to him talk.

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I hadn't any of the mechanical and business stuff in my head that he had in his, so I wasn't of much help to him. About all I did that afternoon was to follow him around and say "Yes" and "No" and "Sure thing" and "I guess so." But to

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that point he didn't suffer for lack of help. He knew just what to do. I saw that, all right. And after an hour or two of tagging him around, with my "yes" and "no" stuff, I began to wonder, troubled-like, if I wasn't going to be a sort of useless ornament in the new company—like the wings on an ostrich. I didn't know much. That was one sure thing.

I guess he read my thoughts. For once I caught him looking at me kind of close-like, as though he was studying me. And after that he asked for my opinion on everything. But, as I say, all I could do was to agree with him. Yet I didn't feel so unimportant after that. Poppy is a good kid that way. You don't catch him trying to be the whole cheese. That is one big reason why I like him so well, I guess.

Oh, yes, I must tell you the dumb-bell trick I did that afternoon, for it connects up with something that happens later on in my story. I'm a great hand to wander around and rubber at things. Curious-like. And noticing a flight of stairs leading up to the second floor of the factory, I decided to see what was up there. Poppy didn't need me, so I slipped away by myself. From the second floor another flight of stairs led up to the top floor, and having climbed one set of stairs, I decided I might just as well go to the top and see all there was to be seen. On the third floor I noticed a door on which was painted: EXPERIMENTAL ROOM. That sounded interesting to me. So I opened the door and squinted inside. It was a rather small room, about sixteen feet square, with a work bench at one end. A skylight in the flat roof gave the room its only supply of daylight. Even at a glance I had the feeling that the room was something like a cell in a jail. Who had worked up here, I wondered. I thought of stories I had

heard about companies employing secret manufacturing departments. Yet I couldn't imagine any such thing in connection with carriages. Later on I was told that old Mr. Donner used to do various kinds of secret inventive work in this room. It was generally thought among his workmen that he was trying to invent an engine to use in his carriages, for at that time automobiles were just coming into use. There may have been no truth in the story, or, if the engine was built, it must have been a fizzle, for nothing was ever done in the factory in the way of branching out into automobiles. As more and more automobiles came into use, and fewer carriages were sold, the business gradually slowed up, and finally stopped altogether.

Well, that prison-like room interested me more than anything I had seen in the factory so far. I wanted to have a closer look at it. So I stepped inside. I heard the door latch behind me, but thought nothing of that. In one corner I saw a pile of gears and other machine parts. They must have been undisturbed for years, for they were covered with heavy dust. I looked in the drawers in the bench, finding files and wrenches and other tools. What sort of thrilled me was the thought that secret things had been done in this room. That is why it was so much like a prison cell—its secret work had been shut away from the curious eyes of the other factory men.

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Suddenly it came to me that Poppy might be wondering where I was, for I had been away from him for more than twenty minutes. So I started to go back downstairs . . . and found, in trying to open the door, that I couldn't unlatch it from the inside!

Well, there I was! I was a “prisoner,” all right. I fiddled with the door, trying to open it. The knob turned. But it didn’t work the lock’s inside parts. Something in the lock was broken or disconnected.

I looked around for another possible way of escape. This was the only door. And the only window was the skylight. The latter was entirely out of my reach. I noticed a scuttle in the roof, but that was out of my reach, too.

I figured that the quickest way of getting out was to yell for help, which I did. And pretty soon I heard some one on the roof. Then the scuttle was raised.

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“Is that you, Jerry?” says Poppy, looking into my prison.

“I can’t get out,” I told him, feeling cheap in my silly predicament.

“Can’t get out?” he repeated.

“What are you doing up there?” says I.

“Oh, just looking around. Mr. Lorrying and Mr. Donner have gone home, so I thought I’d see what the old factory was like. Did you say you can’t get out of that room?”

I explained about the door. And after a good laugh at me, the other came down and let me out.

That evening at the supper table I told Mother and Dad about our new company. They thought at first that I was joking. But I made it very plain to them that our company was a real

manufacturing business, and no joke. Getting the particulars of our trip to Ashton and Steam Corners, and our later call at the bank, Dad gave me a warm look. I guess he felt pretty proud of me.

Mother is a great hand to fret over little things.

“And you say you’re going to work in the factory to-night?” says she, not liking that idea.

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“We’ve got to,” says I.

“How many stilts are you going to make?”

“Seventy-two pairs.”

“And you really think that you can do it in one night?”

“We’re going to hire a man to help us. Mr. Klingsmith. You know him. He’s the cross-eyed carpenter who lives near Poppy’s house.”

Dad laughed.

“I know him well. He hung a door for us at the brickyard and got it upside down.”

“I thought at first,” says I, “that Poppy was cocked-eyed in promising to deliver the stilts to the Ashton man to-morrow morning. But I guess we can do it, all right. For he generally knows what he’s talking about.”

“He’s a bright boy,” waggled Dad. “I’m glad you and he are

chums.”

“And he’s a worker,” added Mother.

“We’re going to let Mr. Klingsmith do the cutting and fitting,” I explained. “For he’s used to that kind of work and can do it faster and better than we can. As he puts the stilts together we’re going to paint them with six-hour paint. So, if we get the last pair painted by midnight, they’ll be nice and dry by to-morrow morning.”

Dad gave me a peculiar look.

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“Does Mr. Donner know that these stilts are to be used against his brother in a shoe sale?”

“I don’t think so,” I considered. “I don’t remember that Poppy mentioned that point to him.”

“Pretty good!” Dad chuckled.

“I have been told,” says Mother, “that the two Donner brothers don’t get along very well.”

Dad was sober now.

“Old Mr. Donner is nobody’s fool. *He* knows how certain relatives of his are waiting impatiently for the hearse to back up to his front door.”

Mother’s face clouded.

“Isn’t it dreadful,” says she, “for people to be like that!”

“I don’t want to be spiteful,” says Dad, “but it would tickle me pink to see Larry Donner get left.”

“And young Donner, too,” says I quickly.

“I never liked that boy,” says Dad.

“No one likes him,” says I.

“What’s the matter with him?” inquired Mother.

“He’s a bully and a smart Aleck.” Then I laughed. “Did you hear how Poppy and I fixed him the other day?”

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“No. How was that?”

I told about our horn stunt. Dad laughed. He said we were the cat’s claws.

“Some day,” says I, wagging, “Poppy and young Donner are going to mix. I can see it coming. For the shoe-store kid is always slinging slurs. He calls Poppy a tramp, and things like that.”

“Now, Jerry,” says Mother promptly, “you know what *I* think about boys fighting.”

I grinned.

“I won’t get any sympathy from you, huh, if I come home with a black eye?”

“I’ll be tempted to take a stick to you, even though you are a

big boy.”

“Donner won’t fight unless he has his gang with him. And, bu-lieve me, stick or no stick, if four or five guys jump on my pal I’m going to pitch in and help him.”

“Absolutely,” says Dad quietly. “I’d be ashamed of you if you didn’t, and so would Mother. Her point is that she doesn’t want you to fight for the sake of fighting.”

“There won’t be any trouble,” says I, “if young Donner leaves us alone. It’s all up to him.”

Supper over, I grabbed my cap and hurried down the street to Poppy’s house, where I found the president and general manager of the Tutter Advertising Novelty Company washing dishes. 100

“Hi, Jerry,” he grinned at me. “We’ve got the electric motor all set up. Mr. Klingsmith is over there now getting the belts ready. We’re going to start up our big stilt factory at seven o’clock.”

“Hot dog!” says I, kicking up my heels.

We worked until twelve o’clock that night. Gee, it was fun! It didn’t seem like work at all. How the time flew! It was midnight before we realized it. Our night’s work done, we shut up the factory and went home to bed, leaving our stilts to dry. Boy, did they ever look peachy! One hundred and forty-four of them in one long row.

Poppy and I talked things over on the way home. Printed

paper stickers had been ordered for the stilts, and it was to be my job in the morning, the leader said, to put these stickers on the stilts and pack the goods for shipment.

“When they’re all ready, Jerry, you had better hire a truck and take them over to Ashton yourself. For we want to make sure that they get there on time.”

“What are you going to do?” says I.

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“Now that we’ve got a factory,” says he earnestly, “we’ve got to keep it running. And we can’t keep it running without orders. So I’m going to make a circle of the small towns near here and see how much business I can scare up.”

I looked at him eagerly.

“I wish I could go with you.”

“So do I,” says he quickly. “But I really won’t need you. And if both of us were to go away there would be no one here to run the factory.”

“Is that going to be my job?”

“Sure thing.”

“Gosh! Do you think I can do it? I never ran a factory before. I don’t know anything about it.”

“Mr. Lorrington and Mr. Donner will help you. But don’t go to them unless you get stuck. Do your own thinking, Jerry.”

“How long are you going to be away?”

“Oh, four or five days. I’ll write or telephone to you every day. And as fast as I get an order I’ll mail it in. You can buy the stilt material and keep plenty of work ahead of Mr. Klingsmith so that he doesn’t loaf on the job.”

Two weeks passed. And I want to tell you that it was an exciting two weeks to me. I learned a lot of things. I started in as green as grass and at the end of the two weeks there wasn’t a thing in the factory that I couldn’t do almost as good as Mr. Klingsmith himself. I had a desk now. Just like a real office man. Oh, there was real class to me, all right! I want to tell you that I felt pretty big sitting there booking the orders that Poppy sent in and keeping track of the stuff that we bought. Mr. Lorrington showed me how to keep a record of things. It wasn’t hard. I made a few mistakes in my figures, but he quickly spotted the errors in checking up on my work.

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Following a four-day selling trip, in which time he signed up five shoe dealers for stilts, the orders averaging six dozen pairs apiece, Poppy took a longer trip, going as far east as Indiana. I guess he had the time of his life. I got one or two short letters from him every day. And I don’t think a single day passed in which he didn’t send in an order. One day he sent in three orders. We had more work now than Mr. Klingsmith could handle alone. So we hired another man.

Of course, everybody in Tutter now knew that something was going on in the old carriage factory. Stilts! The news soon leaked out, for if Mr. Klingsmith was a good carpenter he was also a better gossip. Many of the

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townspeople ridiculed the idea. It was a foolish notion of the old carriage manufacturer's, they said. And when they heard that two boys were sort of running the new company, they almost laughed their heads off. Two boys in business! That sure was a big joke.

But their ridicule didn't worry us. Not so you can notice it. We knew that the business was going to be a big success. The orders that Poppy was sending in daily proved that the stilts would sell. Everything would be hunky-dory when we started sending out our advertising. Where we got one order now we would get ten orders then, or even more than that, for our advertising would visit a hundred merchants while Poppy was calling on one.

Yes, the thing to do was to get our advertising printed as fast as we could. We both realized that. So Poppy came home and started to work on the advertising job. I let him use my desk. And he sat there as big as cuffy, chewing his pencil and scribbling down stuff just like a real advertising man. Other times I saw him tearing through the factory with a wild look in his eyes, as though he was trying to run down an idea that always kept a yard or two ahead of him. He got a lot of help at the newspaper office. Mr. Stair was going to do our printing for us, so he was glad to offer suggestions. He was pretty well posted on advertising, too, having been in the newspaper business for almost twenty years.

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One of the advertising pieces had the title: "*Here is a Way to Increase Your Profits.*" This title would flag the dealer's attention, Poppy said, in explaining the advertising to me. There was a picture of boys and girls walking on stilts. I

won't try and tell you word for word what the folder said. That is unnecessary. The second piece had the title: "*Put This Trade-Pulling Magnet to Work in YOUR Store.*" A picture showed two shoe stores side by side. One was empty; the other was full of customers. Boys and girls were walking out of the busy store on Seven-League Stilts. Over the door of the empty store was a sign: "*Is This YOUR Store?*"

I was too busy running the factory to help with the advertising to any extent. But, then, for that matter, 105 Poppy didn't need my help. He knew more about advertising in a minute than I knew in a year. One day he went over to Ashton to sell Mr. Kelly some more stilts. And when he came home he had a grin all over his face. I grinned, too, let me tell you, when I learned what had happened in Ashton the morning the two Donners started their "clearing-out" sale. When they found out that their chief competitor was giving away stilts they bought a lot of horns. And they hired a couple of boys to stand out in front of their store and toot. You see, they copied our stuff! But while the scheme worked for us it didn't work for them for two cents. The Ashton kids wanted stilts and not horns. What was an old ten-cent horn, anyway, as compared with a pair of peachy Seven-League Stilts! When young Donner learned that we had manufactured the stilts that upset his advertised shoe sale he hated us worse than ever. It galled him, I guess, to know that his rich uncle was helping us with our stilt business. For he was naturally a jealous kid.

Mr. Donner came down to the factory every day. I got so I knew just when to look for him. He never said very much. But he kept a sharp eye on what was going on. And once I heard him jacking up Mr. Klingsmith for some poor work that the

latter had done.

“Charley,” says he, calling the old carpenter by his first name, “we used to build good carriages in this factory, didn’t we?”

“Yes, sir,” says old Mr. Klingsmith, spitting.

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“There weren’t any better carriages on the market, eh?”

“Ours were the best, sir.”

“Very well. Let us live up to our reputation and do as good a job on these stilts as we did on our carriages.”

Mr. Lorry came down to the factory, too, though not as often as its owner. I couldn’t help but overhear a lot of things that the two old men talked about. And I soon learned that they were friends of long standing. In addressing each other it was always “Herm” and “Tom.”

One day when I was talking with Mr. Lorry I told him how grateful Poppy and I were for what he had done for us.

“Um . . .” says he, with a thoughtful look, “I don’t know as I’m deserving of all this praise, Jerry.”

“I’ll tell the world you are!” I cried. “We can’t praise you enough. Gee! We think you’re the best man in the whole world outside of our dads.”

“Well, now, Jerry,” says he soberly, “that’s mighty fine of you to feel that way toward me. I appreciate it. But what would you say if I were to tell you that I had a hidden

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motive in going into partnership with you and Poppy?”

“I don’t know what you mean.”

“No? Well, here’s the truth of the matter: As much as the interests of you two boys, I also had the interests of my old friend Donner in mind in taking up this stilt work. He’s been an awful worry to me in the past year. I was afraid that he’d lose his mind over this queer religion of his. What he needed was a business interest. I realized that. But I couldn’t get him to do anything. Then you boys came along with your stilt scheme. I jumped at it as a possible means of giving my old friend the business interest that he needed. Now, don’t mistake me. I was glad to help you boys, too. Yes, sir-ee. I saw you had a good scheme. And I still have hopes that it will develop into something big. The town needs it. But in taking up this work I don’t want you boys to think that I hadn’t anything in mind except your young interests. I want you to know the truth.”

“I don’t feel any the less grateful to you, Mr. Lorrying,” says I soberly.

“You’re a good boy, Jerry. And so is Poppy.”

“And you’re a good man,” says I warmly.

“It has made me feel happy,” he went on, “to see the way my old friend has taken an interest in things around here. I hope that interest keeps up. And to that point, Jerry, if you ever notice him acting queer again, I’d appreciate your telling me about it. Will you do that?”

“You bet your boots,” I promised.

“He did business with us exclusively when our bank was a one-horse outfit, and helped us to grow. So, aside from my friendly interest in him, I owe him something. I want to help him. And if I can’t help him this way, by keeping him interested in the stilt business, I’ve got to find another way.”

On the day that our advertising was being printed Mr. Donner failed to show up at the factory as usual. And thinking that he might be sick, I went around by his house that noon. No, he wasn’t sick, the housekeeper told me. He was upstairs in his room.

That night Poppy and I went to a picture show. And after the show we stopped in an ice-cream parlor and had a treat. In passing the town hall we saw Mr. Ott and Bill Hadley, the Tutter marshal, chatting together. These two men are great cronies. They talk detective stuff by the hour.

Coming to Poppy’s house, I sat down on the porch with him. And naturally the thing we talked about the most was our stilt business. It seemed to us in our enthusiasm that there was no limit to the number of stilts that we could sell. As fast as we made a thousand pairs there would be need for another thousand pairs. We would turn out millions of pairs a year. Seven-League Stilts! They would become as famous and as well known as Ford automobiles. Soon the Laplanders and even the African natives would be walking on wooden legs of our manufacture! The whole world would be using our stilts!

About eleven o’clock the telephone bell rang. And somehow,

as soon as I heard it, I knew that something was wrong. Thoughts come to a fellow like that. So I followed Poppy into the house.

“Hello,” says he, taking down the receiver, “this is Poppy Ott speaking.” There was a short silence. I could hear a woman’s voice. “He isn’t here just now, Mrs. Fillingham. He’s up town. What’s that? Why, of course—he’ll be glad to come over. I’ll try and get word to him right away.”

“What’s the matter?” says I, as Poppy hung up the receiver.

“It’s old Mr. Donner,” says he, with a troubled face.

“He’s gone back to his spirits, the housekeeper says. And she’s so worked up over what has happened there to-night that she’s afraid to go to bed.”

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Calling up the police station, Poppy was told that his father was on his way home. So we wrote a note of instructions to the old detective, leaving it on the table where he would be sure and see it as soon as he came into the house. Then Poppy and I started down the street to first find out what had happened at the brick house and then report to Mr. Lorrington, in keeping with our promise to him.

Coming to the lonely house, I almost turned back. Those awful pine trees! As I came under their shadow I could imagine that they were reaching down to strangle me with their quivering limbs. They weren’t trees—they were black spirits!

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CHAPTER IX

A WEIRD ADVENTURE

I kept close to Poppy as we hurried up the winding stone walk that led from the street to the front door of the big brick house. For, as I say, I didn't like those black-fingered pine trees. They gave me the shivers. Nor did I like the shadowy bushes that crouched with hidden faces beside the uneven walk. I was afraid that something belonging to another world would reach out of the quivering foliage and grab me by the ankles. It was a crazy thought, I know. But I couldn't crowd it down. A fellow gets that way sometimes.

The house up ahead of us was in total darkness except for a dim light in the lower hall. And everything in and about the place was smothered in deadly silence. Spirits! Were the eerie spirit companions of the old manufacturer creeping throughout the darkened rooms on silent icy toes? Were there weird faces at the black windows that we couldn't see? And was the word being whispered around that two curious boys had come to pry into the secrets of the spirit stronghold?

Br-r-r-r! Letting out my neck at the silent house, I suddenly began to wonder if I hadn't pulled a boner in coming here. I felt anything but safe. Suppose, for instance, that the spirits, angered by our presence, took after us, kicking

us in the seat of the pants with their invisible feet and swatting us in the face with their invisible fists! It isn't any fun to be kicked in the seat of the pants or punched in the jaw. And least of all did I want to be so punished by a gang of angry spirits.

Having heard something up ahead of us, Poppy suddenly grabbed my arm and drew me into the bushes beside the walk.

“Down!” he breathed, dropping to the ground.

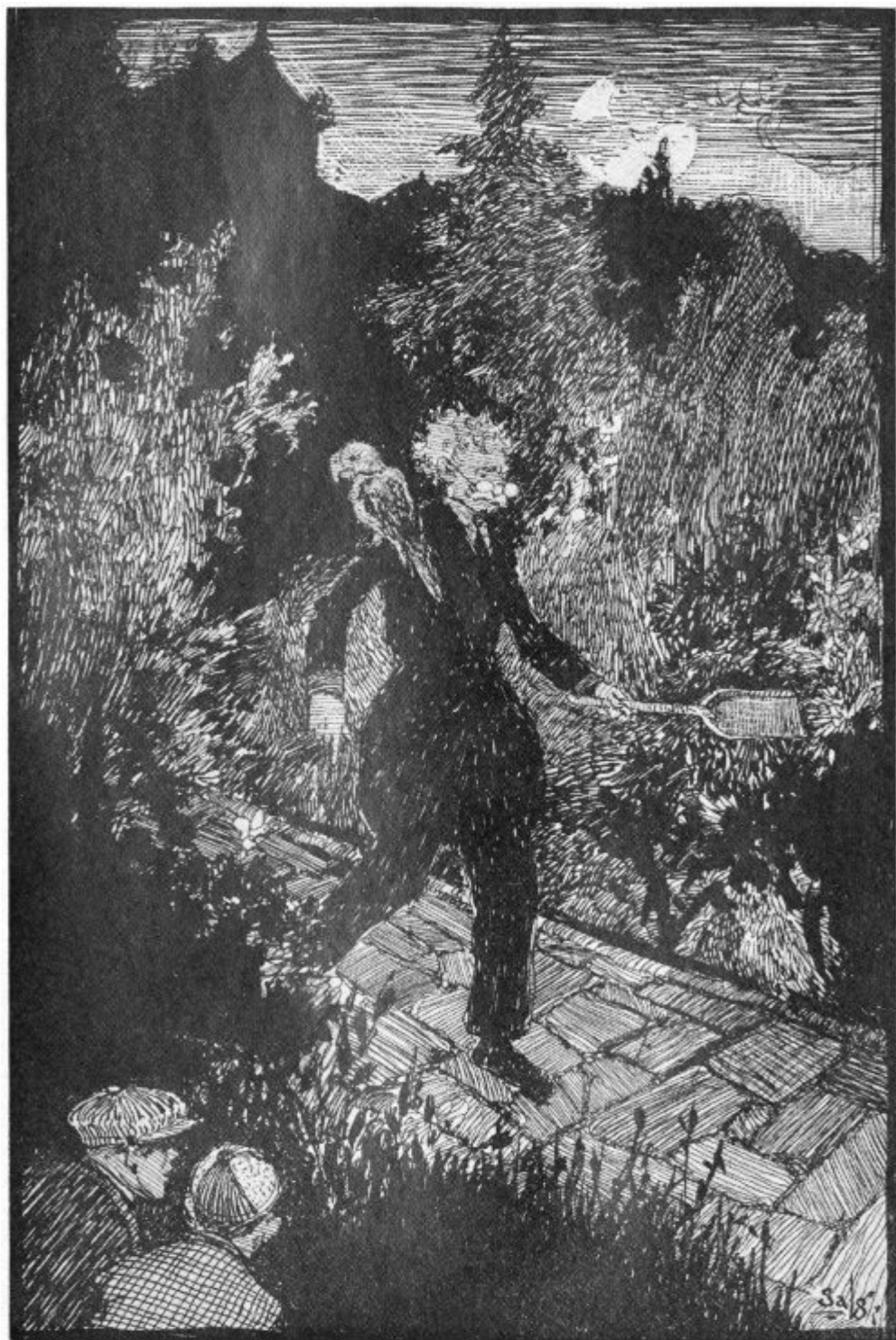
Boy, was I ever scared! Flattened on the ground beside my companion, I could feel my whole body heaving up and down as my heart did its stuff.

“What is it?” I gurgled, getting my voice.

“Sh-h-h-h!”

“Did you see a spirit?”

“It's a man. He's coming this way.”



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I could detect light footfalls now. They rapidly drew nearer. And when they were directly opposite our hiding place I sort of lifted my head out of the bushes. But I popped down again in a jiffy, let me tell you, when I saw who it was. *Good night!* I had goose pimples on me as big as pancakes.

“Jerry!” came in amazement from Poppy.

“Well?” I shivered merrily.

“It’s old Mr. Donner!”

My teeth were playing a tune now.

“We’re the lucky little things! . . . Boy, would I ever love to be home in my trundle bed. I feel about as safe here as an angleworm in a crowded chicken yard.”

“That man puzzles me, Jerry. I can’t understand him.”

“Did I imagine it,” says I, dizzy-like, “or was there something on his shoulder?”

“It was the green parrot. And he had a fire shovel in his hand.”

“A parrot and a fire shovel! What crazy stunt is this?”

“Jerry,” came thoughtfully, “what do you think about that parrot, anyway?”

“I wouldn’t touch it for a ten-dollar bill.”

“You think it has secrets, hey?”

“It knows things, all right, that we don’t know.”

“Its queer laugh is what gets me. I have the feeling that it’s jeering at me.”

“Maybe it’s a spirit,” I breathed.

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“Aw! . . .”

“Why do you say ‘Aw! . . .’? You don’t know anything about this ‘spirit’ stuff. Maybe these trees are spirits, too. I have the feeling that they are. They’ve got eyes. I can feel them *looking* at me.”

“You crazy nut!”

“If the parrot isn’t a spirit,” I went on, warming up to my theory, “what makes it act so queer? Mr. Lorrington said it stopped talking when its mistress died. How can you explain that? And how about its strange laugh? I tell you it *is* a spirit. And it jeers at us because it thinks we’re too dumb to suspect its secret.”

Poppy gave a low nervous laugh.

“This sure is a house of mystery, all right.”

“We’ve seen enough to-night,” says I, “to know that the old man isn’t right. So let’s go to Mr. Lorrington and report.”

“Not yet,” the other held back.

The footfalls having died away in the direction of the street, Poppy crept out of the bushes and started down the walk on tiptoe.

“Come on, Jerry.”

“Are you going to follow him?”

“Sure thing. I don’t believe that he’s crazy, as you think. And therefore, in walking around this way with his parrot and a fire shovel, he must have a reason. If it’s spirits, I think we ought to keep an eye on him. For you know what we promised Mr. Lorrying.”

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“There he goes,” says I, pointing ahead.

“He seems to be heading out of town,” says Poppy, puzzled.

“I wish Mr. Lorrying was here.”

“Jerry!”

“Well?”

“Do you suppose he’s heading for the cemetery?”

“The *cemetery*?” I yipped, with ice water running up and down my backbone. “Kid, if there’s any ‘cemetery’ stuff in this job you can have it all. No more cemeteries for *me*.”

Here a mocking laugh floated back to us.

“The parrot!” I cried, clutching Poppy’s arm. “It knows we’re

following it.”

“Jerry, if the old man does go into the cemetery, I have a hunch that we’re going to see something queer.”

“You’ll never get *me* into that cemetery.”

“We may even learn the truth about this ‘spirit’ stuff.”

“Br-r-r-r!” I shivered. “If Mother only knew where her ‘wondering boy’ was to—night!”

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“Not believing in spirits, it’s going to be an awful shock to me if I actually see one.”

“You’ll need to send for an undertaker,” says I promptly, “if *I* see one.”

Poppy squinted ahead at the moving shadow.

“Do you suppose,” he joked, “that he gets his spirits in the cemetery and then takes them home with him?”

“Go up and ask the parrot,” says I. “It can tell you.”

Another low mocking laugh came back to us.

“What’d I tell you?” says I, hanging to my companion. “It *knows* that we’re following it. And it *knows* that we’re talking about it, too. It’s a spirit, I tell you. It isn’t a real parrot at all.”

“A parrot and a fire shovel,” says Poppy, thinking. “Do you suppose he’s going to dig a hole and bury the parrot?”

“Would he have come away out here to do that?”

“No. On second thought I don’t believe that he would. But he must intend to do some kind of digging. Or else he wouldn’t have brought along the shovel. Golly Ned, Jerry! I’m stumped in this mystery. I can’t make head nor tail of it.”

We were now on the outskirts of town, in a place called

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Happy Hollow. Eight or ten families live here. But to-night the scattered houses were swallowed up in the darkness. Nor could we see the creek, deeper in the hollow, though once or twice I fancied that I heard it splashing down its rocky bed.

Up ahead of us, to the left, was the old Scotch cemetery that I told about in the “Poppy Ott” book that was printed ahead of this one. If you have read that mystery story you will remember the shivering adventure that I had in the lonely cemetery. Boy, was I ever scared! I had no desire to repeat the adventure. And that is why I had told Poppy that under no circumstances would I go with him into the cemetery.

But sometimes we say things that we don’t live up to. And it was that way with me to-night. For, as you will learn, I *did* go into the cemetery. In all fact, I was no less curious than my companion over the old spiritualist’s queer movements, and no less eager than the leader to solve the mystery.

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CHAPTER X IN THE CEMETERY

We hadn't particularly noticed that a storm was coming up until a streak of lightning suddenly slashed through the black sky directly over our heads and slapped the earth with a loud, shattering crash.

"I'm shot!" I yipped, throwing myself onto Poppy. "Call the doctor. *Quick!*"

"You poor fish!"

"What was it?"

"A thunderclap."

"I thought it was a cannon. . . . Are you all right?"

"Of course I am."

I looked up at the black sky.

"We'll be in a pretty pickle," says I, "if it starts to rain."

"Shucks! We're neither sugar or salt; a little rain won't hurt us."

“Bu-lieve me,” I shivered, wondering what our fate would be, “this is *some* night to go into a cemetery.”

The wind was rising now. It came with the storm. I could feel its cool breath in my face. Like a draft out of a well. And coming to the cemetery, we could hear the pine trees creaking and moaning as the wind shook the tar out of them. Cheerful stuff, all right, for a boy with a weak heart and sweaty feet!

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Having trailed the old spiritualist here, we had watched him pass warily through the main gate. And now all three of us were in the cemetery.

Suddenly I got a punch in the stomach.

“For the love of Pete!” says Poppy, out of patience with me. “Quit crawling up my back. What do you think I am—a stepladder?”

“I want to keep close to you,” says I, hugging up to him, “so that nothing will happen to you.”

“Get away.”

“What’s the matter?” says I, feeling kind of silly. “Don’t you love me any more?”

“Don’t act crazy.”

I waggled in the dark.

“Poppy,” says I, earnest-like, “you’re too reckless. Yes, you

are. And it's my duty, as a pal who has shared your bed and your shirts, to keep close to you and guard you." I posed heroically. "When duty calls, kid, I obey!"

"Is there something the matter with your head?"

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I laughed.

"My head's all right. But there's an awful wobble in my knees. I think they need soldering."

"You and your wobbly knees!"

"If I had an accordion fastened to them I could play a tune."

"Jerry, you're a big bluff. You aren't half as scared as you try to let on. Oh, I know you, kid! But let's cut out the monkey business. For we've got work ahead of us to-night."

"What are we going to do?"

"Sleuth the old man and learn his secret."

"I've lost track of him already."

"Don't you see him? He's over there by that big tombstone. It looks to me as though he's digging a hole."

"Maybe he's a grave robber!"

"Let's get closer, Jerry. I want to see what the hole is for."

Something went "splash" on the end of my nose, almost

knocking me senseless.

“It’s raining,” says I, feeling of the drop of water.

“What of it? Come on.”

We kept behind the trees and tombstones, for there was danger of the lightning showing us up. In the dazzling flashes we had changing glimpses of the old spiritualist at work. He was digging a hole, all right. There was no doubt about that. And how weird he looked among the tombstones, with the rain beating down on him and the wind flopping his coat, you can’t imagine. 121

Poppy suddenly gave a cry.

“Jerry! He’s gone!”

Yes, sir, the digger had vanished as quickly and as completely as if the earth had suddenly yawned and swallowed him up. One minute he was there at work with his fire shovel. The next minute he was gone. It looked like wizard stuff to me. But later on we came to the sensible conclusion that the old man had run into the bushes between lightning flashes.

But why? What had scared him away? Had he caught sight of us? He had left his fire shovel behind. We found it on the ground. And there at our feet was the hole that he had dug. But the hole was empty!

I was glad when we were on the outside of the cemetery.

“This ‘spirit’ stuff is exciting,” I told my chum, drawing 122

a deep breath, “but I guess I’d rather be a Methodist. It isn’t so hard on a fellow’s nerves.”

Coming into town, we found the brick house all lit up. That was an unusual thing. Poppy went in alone, bringing back the news that the old spiritualist had beat us home.

“Pa is there. He says Mrs. Fillingham is scared out of her wits. She thinks that the house is full of spirits. They follow her around, she says. And when she stretches forth her hand she can *feel* them jumping back out of her reach.”

“Did you tell your father about us following the old spiritualist to the cemetery?”

“No. I thought we had better keep that to ourselves until we had seen Mr. Lorrington.”

We started down the street together. Poppy, I noticed, was unusually quiet and thoughtful. I looked at him curiously when we passed under a street light.

“Well,” says I, at length, “what’s going on in your mind?”

“I found out something, Jerry, when I was in the house.”

“Yes?”

“Lawrence Donner was here to-night at ten o’clock.”

“The kid?”

“No, his father. The two brothers had an awful quarrel.

It was about the stilt business, the housekeeper said. It seems that the shoe man wanted to kick us out and put his son in our place as the manager of the company.”

“But the scheme didn’t work, hey?”

“No.”

“The old man must like us.”

“He’s fair, Jerry. He isn’t like his younger brother.”

“I wish he wasn’t so queer,” says I soberly.

“What puzzles me, Jerry, is *why* he went to the cemetery tonight. Was it to bury something? If so, why didn’t he finish the job? And what connection is there between the brother’s visit and what we saw? I can’t make head nor tail of it.”

Coming to the banker’s house, we found that the lights had been put out for the night. But a window was quickly raised over our heads when we rang the door bell.

“Hello!” a familiar voice boomed down at us. “What’s wanted?”

“It’s Poppy and Jerry. We’ve got something to tell you, Mr. Lorrington. It’s about Mr. Donner.”

The banker drew a sharp breath.

“Um . . .” says he quietly. “I’ll be right down.”

A moment or two later we were admitted into the house by its owner, who had stopped upstairs only long enough to find his bathrobe and bedroom slippers.

“What’s Herm been doing?” he inquired anxiously, searching our faces.

Poppy did the talking. He told about the quarrel between the two brothers and about the older one’s later trip to the cemetery. As he came to the end of his story a gray-haired woman flew down the stairs.

“Pa! What’s wrong? What are these boys doing here at this time of night?”

“This is the Ott boy, Ma.”

“But what has happened?”

“Poppy and Jerry have had a queer experience. Herm Donner has been up to the cemetery digging a hole. The boys saw him. And they say he had his parrot with him.”

The woman’s face was full of distress now.

“Oh, the poor old man! He must be out of his head.”

The banker started to pace the floor. And so heavily did he set his feet down that I could feel the floor shake under his tread.

“Spiritualism!” he exploded. “Tomfool nonsense, that’s what it is. I thought Herm would forget about it when I turned his attention to stilts. I swan, I don’t know what to do

with that man. I'm beginning to lose patience with him."

"Pa, you're planning to go away on a vacation. Why don't you take him with you? A trip like that may work a big change in him."

"Um . . . I wonder if I can get him to go with me."

It was one-thirty when I tumbled into my bed. Mother scolded me for staying out so late, threatening to take a stick to me if it happened again. I didn't tell her where I had been. For Mr. Lorry had asked us to keep the night's work a secret.

The next morning I didn't get up at the usual time. I had an upset feeling in my stomach. Too much graveyard stuff, I guess! At noon Poppy came to the house, bringing the news that our two senior partners, in hastily completed vacation plans, had left on the eleven o'clock train for a month's trip in the West.

"So you better get well in a jiffy, old horse. For I need you to help me run the business."

This was on Tuesday. On Thursday a telegram came that stunned the whole town. There had been a frightful railroad accident. And old Mr. Donner was dead!

CHAPTER XI

THE VANISHED WILL

It wasn't until Friday morning that we got the full particulars of the railroad accident, which was said by the Chicago newspapers to be the most dreadful accident of its kind in many years. Two sleeping cars in the ill-fated train had been smashed completely to pieces and more than a dozen people had been killed in their berths. And as though to make the accident still more frightful the wreckage of the cars had caught fire and many of the bodies had been burned almost beyond recognition.

Struck on the head by a beam, Mr. Lorrington had been taken to a hospital in a senseless condition. At first it was feared that he might die, for the skull appeared to have been fractured. But later reports stated that the injured man was in no particular danger of losing his life, though it was reluctantly admitted by the doctors that he might never recover the full use of his mind.

Having closed down our stilt factory for the time being out of respect for the dead, Poppy and I lived through four days of gloom, and then the body of the old manufacturer was brought home for burial. I guess the burned body as it was received in Tutter was in awful shape, and no fit sight for

people's eyes, for the undertakers in charge of the big funeral kept the casket sealed.

I can't describe the queer, sober feeling that gripped me as I followed the body to the cemetery for final burial. Less than a week ago the old spiritualist had come to this same cemetery on a mysterious midnight errand. And now he was dead! Watching the casket as it was lowered into the grave and covered with earth, I found myself wondering if the dead man's secret had been buried with him.

Poppy's father was now staying at the brick house all the time, for Mrs. Fillingham, with run down nerves, was afraid to stay in the big house by herself. And I didn't blame her! Now that the old spiritualist was dead the house seemed spookier than ever.

After the funeral my chum and I went home with the housekeeper, at her request. However, we didn't follow her into the front part of the house where the heirs were nervously assembled in the library to hear the family lawyer read the dead man's will. Young Donner was there, of course, as was also his father, and both were on needles and pins.

But it turned out that there was no will to be read! There had been a will in the library safe, but it had disappeared. I felt sorry for Mrs. Fillingham in the turn of affairs. Poor old lady! She had expected to inherit several thousand dollars as a sort of reward for her many years of faithful service. Now that she was getting along in years she needed the money for her support. But in the absence of a will she couldn't collect a penny. Everything went to the dead

man's younger brother.

I saw young Donner and his smug-acting father drive away in their automobile. My, they acted big! It wasn't a nice thought, I know, but at the moment I wanted to soak smarty in the face with a hunk of mud. I absolutely hated him.

Mrs. Fillingham almost cried her eyes out. She had counted on a legacy, she said, and now she didn't know what would become of her. What little money she had saved up wouldn't last her many months. As for keeping her job of housekeeper, she wouldn't be contented to work for the new master, she said, even if he wanted her to, which was doubtful.

The news of the vanished will, as brought to us by the distressed housekeeper, had set Poppy to pacing the kitchen floor. And now as I watched him I wondered what was going on in his mind.

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Finally he paused.

“What did the lawyer say about the will, Mrs. Fillingham? Was he puzzled to understand why it wasn't in the safe?”

“He asked me a lot of questions about it. But I couldn't tell him anything.”

“You're sure there was a will?”

“Oh, yes! We all knew that Mr. Donner had a will.”

“And did his brother know about it, too?”

“I think so.”

“Does anybody know what was *in* the will?”

“The lawyer does. For he drew it up. I was to get twenty thousand dollars. This house was to be given to the town for a hospital, together with enough money to remodel and endow it. There were other legacies. And the balance of the estate was to go to the younger brother.”

“Was Mr. Donner very rich?”

“Indeed he was! This property alone is worth forty thousand dollars. The factory is worth another hundred thousand. And he had thousands and thousands of dollars’ worth of stocks and bonds.”

“Then he must have been a millionaire.”

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“I think he was. But I can’t say for sure.”

“And you say the shoe man gets the whole fortune?”

“He’s the closest heir. In the absence of a will everything goes to him.”

There was a moment’s silence in which Poppy looked steadily at the distressed woman.

“I can’t understand,” says he, puzzled, “why the old man should want to cut you off at the last moment. And why should he change his mind about leaving this house to the town? He didn’t care anything for his brother. Or even if he

did want to leave everything to his brother, for certain mysterious reasons, why didn't he make a new will when he destroyed the old one?"

The woman was still weeping.

"Mr. Donner was a kind-hearted man. I still believe that he intended to do well by me."

A grim look came into Poppy's face.

"I wonder," says he, steady-like, "if the will hasn't been stolen."

The woman quickly raised her tear-streaked face.

"Stolen?" she cried.

"From what I have seen of the younger brother," Poppy went on, in continued grimness, "I wouldn't put it past him to do a trick like that. He wanted everything. See? He didn't want you to have the twenty thousand dollars. Nor did he want the town to get hold of this house. So he fixed up everything to his own interests by stealing the will and destroying it."

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"But he couldn't have gotten his hands on it. For it was kept in the big safe."

I hadn't said anything till now.

"Maybe," I spoke up, "the will wasn't stolen. Maybe the old man took it out of the safe himself and hid it in some other

place.”

Poppy stared at me.

“But why should he do that?”

“He did other queer things.”

“I know. But what would be his object in hiding his own will?”

“Maybe he was afraid it would fall into his brother’s hands before the lawyer got hold of it. Or maybe he distrusted the lawyer himself.”

I hadn’t noticed that the dead man’s parrot was in the kitchen until at this point the room was filled with shrill, mocking laughter. I shivered as the weird sound cut into my ears.

“The will! The will!” came the shrill cry. “Dr-r-r-rum! Dr-r-r-rum! The will!”

Mrs. Fillingham screamed. And I thought for a moment that she was going to faint. Never in all my life had I seen a woman so white and so frightened.

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“Those are the first words it has spoken in ten years. Oh, what will happen next in this awful house! I want to go away from here. I can’t stand it. It is driving me mad.”

Poppy was wildly excited now.

“Mrs. Fillingham!! Jerry! The parrot knows where the will is.

Don't you see? The old man hid it. And the parrot is the key to the hiding place."

The expression of fear deepened in the woman's face as she looked at the parrot.

"Spirits!" she murmured. "Spirits! It may be the voice of Mr. Donner himself that we hear. For he said that he would come back! I've heard him say that a hundred times. The grave couldn't hold him, he said. This may be his scheme to talk to us in death through his parrot."

"Ha! ha! ha!" came in shrill, mocking laughter. "Ha! ha! ha! Dr-r-r-rum! Dr-r-r-rum! The will! The will!"

Convinced now that the weird parrot was indeed the key to the hiding place of the missing will, as Poppy had said, we tried to question the bird, but to no success. The will! What did it know about the will? Where was the will hidden? When we turned away in disappointment, having gotten nothing out of the bird except an idiotic stare, it shrieked at us in a perfect gale of taunting laughter.

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And I wondered at the queer drumming sound that it made. That was something new.

"Mrs. Fillingham," says Poppy soberly, "I think that you and I and Jerry had better keep this secret to ourselves. The parrot *does* know something about the vanished will. I'm sure of that. And sooner or later it undoubtedly will supply the key to the mystery, just as old Mr. Donner intended that it should. Therefore it would be a bad thing for our plans, I think, to let Mr. Lawrence Donner know about this. I don't mean to say

that he would kill the bird, for he may not be as wicked as I think. But we had better play safe.”

At Mrs. Fillingham’s request, my chum and I slept together in the big brick house that night. Even with old Mr. Ott in the house she would feel safer if we were there, she told us.

Unnerved more than ever by the parrot’s strange outburst in the kitchen, I think she had the uneasy feeling that she might suddenly need us. In this house of strange secrets, where so many weird things seemingly had been done to a plan by its former mysterious master, it wasn’t to be unexpected that there would be sudden surprising developments.

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I laughed nervously when I got into bed.

“I never dreamed,” says I to my bedfellow, “that I’d ever stay all night in *this* house.”

“Some class, eh?” he grinned, looking around the high-ceilinged room with its quaint old-fashioned furniture. “Makes me think of a king’s room.”

“Don’t forget to lock the door.”

“Jerry!”

“Well?”

“What would you do if you actually saw Mr. Donner’s ghost?”

“Drop dead, of course.”

“Honest, now, would you be scared?”

“*Would I?*”

“I don’t think I would,” came thoughtfully.

“Any old time!”

“If he were to come back to earth I’d figure that he did so for an important reason. And I’d try and make myself believe that it was a *kindly* reason and that he had no intentions of harming me.”

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“Do you really think that we’ll see his ghost?” says I anxiously.

“I don’t believe in ghosts.”

“Neither do I. But just the same you better lock the door.”

He sat down thoughtful-like on the edge of the bed.

“I wish we had brought the parrot up here.”

“*What?*” I squeaked. “Sleep in the same room with that bird?”

“It might get to talking.”

“Bu-lieve me, if you bring that bird in here you’ll sleep alone.”

“That was a foolish thing for Mrs. Fillingham to say about the

old man's spirit being in the parrot," he mused. "It shows how upset she is. Not for one minute do I believe that the dead man can talk from the grave through his parrot, but I do believe that the bird has a secret. And I further believe that if we can find out what that secret is we'll know where to turn to put our hands on the missing will."

"I'd like to find the will," says I, "for Mrs. Fillingham's sake."

"Yes," says he quietly, "and for our own sake, too."

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"What do you mean?" says I quickly.

He rolled over.

"Let's go to sleep," says he, with his back to me.

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CHAPTER XII

THE MAN FROM CHICAGO

“Well,” says Poppy, when I woke up the following morning and rolled over against him, “how did you sleep last night?”

“Like a log,” says I, stretching and yawning.

He grinned.

“The spirits didn’t keep you awake, hey?”

“They were busy in some other part of the house last night.”

“I’m beginning to think,” says he thoughtfully, “that the stories about this old house are considerably exaggerated.”

“But Mrs. Fillingham declares she heard things. She wouldn’t be likely to tell a lie.”

“Her imagination may have tricked her.”

“You’ve been here only one night and she’s been here for twenty years. So she ought to know more about the place than you.”

“People *do* imagine things,” he went on thoughtfully.

“Take old Mr. Donner. He *thought* his dead wife was near him. But that was all imagination. And when he talked to her it was imagination that gave him the idea that she heard him. Of course, all people couldn’t let their imaginations carry them off as completely as that. And I dare say, if the truth were known, that the old man’s mind wasn’t quite right on the subject. Certainly we thought there was something out of kilter with his head the night we followed him to the cemetery.”

“That was a queer thing for him to do.”

A deeper look came into Poppy’s eyes.

“Since that night, Jerry, there hasn’t been an hour that I haven’t thought about the mystery. *Why* did he go to the cemetery? *Why* did he dig that hole? *Why* did he take the parrot with him? And *why* did he run away and hide in the bushes?”

“He must have been crazy, all right.”

“If he was, his actions are nothing to wonder at, for crazy people are liable to do anything. On the other hand, if he wasn’t crazy—if he knew what he was doing, and was working to a hidden purpose—it will pay us, I think, to dig into the mystery.”

“Crickets! I wish we could solve the mystery.”

“Why can’t we? We’ve solved other mysteries. And in a day or two we may find that we haven’t much else to do.”

His words puzzled me.

“What do you mean?”

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“Jerry, hasn’t it occurred to you that we’re liable to have trouble at the factory and end up on the outside of the fence?”

“Trouble?” I thought of Mr. Donner’s death and Mr. Lorrying’s absence. “Don’t you think we can run the business alone?”

“Whose factory is it?”

“Old Mr. Donner’s.”

“Oh, no, it isn’t! It *was* Mr. Donner’s factory. But he’s dead now. Don’t you get my point, Jerry? Lawrence Donner hates us. He would like to take our business away from us. And, as the factory’s new owner, I have a hunch that he’ll try and do it. That is why I say we may go down there some morning and find ourselves locked out, or enjoy the gentle experience of being kicked out.”

“Let him have his old factory,” I snorted. “We’ll move our machines into another building.”

“But they aren’t *our* machines, Jerry. They’re his. He owns everything. We don’t own a thing.”

“Gosh!” says I, in sudden gloom. I could see where smarty had us by the neck, all right. And the helplessness of our situation sickened me. The stilt business had been our idea in the first place. We had started it and had

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made it a success. That the business had a big future we could not doubt for a moment. In time the factory might even employ hundreds of workmen. And now smarty would get the money that the business would earn and all we would get would be a kick in the seat of the pants.

“Of course,” Poppy went on, “I may be wrong in thinking that young Donner will try and kick us out. He may even use us as nice as pie. For he’s tricky. But, even so, it isn’t going to be any fun working with him. For we don’t like him or trust him.”

“I wish Mr. Lorrying was here,” I cried. “He’d know how to help us so that smarty couldn’t take the business away from us.”

“That’s the trouble, Jerry. With Mr. Donner dead and Mr. Lorrying in a hospital, we haven’t any one to back us up. And we won’t stand much of a chance against the Donner kid and his father.”

“When I went to bed last night,” says I miserably, “I was crazy for morning to come so that we could start up our stilt factory again. But I don’t feel that way now.”

“The only thing that can save us, Jerry, is a will. That is our only hope, as I see it. There may be a *new* will. See? The more I think of what happened that night in the cemetery the less I believe that the old man was crazy. His brother was here at ten o’clock. The two men had a quarrel over us. Mr. Lawrence Donner wanted to kick us out so that his son could have our business. But old Mr. Donner got up on his ear. Kick

us out? Not on your life! He wouldn't consider the suggestion for an instant. That proved that he liked us. Well, failing in his purpose, the younger brother left the house. The old man was alone now. He was mad as time at his brother. Naturally he thought of his will in the library safe. Maybe he had a—what do you call it?—a premonition of his coming death. And wanting to fix it so that his brother couldn't inherit the property, and cause trouble for us, he took his old will out of the safe and burned it. Then he made out a new will. And fearful that his brother might get hold of it and destroy it, he decided to hide it. The cemetery! He'd go there, he told himself, and bury the will beside his wife's grave—for that was where the hole was dug, Jerry. If he *did* die the will would be recovered when his grave was dug. See? That is the way I have it figured out. But for us the bad part is that the will never was buried in the hole that the old man dug for it. He must have hid it some place else."

"For the love of mud!" says I, staring at the speaker.
"Talk about people having crazy imaginations! You ought to make a good spiritualist yourself."

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"A fellow wouldn't get very far in solving mysteries," says he, "if he didn't use his imagination."

I looked at him curiously.

"What are you going to do?—start searching the cemetery for the hidden will?"

"I'm going to do some deep thinking first of all. And I'm going to study that parrot. It is the key to the mystery, Jerry.

I'm sure of that.”

“It’s queer,” says I, “that the bird started talking last night. Mrs. Fillingham was scared out of her wits. And no doubt she still believes that the old man’s spirit has gotten into the bird.”

“It’s a strange bird, all right. There’s no doubt about that. But it hasn’t got spirits in it. I dare say that if Mr. Donner were alive *he* could tell you why it started talking again. Oh, he was a deep man, Jerry! I realize it more and more now that he is dead. He was deep and mysterious. It was his nature. He may have taught the bird to talk about a will. I imagine that he did. For a parrot hasn’t the power to reason things out. It imitates. And convinced that the old man made his parrot the key to his new will’s hiding place, as I say, I’m going to keep an eye on the bird. For some little thing that it will do or say will open the door of the mystery to us. You wait and see if I haven’t got the right dope.”

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We had breakfast with the housekeeper and Poppy’s father. Then my partner and I hurried over to the stilt factory, where we learned that Poppy’s advertising stuff had been printed and delivered during the time that the factory had been closed down. Through a Chicago concern that made a business of getting up mailing lists, we had bought a typewritten list of all of the shoe dealers in the state, but in sending out the advertising it was Poppy’s plan to first try out the campaign, as he called it, in the near-by counties. Then, if everything worked out successfully, we would shoot the advertising all over the state.

I left Poppy to his job of addressing the advertising. And at

ten o'clock he took a big wad of it to the post office for mailing. When he came back to the factory he had a strange man with him—a sort of snappy-looking man. I was considerably worried at sight of the stranger. For I had been expecting young Donner to show up. And now the thought came to me that maybe this man was the county sheriff.

“Mr. Killburn,” says Poppy, when he had brought the visitor into the room where I was, “I want you to meet my partner, Jerry Todd.”

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Killburn! That wasn't the name of the county sheriff. So I got rid of my worried feeling. Anyway, I could see that everything was all right. For Poppy was acting as tickled as a kid with an all-day sucker.

It was then explained to me by my partner that Mr. Killburn was the advertising manager of the Warman-Baldwin Company of Chicago.

“The most progressive mail-order house in business to-day,” smiled the visitor. “In fact,” he went on, “we are constantly on the lookout for new merchandising ideas. Some one told us about your Seven-League Stilts. So I came around to see what kind of a business you have here. For it isn't improbable that we may want you to build some stilts for us. Not as toys, but as advertising novelties. The manager of our furniture department would like to try out the scheme. With every ten-dollar order, a pair of stilts free, or something like that. We haven't tried to work out any definite plan. I thought it would be best to first see what you have. And passing through town on my vacation, I decided to stop over for an hour or two and

talk with you.”

Well, I let Poppy do the talking. I didn't know what to say myself. As a matter of fact it kind of dazed me to have a big business man from Chicago come to Tutter to see us about our stilts. Warman-Baldwin was one of the foremost mail-order houses in the country. I knew that they were a big concern by the size of their catalogue. If they gave us an order it probably would be a big one. 145

Having met the advertising manager at the post office, where the executive had stopped to inquire the way to our factory, Poppy had given the other a brief history of our business. No doubt the man was surprised to learn that two boys were at the head of the company. I fancied that he looked at me queerly when he shook hands with me. What we were doing was very interesting, he said, when he had been through our factory. And having learned the price of our stilts, he wanted to know if we would cut the price to forty cents a pair if we were given a standing order for five thousand pairs of stilts a month. *Good night!* When he said that I almost fainted. And I kicked Poppy in the shins as a signal to hurry up and say “Yes.”

“I'll be back at my desk in a few days,” the visitor concluded, “and then, if you wish, you can come up to Chicago and see me. I rather feel, though, that on an order calling for five thousand pairs of stilts a month we are entitled to the forty-cent price. I don't mean that we would want you to manufacture stilts for us at a loss. Not at all! If we were to enter into business dealings with you we would want those dealings to be wholly satisfactory to both sides. But it would seem to me that on a big order you can cut down your 146

manufacturing costs amazingly and probably make as much profit at forty cents a pair as on small orders at fifty cents a pair.”

“I’d want to do some figuring,” says Poppy, “before I gave you a definite answer.”

“Of course. And to that point there is no need to hurry matters. As I say, I’ll be back in Chicago within a week’s time. I’ll drop you a line. And then you can come up and see me. I hope that we can get together. I may say, though, that inasmuch as you are—ah—rather young and inexperienced, we would expect to do business through your bank as protection to our company. I trust that does not offend you.”

When Poppy and I were alone I dropped into a chair.

“Oh!” I squeaked. “Two thousand dollars’ worth of stilts a month! Gee-miny crickets! I can’t stand the shock. Turn on the electric fan. I’m going to faint.”

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Poppy had gone to raise a front window. And now I saw him staring into the street. I could tell by his face that something was wrong. For he was white around the mouth.

“What’s the matter?” I cried, deciding I’d wait and faint some other day.

“There’s a red sedan outside,” says he quietly. “And I just got a glimpse of a pair of long legs in white trousers.”

Young Donner! In the excitement of talking with the advertising manager I had forgotten all about the enemy. Now

my heart fell from its shelf into the pit of my shoes.

CHAPTER XIII

OUR SKUNK TRAP

Poppy and I had opened our stilt factory that morning with a feeling of worry over what young Donner would be liable to do to us. And then, as I have written down, the Chicago customer came along to lift us out of our gloom. In talking with the interesting and welcome visitor, whose trip to Tutter might mean so much to our business later on, we temporarily forgot about our troubles. Oh, boy, was our hilarious thought, if only we could land that suggested Warman-Baldwin order! Five thousand pairs of stilts a month! At forty cents a pair we would get a check each month from the mail-order company for an even two thousand dollars. Twenty-four thousand dollars a year from just one customer! No wonder that we were dizzy in our unexpected good fortune. The world was ours! We had it by the tail!

More than ever before we realized that our stilt business was going to be a rip-roaring success. And as its principal owners Poppy and I, of course, would end up with a bank account as big as the coal cellar under the Woolworth building in New York City. The boy millionaires! That is what the newspapers would call us. We'd be as famous as Rockefeller and Ford. And to make room for our immense factories the Tutter people would have to move their chicken

houses and grapevines over near Ashton.

Then young Donner came! And all in an instant, so to speak, our ice cream was turned to sour pickles. At least that is the way I felt as I miserably watched the enemy park his car in front of the factory and strut toward the entrance. Everything was lost to us now, I told myself in despair.

But I gave up too soon. For Poppy was there! And I should have known that my quick-minded chum would bob up at the last moment with a scheme to outwit the other. For that's the kind of a kid Poppy is! Every time.

"Quick, Jerry!" says he, clutching my arm and drawing me away from the window. "Don't let him see you."

"What's the idea of running away from him?" I grumbled, when we were in the back part of the rambling factory. "Are you scared he'll crack you one on the snout?"

"Afraid of *him*?" and there was a scornful laugh. "Oh, yes, I shiver in my shoes every time he scowls at me. I'm scared to death of *that* guy."

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"You act like it, all right," says I pointedly. "What are you going to do?—sneak out of the back door?"

The other grinned.

"Jerry, how would you like to help me trap a skunk?"

I stared at him. That was a crazy thing for him to say.

“You’re getting cuckoo, all right,” I waggled, still dumb to the fact that he had a scheme up his sleeve. “In another week or two you’ll be worse than old Mr. Donner was.”

“A two-legged skunk,” he added, with laughing eyes.

“Whoever heard of a two-legged skunk?” I snorted.

“The one that I have in mind,” says he, “wears flashy neckties and rides around in a red sedan.”

“Oh! . . .” I caught on, my jaw dropping. “You mean young Donner.”

“That’s his name. But so far as you and I are concerned, Jerry, he’s a two-legged skunk. See? And we’re going to trap him.”

“Trap him?” says I dully. “What for?”

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“To save our business.” A fighting look came into the other’s face. “We’ve *got* to save it, Jerry,” says he grimly. “With that big order coming in, I won’t let him take the business away from us, or bust it up for us.”

“Bu-lieve me,” says I, taking him literally, “you’ll need something bigger than a skunk trap to hold that guy.”

“Jerry,” came the laugh, “do you remember the day you got locked in the experimental room on the third floor?”

“Do I?” I howled. “I would have been there yet if you hadn’t happened along to open the door for me.”

“All right! Suppose that young Donner walks into the same trap? I think we can fix it so that he will. Finding himself locked in, he’ll naturally kick and pound to get out. But we pretend not to hear him. See? In the meantime everything goes along merrily in our stilt factory. Orders come in and stilts go out. Now, I realize that we can’t keep him locked up forever. But given a week’s time I think that we can do a lot of things toward saving the business, whereas if we fought him now we’d probably lose everything. I’m going to hire a good lawyer, whose first job will be to get a patent on our stilt lock. With this patent, and the Warman-Baldwin order, we’ll be all hunky-dory. The bank will help us get another factory. And we should worry then what young Donner does. He can have the stuff in here if he wants it.”

“How about his father?” says I, sort of checking the scheme over in my mind. “He may come to the factory any minute. Are you going to trap him, too?”

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“I heard down town this morning that the shoe man has gone to Chicago to hurry up his lawyers. He wants to get his hands on the fortune right away. So we won’t worry about him. Let’s hope that he stays in Chicago the rest of the week. For it’s a fact, Jerry, I wouldn’t have the nerve to trap *him*.”

I waggled.

“That would be risky.”

A change came over the other’s face.

“Oh,” he cried, “if only we could find the hidden will! I’d like to see the shoe man get left. For he’s grabbing

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everything in sight. The hog! And right there, Jerry, is another reason why we've got to trap young Donner and keep him a prisoner. If we don't, he may order us out of the brick house before the day is over and take the parrot away from us. We would be in a fix then."

"Skunk trapping is new stuff to me," I laughed. "I'm wondering how you go about it."

"We'll keep out of sight. See? And pretty soon Donner will start looking for us. All right. When we know that he's coming up the stairs we'll talk so he can hear us. That will hurry him along. Then we'll hide. He'll go into the experimental room, of course. Snap! will go the latch. Then let him pound his knuckles off if he wants to. We won't say a word."

"Hot dog!" says I. "This is going to be fun."

"I don't know very much about the law, but I imagine that he could make trouble for us afterwards if we grabbed him and locked him up by force. But if he sort of locks himself in, without us touching him, I don't believe that the law can do anything to us if we take our time about letting him out—as long as we don't mistreat him."

"We're going to give him his three square meals a day, hey?"

"Absolutely. The kinder we treat him the better it will be for us later on."

"Sh-h-h-h!" says I, holding up my hand. "Here he comes now. Look at him strut! Boy, would I ever like to

soak him! He thinks he owns the earth.”

Well, everything worked as slick as a button. When smarty heard us talking on the third floor he couldn't climb the stairs fast enough. Oh, he was going to tell *us* a few things, all right, all right! Blub-blub-blub-blub! This was *his* factory now. And if we didn't get out he'd kick us out, by cracky!

Finding himself a prisoner in the experimental room, he began to pound on the door and yell his head off. “Open that door!” he bellowed, thinking, I guess, that we had locked him in. “Open that door, I tell you. You slobs! If you don't let me out of here I'll knock you cuckoo.”

We didn't say anything. But I want to tell you that we had a nice quiet laugh to ourselves as we listened outside of the door. It finally percolated into the prisoner's head that the door had latched itself. He didn't blame us now for his predicament. But he wanted us to come and let him out, so he continued to kick and pound. He even attacked the door with his shoulder. But he might just as well have saved himself the effort. For that door had been built by a carpenter whose chief pride in life was the making of good doors. No flimsy doors for him! He had put up this door to stay. And smarty's attacks on it accomplished about as much as a mosquito trying to lick an elephant.

We were wasting valuable time now. So we went downstairs, where I took up my regular work in the factory while Poppy hurried down town to consult a lawyer. I read disappointment in his face when he came back.

“Mr. Isham tells me, Jerry, that we can’t get a patent on our stilt lock.”

“Why not?”

“It isn’t a distinct device,” he says. “It’s just an adaptation of a mechanical principle as old as the hills.”

“I suppose you know what you’re talking about,” says I, “but I’ll be hanged if *I* do.”

“I’m telling you just what he told me.”

“Say it over again and cut out the big words.”

“This is the way I understand it: You can get a patent on a *device*. But our stilt lock isn’t a device, Mr. Isham says. It’s just one piece of wood bolted to another piece.”

“And what’s the answer?”

“The answer is that young Donner can manufacture stilts like ours and we can’t do a thing under the patent law to stop him.”

I felt sick in the discouraging news.

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“I guess,” says I weakly, “that we’re licked.”

“Licked?” bristled Poppy. “Well, I should hope not!”

“This is young Donner’s factory. He has the stuff to work with and we haven’t anything. He has all kinds of money back

of him, too. So what chance have we got in bucking him?”

“Jerry, if I must say so, you give me a pain. Believe me, I don’t back down for any boy just because he’s got money, though I’ll admit that I was kind of discouraged last night. Money isn’t everything, kid. Along with money you’ve got to have brains to succeed in this world.”

“You’ve got the brains,” I told him.

“Thanks,” says he dryly. Then, seeing that I was kind of discouraged, he thumped me on the back. “Brace up, old timer. We haven’t lost anything yet. Of course, it’s a disappointment that we can’t get a patent on our stilts. For that would shut out young Donner. But if we can land the Warman-Baldwin order we’ll be all right.”

That morning we ran the red sedan into the back part of the factory, out of sight, for it was dangerous to our plans to leave it standing out in front. Besides, we didn’t want anything to happen to the costly car. As long as smarty was our prisoner we had to take care of his stuff. 157

Then Poppy went over to the brick house to get the prisoner something to eat. I expected him to come back with a basket of grub on his arm. But instead he drove into the factory yard in a one-horse wagon, the back part of which was filled with furniture.

I had heard that negro Mose had started up a local parcel delivery outfit, but this was the first time that I had seen it. And did I ever laugh! For the old nag had feet as big as coal scuttles. And the knock-kneed wagon looked like a drunken

wreck.

“Whoo-o-o-o!” says the driver, bringing his gallant steed to a stop at the factory door. “Am dis de place, Mr. Ott?”

“Yes,” laughed Poppy, jumping down and stepping around in high feather, “this is the place.”

“What’s the idea of all the furniture?” said I, puzzled, when old Mose had gone.

“We’ve got to see that our high-toned prisoner has every convenience, Jerry,” came the laughing reply.

“*What?*” I squeaked. “Is all this stuff for Donner?”

“Sure thing. As I told you this morning, we’ve got to give him service. So here’s a bed for him and a small dressing table and an easy chair. I brought along a couple of books, too, for I thought it might be kind of dull for him with nothing to do except to chew his fingernails and meditate on the vicissitudes of life.”

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“You and your ‘vicissitude’ stuff! You’re cuckoo. Where did you get this junk, anyway?”

“From Mrs. Fillingham. The attic of the brick house is full of old stuff like this. It sort of belongs to smarty, anyway. So I figured we might just as well let him get the benefit of it.”

“If you aren’t dumb!”

“Listen, Jerry! Isn’t it going to help our case later on if we can

make a joke of Donner's imprisonment?"

"What do you mean?"

"Suppose he has us arrested when he gets out. All right. The law asks us a lot of stern questions. Did we lock up the prisoner? No. But we knew that he was locked in the experimental room? Yes. Why then didn't we let him out? Oh, we had business reasons for keeping him there. Br-r-r-r! The law gets all frosty now. Was the plaintiff—or whatever you call it—inconvenienced by his imprisonment? Oh, yes, very much so, he says. Was he mistreated? No-o. Did he get plenty to eat? Ye-es. Did he have a nice soft bed to sleep in? Ye-es. Did he have a comfortable chair? Ye-es. Did he have books to read? Ye-es. . . . Don't you see, Jerry—the law, in getting the whole story, will *laugh* at smarty. Everybody will laugh at him. With us lugging all this stuff into the factory for his use, his imprisonment will be a big joke."

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I looked at the pile of furniture.

"But how are we going to get the stuff into his room? If we open the door he'll escape."

"Oh! . . . We'll lower it through the scuttle."

"*Good night!*"

"Don't you see the fun, Jerry?"

"I see a lot of hard work."

"Shucks! The harder we work the more fun we'll get out of

it.”

“And do we lug all this junk to the roof?”

“Sure thing.”

I shook my head.

“Poppy, I’ve bragged on a lot of your schemes. But I’ll be cow-kicked if I can brag on this one. It looks like a piece of junk to me.”

“Well, if you don’t want to help me—”

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“Oh, I’ll help you, all right. But I think you’re cuckoo.”

I made seventeen trips up the sun-baked fire escape that afternoon. Boy, was I ever tired from lugging stuff. We had to use a block and tackle on the mattress and other heavy stuff. Poppy whistled all the time he was at work. It was pie to him. And pretty soon I began to see the funny side of the situation, too. It was funny because it was so blamed crazy.

Hearing us at work, smarty started to bellow his head off.

“Listen!” says Poppy, giving me the wink. “I thought I heard something.”

“Help! Help!” yipped the prisoner at the top of his voice.

“It sounds like a human voice,” says Poppy thoughtfully. “But it can’t be,” he added, puzzled. “For this part of the factory is closed up.”

“Help! Help!” smarty yipped again. “I’m shut in a room. I can’t get out.”

“Let’s raise the scuttle,” says I, “and take a look.”

Up came the scuttle. And did smarty ever howl when he saw us squinting down at him.

“I knew you kids were at the bottom of this,” he raved.

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“There’s something down there, all right,” says Poppy. “I can see it moving around on its hind legs.”

“What is it?” says I.

“A skunk.”

“I’ll ‘skunk’ you with a punch in the jaw when I get out of here,” danced smarty, shaking his fists at us.

“Hear it?” says Poppy quickly. “It’s a skunk, all right. I can tell by the way it squeals.”

“I can smell it, too,” says I, turning up my nose. “Phew. Bring me a gas mask.”

Smarty suddenly cooled down.

“Say,” says he, giving us a cold eye, “what’s your game, anyway?”

“A talking skunk!” says Poppy in wonderment. “What do you know about that!”

“Aw, can that ‘skunk’ talk! You give me a pain.”

“It says it’s got a pain,” says I. “Maybe we ought to send for the horse doctor.”

“You guys’ll need an undertaker when I get through with *you*.”

“Doesn’t it talk rough!”

“It looks hungry,” says I. “Let’s feed it.”

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“Yes,” purred Poppy, “we’ll be kind to the poor *dumb* animal and give it something to eat.”

That brought an explosion from below.

“You guys’ll suffer for this. I’ll show you who’s dumb!”

“It’s suffering,” says I. “It just said so.”

“My father’ll fix you. He told me I could order you out of here. And when he hears about this he’ll put you in jail. Oh, you’re going to catch it!”

“Doesn’t it talk plain,” says Poppy.

“Say, are you guys going to let me out of here or not?”

“What did it say that time?” says Poppy, looking at me soberly. “I didn’t catch all the words.”

“It wanted to know if you’ve got the toothache?”

“I didn’t say anything about a toothache,” howled smarty.

“There!” says I. “It just said ‘toothache’ again.”

“Oh, I’d like to punch you guys!”

“Shall we feed it now,” says Poppy, “or wait till to-morrow?”

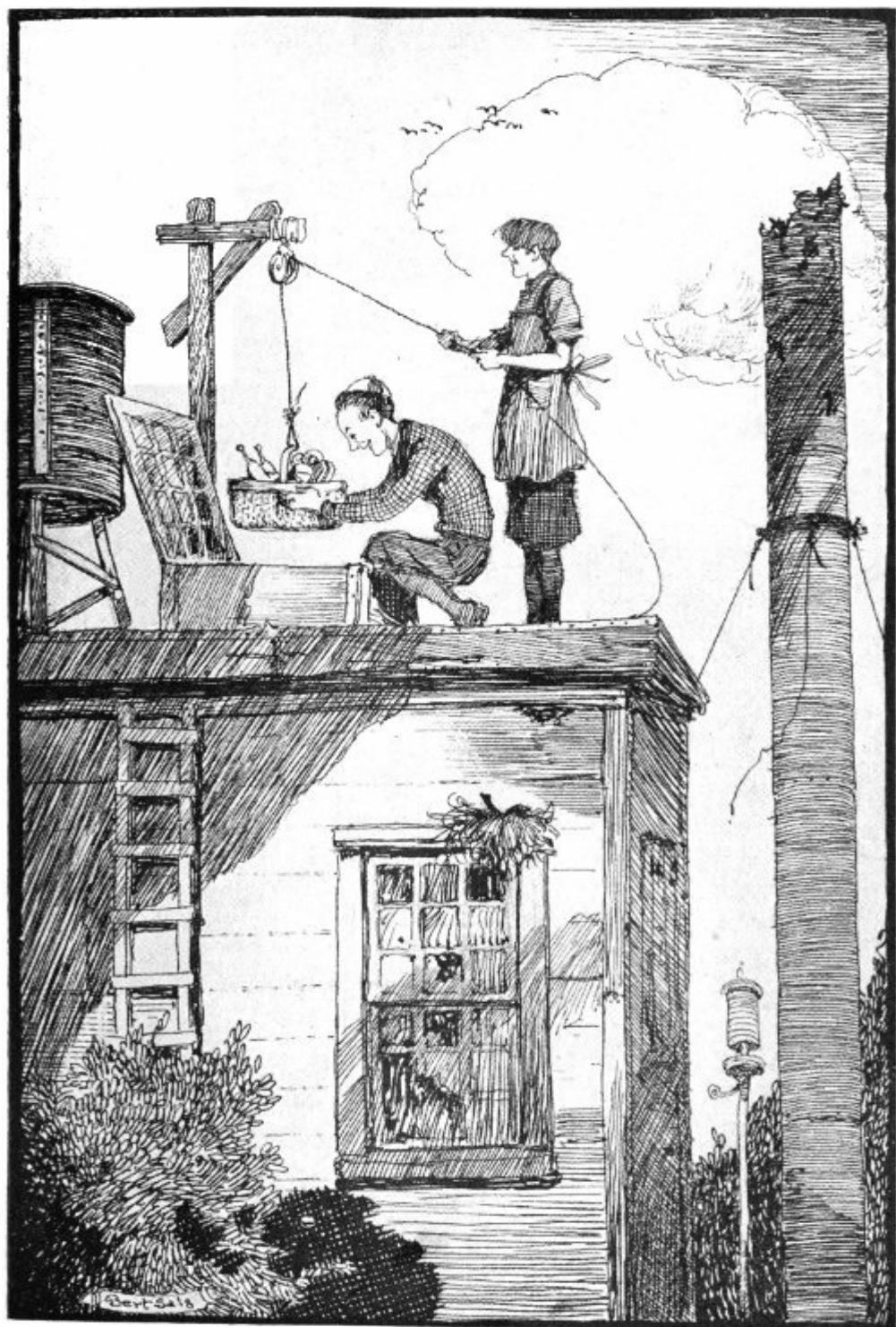
“Say,” came from below, “what’ll you guys take to let me out of here?”

“I wonder if it likes pickles,” says Poppy, squinting into the basket of grub that he had brought from the brick house.

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“Go ahead and unlock the door,” the prisoner begged. “I won’t do anything to you. Honest, I won’t. You can trust me.”

We let the basket down on the end of a rope. The “skunk” wouldn’t pay any attention to it at first. But he emptied it finally. For he was good and hungry. Then we tossed him the two books that Poppy had brought along. One was “The Book of Etiquette” and the other one was “The Pilgrim’s Progress.” After the books, we let down the bed, piece by piece, then the springs and the mattress. We had an awful time getting the dressing table through the scuttle, but we finally managed it. Of course, smarty wouldn’t untie our ropes, so we had to use trick knots. When we got through with our work there was a pile of stuff on the floor under the scuttle.



“My father always told me to be kind to *dumb* animals,” says Poppy, in the completion of our work, “and it’s a fact that I can’t bear to see even a *skunk* uncomfortable. So here’s a nice soft bed for you, Mr. Skunk, and an easy chair and a pretty dressing table. If you’ll look in the drawer of the dressing table you’ll find toilet water and talcum powder. There’s a manicure set, too. Try and fix up everything nice and cozy, for now that you came here without an invitation I have a hunch that you aren’t going to get away for a few days at least.”

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“Say—” yelled Donner. “Wait a minute—” But we paid no more attention to him and closed the scuttle.

“I hope that our ‘skunk’ has a good time reading ‘The Pilgrim’s Progress,’” I laughed, as we climbed down the fire escape. “I tried reading it one time and couldn’t keep awake.”

“Huh!” grunted Poppy. “He better read the ‘Etiquette’ book first.”

The day’s work having come to an end, we had supper with Mrs. Fillingham, after which we gathered around the parrot in the kitchen. But to no success. To-night the bird neither talked nor laughed. Poppy was disappointed.

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CHAPTER XIV

THE HOUSEKEEPER'S STORY

Another day passed. More stilts were built and shipped and more advertising was sent out. I think that Poppy was disappointed that there weren't any orders in the morning's mail. For he had expected his advertising to bring in immediate business. The orders that we were going to get when the advertising got into circulation! Oh, boy! It was all he could talk about.

And to that point there was need of the advertising bringing in some fresh business, let me tell you, for we were rapidly getting to the bottom of our "order" file. Soon all the orders that we had on hand would be filled and we would have to start working on stock. Somehow I didn't like that idea, though Poppy said it was good business. I liked to build stilts that had been ordered. That seemed more like making real money to me.

Again that night we tried to get the parrot to tell us what it knew about the hidden will. But to no success. All that we got out of it in the way of attention to our questions was an occasional blink of its dull-looking eyes.

Poppy was out of sorts with the secretive bird.

“We’d ought to wring your confounded neck,” he told it crossly, shaking his fists in the feathered face.

“That would be like killing the goose that laid the golden egg,” says I.

“Oh,” he growled, “I didn’t mean it. You know that. But it does make me sore to think that the blamed thing won’t talk. For it knows stuff, all right! It could clear up the mystery in a moment if it wanted to.”

The housekeeper moved restlessly behind us.

“I think,” says she nervously, “that you are giving the parrot credit for having too much intelligence. It may know something about the hidden will, as you say. But I don’t believe that it knows what you are saying to it, or even realizes that it has a secret. If you were to get anything out of it in the way of a clew I think it would be an accident.”

I got her eye.

“What if it is the Spirit of old Mr. Donner?” I laughed.

“Oh! . . .” she cried, with a nervous gesture. “Please don’t talk about it. I can’t comprehend how I ever was foolish enough to say such a thing. And me a Christian woman!”

Poppy turned away from the parrot.

“I’ve been going to ask you, Mrs. Fillingham, what happened here the night the old man went to the cemetery. If you’ll tell

us, maybe we'll get a clue to the mystery. You see what I mean, don't you? From something he said or did *before* he went to the cemetery, we may be able to figure out what his idea was in digging the hole and later running away."

"I was very nervous that night," the housekeeper began. "To start with, Mr. Donner had been acting strangely all day. A few years ago I wouldn't have minded his queer actions. But lately he has made me nervous. At times he even frightened me. And I was terribly frightened that night."

"What frightened you?" put in Poppy.

"Oh, he had such a queer look. His eyes were so bright and so feverish. And he wandered throughout the house muttering to himself. I saw him moving his dead wife's things around. And all the time he was at this he kept talking to her. I got the feeling that his mind was breaking down. And probably that is what frightened me the most. For I saw the danger of being in the house with him."

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"You really think he was crazy, Mrs. Fillingham?"

The woman slowly shook her head.

"No-o," says she thoughtfully, "he wasn't crazy. I think he knew what he was doing. But queer things were going on in his mind. And I was afraid of what the consequences would be."

"When we first saw him that night," says Poppy, going back to the time when he and I hid in the bushes, "we thought that he was crazy. For that was the only way we could account for

him having the parrot. Of course, we didn't know then that he was heading for the cemetery. We thought he was just walking around. And you can imagine how weird he looked to us. Br-r-r-r!"

The housekeeper drew a deep breath.

"A queerer man I never have met. It was hard for me to feel at ease around him. He seemed so deep in his thoughts. It was the mystery in spiritualism, I believe, that led him to take an interest in that peculiar religion."

"And do you think that he actually saw dead people, Mrs. Fillingham?"

"I can't answer that," was the nervous reply, and from the woman's actions I could imagine that she was thinking of queer things that had happened in the house. "His mind may have gotten out of balance on that one point. He may have *imagined* that he saw supernatural things."

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"But down in your heart," pressed Poppy, "you don't believe that he actually saw things that you and I couldn't see."

"No-o," came slowly. "I was raised a Presbyterian. And I cannot believe in spiritualism as he did, though at times I nervously imagined things. If there is anything in it, I say it is the work of the Devil and not the work of the Lord."

Poppy gave a grunt.

"To me," says he, "this spiritualism stuff is a bunch of junk."

“Mr. Donner was all wrapped up in it. And smart man that he was, it does seem queer that he could feel that way about it if there wasn’t something behind it.”

“Let us go back to the night he hid the will. You say he acted queerly all day. And then what?”

“Mr. Lawrence Donner came late in the evening. I showed him upstairs. He was in the house about an hour. In the quarrel between the two brothers I overheard things that possibly were not intended for my ears. Mr. Lawrence Donner wanted to have his son put in charge of the new stilt factory. If a boy could run the business, he said, in pressing his point, he wanted *his* boy to be in charge. And it was the duty of the older relative, he argued, to *put* the nephew in charge. But Mr. Herman Donner wouldn’t listen to the suggestion. He said ‘No’ over and over again. Finally he got quite angry. He was all worked up, anyway. One sharp word led to another. Accused by the older one of wanting his money, the younger one said insulting things about the other’s religion. That threw old Mr. Donner into a rage. It was terrible to listen to. I was frightened out of my senses. And the only thing that kept me from running to the neighbors for help was the thought of what they would say. I didn’t want unpleasant stories to get started.”

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Poppy had been drinking in each word.

“You say old Mr. Donner accused his brother of wanting his money. Was there any mention of a will?”

“No. But I overheard the old gentleman tell the other one that

he was going to disinherit him.”

Poppy’s eyes were dancing now.

“Hot dog!” he cried. “I knew it! Don’t you see, Mrs. Fillingham?—the old man destroyed his old will, just as I say, and made a new one. And knowing what a sneak his brother was, he decided to hide the new will in some unusual place, where it couldn’t be stolen.”

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“Mr. Lawrence Donner was white with rage when he left the house,” the woman went on. “For the older brother, in ordering him away, had shrieked at him, ‘You’ll never get a penny of my money!’ Shortly after the visitor had gone the old gentleman himself came down the stairs and went into the library, locking the door behind him. I didn’t hear anything more of him for about an hour. Then he rang for me. ‘Send for Ott,’ says he shortly, when I had been admitted into the room.”

Poppy looked surprised.

“Did he say why he wanted you to send for my father?”

“No. He just said, ‘Send for Ott.’”

“That was queer. . . . Did you notice if the library safe was open?”

“No.”

“You didn’t notice any papers lying around that could have been taken from the safe?”

“No.”

“Later on did you notice if any papers had been burned in the fireplace?”

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“No.”

“How long did you say he was in the library before he sent for you?”

“About an hour.”

Poppy checked over some of the things in his mind.

“An hour! That would have given him plenty of time to destroy his old will and make a new one. . . . Did you notice any pens or anything like that lying around?”

“No.”

“You didn’t see anything that would suggest to you now that the old man had been writing?”

“No.”

“You said a few moments ago that he had been acting queerly all day. Did he act queer, or look queer, when you went into the library?”

“No.”

“You had no thought that he was out of his head?”

“I was terribly unnerved over the quarrel. And I expected to find him similarly unstrung. But he wasn’t. He seemed rather quiet, in fact.”

“You think he was wholly in his right mind?”

“Oh, yes!”

Poppy waggled.

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“All right. What happened after you left the library?”

“We have two telephones in the house, one in an upper room and the other in the kitchen. I had gone to the kitchen to telephone. Suddenly I heard the parrot. It was laughing in a shrill, peculiar way.”

Poppy leaned forward.

“What do you mean by ‘peculiar’?”

“Since Mrs. Donner’s death the parrot has led a morbid, melancholy life. It wouldn’t talk. It laughed, but its laugh was a jeering, melancholy laugh. But the laugh that I heard that night was different. It was a pleased laugh. Sort of crooning. I ran into the hall. Mr. Donner was coming down the stairs with the parrot on his shoulder. Something had happened, for he was as white as chalk. I think I said something to him. But whatever my words were, he paid no attention to me. He didn’t seem to see me at all. And in another moment he was gone.”

“He had something in his hand,” says Poppy. “Did you notice

what it was?”

“No. I was too badly frightened at the moment to notice anything clearly.”

“He carried a fire shovel,” explained Poppy. “Later on we found the shovel in the cemetery. As I have told you, Mrs. Fillingham, he dug a hole beside his wife’s grave. And I still believe that he intended to bury his new will there. But something came up to make him change his mind. . . . What did he do when he came home?”

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The trace of a smile crossed the woman’s weary face.

“He inquired sharply why I was burning so much electricity. You see, your father had gone all over the house turning on the lights. Even the attic lights were burning.”

“Pa must have been afraid of spooks,” smiled Poppy.

“I told Mr. Donner that your father was in the house. But he didn’t pay any attention to me—he seemed to have forgotten that he had sent for the other man. When the lights were turned out to his satisfaction he went upstairs to his room.”

“And did you know where he had been?”

“No.”

“Did he seem excited upon his return?”

“Not at all.”

“And he still seemed to be in his right mind?”

“Oh, yes! The fact that he scolded me about the lights proved that. It worried me to know that he had been out in the storm. I offered to lay out dry clothing for him, but he said he would wait on himself.”

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“And was the parrot wet, too, Mrs. Fillingham?”

“The parrot? Why! . . .” There was a breathless pause. “I hadn’t thought of it before, but now I recall that Mr. Donner did another very peculiar thing that night in connection with the parrot.”

“Yes?” cried Poppy.

“For the first time in many years he took the bird into his room and kept it there all night.”

Poppy was on his feet now dancing around the room like a six-year-old kid at a Christmas tree.

“Now I know! Now I know! He took the parrot into his room to teach it to say, ‘The will! The will!’ Oh, we’re getting somewhere at last! Just as we thought, the parrot *is* the key to the mystery. And if we can only make it talk . . .”

“Ha! ha! ha!” came a jeering, rasping laugh. “The will! The will! Dr-r-r-rum! Dr-r-r-rum! Ha! ha! ha!”

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CHAPTER XV

KICKED OUT!

Where was the hidden will? That was the chief thought in our minds now. To one point we were convinced that the will wasn't buried in the cemetery. For if the old spiritualist had wanted to bury it he would have used the hole that he had dug beside his wife's grave. Instead he had abandoned the hole after all of his trouble in digging it. He had tossed his shovel away, too, which was proof, Poppy said, that the will hadn't been buried. For if the old man had intended burying it in some other part of the cemetery he would have kept his shovel.

“Jerry,” says my puzzled companion, when we were in bed together, “we sure pulled a boner in not keeping closer watch on the old man that night.”

“What do you mean?”

“He hid the will in some other place. And he must have done a quick job of it, too, for he got home ahead of us. So if we had been onto our job, and had kept him in sight, as we should have done, we now would know where the will is.”

“Maybe,” says I thoughtfully, “we ought to go to the cemetery and look for hollow trees. For one time I read a story about a

boy who crawled into a hollow tree in a rain storm and found a box of money that had been hidden there.”

Poppy gave a sudden whoop.

“In a rain storm! Jerry, old kid, you sure said a mouthful that time. Hot dog!” Then he went on: “I was dumb not to have realized before this that the storm that night had something to do with the mystery. Don’t you see, Jerry?—the parrot’s drumming is *thunder* or the *wind*.”

“Gee!” says I, excited. “Do you suppose that’s it?”

“Sure thing. It’s as plain as the nose on my face.”

I laughed.

“I can’t see your nose in the dark.”

“No? Well, it’s there.”

“Let me feel,” says I.

There was some fun then.

“Jerry,” says the other, when we had quit fooling, “do you know what I’m going to do the next time it storms?”

“Get out your umbrella?”

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“You poor fish!”

“If I’m a fish,” says I, “I won’t have to get out an umbrella.”

“I’m going to park myself in the cemetery,” says he. “For take it from me, kid, there’s something out there that *drums* during a storm.”

“Maybe it’s old John Dooble,” says I, naming an old soldier who had died recently. “He was a drummer in the Civil War.”

“How could *he* play a drum? His drum wasn’t buried with him.”

“*Good* night! Don’t you suppose they have drums in heaven as well as harps!”

“Maybe old John didn’t go to heaven. For he was a bad egg. But what I was going to say is this, Jerry—wherever the drumming is in the cemetery, whether it’s in old John’s grave or in the top of some tree, that is where we’ll find the hidden will.”

I laughed.

“Won’t young Donner and his father be sick, though, when they learn that the fortune isn’t theirs, after all!”

“And won’t old Mr. Donner chuckle in his grave!”

“Who do you suppose will get the fortune?”

“The town probably.”

“Aren’t there any other heirs besides the shoe man and his family?”

“Not that I know of.”

“A million dollars!” I whistled. “Gee! I wish I was the chief heir.”

“Shucks!” grunted Poppy. “I’d rather work and earn money than inherit it. For when it’s given to you you miss all the fun of working for it.”

“You’re cuckoo!”

“Let’s go to sleep,” he yawned. “It’s getting late.”

I raised myself and looked out of the window. In the moonlight I could see long rows of growing things in the kitchen garden.

“What if a storm comes up to-night?” says I. “Are you going to go to the cemetery?”

“Sure thing.”

“Then I hope it doesn’t storm. For if I’ve got to go to the cemetery with you I want to do it in the daylight.”

“Cemeteries are interesting places at night,” he laughed.

“Yah—for ghosts and hoot owls.”

“And in a storm,” he went on, making his voice sound weird, “with the lightning flashing and the thunder rolling and the trees quivering and the tombstones glistening —?”

I gave him a kick.

“Shut up!” says I. “What do you want me to do?—shiver my toenails loose?”

Well, we went to sleep then. And did I ever have crazy dreams! Cemeteries filled full of ghosts and parrots running around with fire shovels and I don’t know what all.

At the factory the following morning we made the discovery that our “skunk trap” was empty. Sometime during the night the prisoner had piled stuff under the scuttle and had thus made his escape.

Poppy didn’t know what to do in the unexpected turn of affairs. And I left him sitting on the late prisoner’s bed with a troubled face. Twenty minutes later he came into the factory on the run. And you should have seen the wildly happy look in his eyes!

“Jerry!” he yipped, grabbing me and pulling me around. “I’ve got it!”

I brushed him away in pretended coldness.

“Please remember,” says I, with a severe face, “that I’m the secretary and treasurer of this company. So hereafter when you approach me, use a little dignity.”

“You and your dignity!” he hooted, batting me in the stomach. “I’ll throw you out of the window if you don’t can that stuff.”

I laughed.

“What happened upstairs?” says I, curious. “I left you in the dumps. And here you are acting like a clown.”

“The bed fell down with me, Jerry.”

“Well, what of that?”

“I started putting it together again, hardly realizing what I was doing. I was thinking of other things, you know. And all of a sudden an idea came to me.”

“Well,” says I, in nonsense, “I’ve always heard that one of the best ways to get an idea is to put a bed together.”

“Jerry, did *you* ever put a bed together?”

“Hundreds of ’em,” I bragged shamelessly.

“There are four pieces to a bed frame—the headboard and footboard and the two side rails. And the rails have *hooks* that fit into *slots* in the headboard and footboard. All right. Now just imagine that our stilt shaft is the *headboard*. See? And our stilt step is the side rail. There’s a step adjustment that we can patent. It’s a *device*. No bolts to loosen. The simplest thing in the world. Kiss me, kid—I’m crazy.”

“You’re crazy, all right.”

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“And just think,” he cried, pulling me around, “I might not have gotten this wonderful idea if Donner hadn’t escaped. Boy, aren’t we the lucky little things!”

Later in the morning the escaped prisoner came to the factory with the town marshal. He wasn't going to let us get the best of him *this* time! I guess not! We met him at the door with our caps on. And before he could fire any of his insulting gab at us we bowed, as polite as you please, and told him to step inside and take complete possession. Everything was his, we said. And we wished him good luck.

Say, you should have seen the dumfounded look on his face. He hadn't expected anything like this. And he was furious at the thought that in some way or another we were getting the best of him after all.

"Arrest 'em!" he bellowed at Bill Hadley, who had been taking in things with a good-natured grin.

"How can I arrest 'em," drawled Bill, spitting, "when I haven't got a warrant?"

"Arrest 'em anyway," screeched the furious one. "My father'll back you up."

Bill scratched his head.

"But what have they done?" says he, puzzled. "You can't arrest people without a reason."

Smarty was dancing in his rage.

"If you don't arrest 'em," he roared at Bill, "I'll have my father tie a can on you."

That made Bill mad.

“Applesauce,” he growled, and with a disgusted look at the crazy-acting one he wheeled and went back down town.

CHAPTER XVI

SMARTY GIVES A PARTY

It was our plan now to hurry up and make a working model of our new stilt lock. Then we would have the papers made out for a patent. The lawyer would do that for us. Of course, it would take several weeks for the government to grant us a patent, but to that point Poppy said that we could go ahead with our business just as though we had a patent, for our application protected us. If we got an application in on Tuesday, he said, explaining how the government's patent plan worked, and another inventor put in an application for a patent on practically the same kind of an invention on Wednesday, we would get the patent ahead of the other fellow.

“The word to use,” says he, “is priority. I read about it in my advertising book. So if we get priority on our step lock, which ought to be easy for us, we're protected for the next twenty-odd years.”

“And can't anybody else manufacture stilts like ours?”

“Not without paying us a royalty.”

“A royalty?” says I. “What's that?”

“Suppose young Donner wanted to manufacture stilts like ours, and put the proposition up to us as the owners of the patent. ‘All right,’ we’d tell him. ‘You can use our patent and make all the stilts you want to. But you’ve got to pay us two cents a pair on all that you sell.’ See, Jerry? The two cents a pair would be our royalty on the invention. A royalty is an inventor’s pay.”

“Let’s make Donner pay us ten cents a pair,” I laughed, “and lay around in the shade and take it easy.”

“Nix. We’re going to have a business of our own and not depend on that guy. For I don’t believe that he knows enough to run a business successfully. You wait and see! Besides, we can make more money with a business of our own, and have more fun.”

Having put in an application for a patent, it was then 186 Poppy’s intention to go to Chicago and see what he could do about closing the big Warman-Baldwin order. Of course, he would have to tell the advertising manager what had happened to us, admitting to the customer that we hadn’t any factory now, and probably wouldn’t be able to get one unless we got the big order. But it was in our favor that we had a classy stilt design. The new step lock was miles ahead of the old one. There really was no comparison between the two designs. So, no matter how hard young Donner worked to get the order away from us, as the manager of the old company, we ought to win out in the end, if quality of product meant anything to the mail-order house.

We worked on the new stilts that day. They were harder to

make than the first ones. It took a lot of experimenting to get the step hook just right. In fact it took us a day and a half to complete the first pair. But with the right kind of machinery and tools we could build the new stilts just as fast, or faster, than the old ones, Poppy declared. The metal piece would be punched out in a die press, one machine turning out thousands of hooks a day. And the other pieces could be made in jigs, he said, so that all the pieces of a kind would be alike. He tried to explain to me what he meant by “jigs.” But when he got through talking I didn’t know much more about it than when he started in, so I won’t try to explain it here. You probably wouldn’t understand me, anyway.

As soon as we had completed a working model of our new step lock we took it to our lawyer, who in turn mailed it, with the necessary papers, to the patent office in Washington, where the president lives. That important job out of the way, the leader got ready to leave for Chicago. As yet we hadn’t heard from the advertising manager. And we wondered uneasily if Donner had gotten a letter. It came to us in a roundabout way that things were kind of slack at the stilt factory. The advertising that was to have accomplished so much wasn’t bringing in the expected orders. In a way that tickled us. We were glad that smarty was having his troubles as the company’s new manager. Yet the lack of orders puzzled us. And in odd moments I found myself looking at Poppy curiously, wondering if he knew as much about advertising as he thought he did. Maybe there was something wrong with his advertising, I acknowledged. Maybe it wasn’t any good.

It was planned between us that the leader was to go to

Chicago on Thursday. Leaving on the early morning train, he would arrive in the big city about ten o'clock. That would give him the balance of the day at the Warman-Baldwin plant, where the advertising executive undoubtedly was back at work.

While we were busy at Poppy's house Wednesday afternoon, Mrs. Fillingham called us up on the telephone asking us in a distressed voice to please come over right away. We found her crying. Young Donner had just been to the house, she told us, and having gone through the place in a lordly, swaggering way, had ordered her to open up and air the downstairs rooms, as he intended giving a party that night.

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“I would like to go away from here and never set eyes on the place again,” sobbed the distressed woman. “A party here tonight, and old Mr. Donner hardly cold in his grave! It is the most disrespectful thing I ever heard tell of. Why, it was only a few days ago that we had the master's funeral here! And now a party! A *dancing* party, mind you! I don't know what to do. I'm at my wit's end. I tried to persuade the boy to show more respect for his dead uncle—I told him how the people would talk. But he as much as told me to tend to my own business. He said I was 'old-fashioned.' Wearing crape was out of date, he sneered. Oh, dear! It seems to me as though my troubles are without end.”

Poppy is a good kid. He has the right kind of respect for people, dead and alive. And it made him furious to think that our enemy should pull a stunt like this.

“The dumb-bell!” he gritted, his eyes flashing. “He ought to have his neck broke.”

“The restaurant is sending out a man to serve a midnight supper. And they’re going to dance throughout the downstairs rooms, on the floors that were such a pride to old Mr. Donner!—floors that I have polished with my own hands! Fifteen boys and fifteen girls. Oh, I can see what will happen here! The whole house will be turned upside down and no end of damage will be done to the woodwork. For they’ll pay no attention to me if I try to restrain them.”

“As I have told you before,” waggled Poppy, “I don’t know very much about this spiritualism stuff. It looks like junk to me. But, bu-lieve me, if I were old Mr. Donner, and I *could* come back from the grave, I’d do it to-night. A dancing party, hey? I’d make ’em dance! I’d run ’em out of here with a club. And I’d scare ’em so they’d never come back. Young Donner hasn’t the decency of a snake. Boy, won’t I yip when the lost will turns up and he and his father get shoved out in the cold! That’s what the both of them are going to get. I’ll tell the world! Jerry and I are going to find that will, Mrs. Fillingham. And you’re going to come out all right in the end. So I wouldn’t cry if I were you. Probably if old Mr. Donner could speak his wishes right now he would want you to stay here and see that things weren’t knocked to pieces. So you had better stay, I think. But to-morrow, if you wish, you can take the parrot and your things and go to a hotel. It won’t be for long. You’ll be back again in a few days. I’m dead sure of that.”

The woman dried her eyes.

“You’re a good boy,” she told Poppy, comforted in what he had said. “You’re both good boys,” she added quickly, not wanting to slight me. “I don’t know what I would do without you. And I can only hope that in the end you get your stilt factory back.”

“We should worry about the factory,” says Poppy. “We’ve got other plans.”

“I have a little money saved up,” the woman faltered. “It isn’t very much. But if I can help you—”

“Thanks, Mrs. Fillingham,” says Poppy, and there was a queer catch to his voice. “Jerry and I won’t forget that. You’re all right.”

Poppy and I, of course, weren’t invited to Donner’s swell party. I guess not! He wouldn’t have used us to wipe his feet on at the front door. We were less to him than the holes in the fried cakes that were sent up from the restaurant. Oh, he was real class—that guy was! So he thought. His gang was a bunch of cake eaters, most of them older than himself, who knew the location of all the sporty roadhouses within a circle of thirty miles. The fast set! That is what they called themselves. What a lark, they told one another, to have a “wild” party in a house that was full of spooks!

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They started to roll in about nine o’clock. Poppy and I were there, for the unnerved housekeeper had expressly asked us to keep near her. But, of course, we didn’t let smarty get his eyes on us.

Boy, was the young host ever lit up! A black dress suit and diamond studs in his shirt front (they belonged to his father, who was away from home!) and dancing pumps. Not *shoes*, mind you, such as real he-boys wear, but cunning little slippers made of patent leather, with *buckles* on them! Oh, he was some sheik! Rudolph Vaselino, number two. One automobile after another rolled up the private drive to the brilliantly lighted house and emptied itself at the front door, where smarty gave the glad hand to all the young lounge lizards and the petticoat racks that came with them.

“Come in; come in,” he invited, acting like a lord.

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“We’re going to raise the roof to-night. A wild time, gang! If you see anything you want, grab it. But be careful that you don’t let any of my late uncle’s pet spooks grab *you* in some dark corner. For the house is full of ’em.”

“Oh! . . .” squealed a silly-acting girl. “Are there really spooks in this queer old house? Can you show us one?”

“At midnight,” says smarty, “I’m going to take you upstairs and show you the room where my aunt died. The bed hasn’t been touched to this day.”

An orchestra had been engaged, and at nine-thirty the saxophones began to moan and groan. Gee! You can’t imagine how out of place the snappy music sounded in that dignified old house. It was like giving a jazz jamboree in a church.

Then it came twelve o’clock. True to his boast, smarty got his gang together and started up the stairs. Suddenly the lights

went out. Every light in the house. The girls screamed. Having gotten loose, the parrot flew over their heads, screeching at them with horrible mocking laughter. Boy, it was a creepy mess! A door slammed like a thunderclap in the top part of the house. After that three or four doors slammed in quick succession. Then came the heavy “tramp! tramp! tramp!” of feet.

“The master! The master!” screamed the housekeeper, fainting dead away.

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“Ha! ha! ha!” screeched the mocking parrot. “Ha! ha! ha! The will! The will! Dr-r-r-rum! Dr-r-r—rum! The will! The will! Ha! ha! ha!”

Well, you never saw a party break up any faster than that party did. In five minutes the house was as silent as a tomb. A negro had been sent out from the restaurant to wash the dishes. But where he went to I can’t imagine. Some one yelled “Ghosts!” and the next instant he was gone. For all I know to the contrary he may be running yet.

Having gotten a hand lamp, Poppy and I helped Mrs. Fillingham into bed. She was out of her head. So we sent for the doctor, who ordered her to be taken to the emergency rooms, which are the nearest thing we have in Tutter to a hospital.

And so the lonely brick house was shut up. It was a place to keep away from, everybody said. The following morning many curious people came and stared at the house through the black-fingered pine trees. And *some* people declare to this day

that they saw things at the windows. *White* things with *queer* shapes and *hideous* faces.

CHAPTER XVII

THE FALLEN TOMBSTONE

What was the secret of the brick house? What had caused the electric lights to go out during smarty's party? Were the footfalls that we had heard human or ghostly? And had the doors been slammed by human hands or ghostly hands?

Poppy had said that spiritualism was bunk. To believe in it one had to have a weak will and a strong imagination was the way he had expressed himself on one occasion when we had discussed the peculiar religion as old Mr. Donner had practiced it. But now I noticed that my chum, by spells, had a queer, puzzled look on his face. Strange things had happened in the old spiritualist's home—things that neither he nor I could explain.

“Jerry,” says he the following morning, “I almost wish that I didn't have to go to Chicago to-day.”

“Why not?” says I, searching his face.

“There are things here that I'd like to dig into. Mystery things. For instance, I'd like to spend an hour or two in that queer old house, to examine the doors that slammed last night. Maybe I could find out what made them slam.”

“It was spirits,” I shivered.

“That’s what everybody thinks.”

“You thought so yourself last night.”

“I know it. At the time I was as badly scared as you were. But I don’t feel that way now. I feel more curious than scared.”

I gave a jerky laugh.

“I wonder how young Donner feels this morning? Boy, did he ever step lively in making his escape? I bet you couldn’t drag him into that old house again with a team of mules.”

A hard look came into Poppy’s face.

“The young puppy! He had good reason for being scared. And for my part I hope that he keeps on shivering for the next six years. Maybe this will teach him a lesson to be more respectful toward the dead hereafter.”

I shivered.

“Can you imagine how you’d feel,” says I, “to go into that old house and actually come face to face with the dead man’s ghost?”

“I’d cheerfully face worse dangers than that, Jerry, if I could clear up the mystery of the hidden will.”

“Br-r-r-r!” says I, with a chill in my backbone. “None of that ‘ghost’ stuff for me.”

“But, listen, Jerry—did you ever hear of any one being injured by a dead man?”

I grinned.

“I guess young Donner would have been ‘injured’ last night, all right, if his uncle’s spirit could have gotten a swift kick at him.”

“Rats! The living has nothing to fear from the dead.”

“You talk brave. But I bet you would shiver the pegs out of your shoes if you were to find old Mr. Donner’s spirit zigzagging toward you.”

“I’d be amazed—I won’t deny that.”

“Yes,” says I, wagging, “and you’d be *dismayed*, too, when the spirit gave you a kick in the seat of the pants and ordered you to beat it.”

“Now you’re talking foolish.”

“You don’t believe that a spirit can kick a fellow in the seat of the pants, hey?”

“You poor fish!”

I grinned at him.

“What are you going to do when you come home from Chicago?” says I. “Go over and live in the brick house?”

“I’m going to spend a night there.”

“The hero!” I cried, slapping him on the back.

“Just now,” says he thoughtfully, “I’m on the fence.”

“Your hide’ll be on the fence when Mr. Donner’s spirit gets through with you.”

“One minute I think that there *is* such a thing as spirits,” he went on, his forehead puckered up, “and the next minute I want to kick myself for letting such a crazy belief come into my mind. I want to find out the truth. And the way to do it, I figure, is to stay all night in the brick house. Then I’ll know its secret, and will no longer be in doubt.”

“I hope,” says I, giving him a steady look, “that you aren’t planning on taking me along with you to play the ukulele while you shimmy.”

He laughed.

“Jerry,” says he, winding his arm around me, “you’re funny. You try and let on that your backbone is made of jello. But, as I have told you before, you can’t fool me. I know you, old kid!”

“You think I’m going to be on hand for the big show, hey?”

“Of course you will. I couldn’t keep you away, even if I wanted to. That’s what I like about you—wherever your pal goes, into danger or into fun, you go, too.”

We were on our way to the depot. And as I squinted out of the corner of my eye at my companion I told myself that he was some classy-looking kid, all right. A real young business man! I was proud of him. And I was proud to know that I was his chum. Maybe I wasn't as brave about some things as he had said. But I told myself quickly that I was going to watch my steps hereafter and not let my shivers get the best of me if I could help it. For I wanted him to keep on thinking well of me.

At the depot we overheard the ticket agent talking with some other men about a monument that had been tipped over in the Tutter cemetery. And when we learned what monument it was I thought that Poppy would jump out of his shoes.

“Jerry,” he cried excitedly, “whoever tipped over the Donner monument last night did so for a reason. It’s the hidden will! It can’t be anything else. Some one is searching for the will. So you had better go to the cemetery this morning and look around. Maybe you’ll be able to pick up a clew. Golly Ned! I wish I was going to be here with you. I hate to go away. But I’ve got to. For we can’t run the chance of losing that big stilt order.”

“Do you suppose,” says I, dizzy-like, “that the monument was tipped over by Mr. Donner’s spirit?”

“If there *is* such a thing as spirits,” says he thoughtfully, “they are supernatural and hence can do supernatural things. They don’t have to open doors to get into houses—they can go right through walls. So why should a spirit have to tip over a monument to find out what was underneath it? No, Jerry! The

ticket agent *thinks* it was a spirit that tipped the monument over. See his eyes!—you could knock them off with a stick. And look at those other men wagging their heads in agreement with him! But they’re wrong. I won’t let myself believe for a moment that the tombstone was tipped over by spirits. And I don’t believe now that it was spirits that slammed the doors last night. Some one is secretly at work around here, Jerry. And it’s going to be our job to find out who it is.”

“I wish you weren’t going away,” I cried, in deeper bewilderment.

“Here comes the train. I’ll try and get back to-night on the ten-thirty. Watch the cemetery, Jerry. And don’t lose your grit, old-timer. Gee, you’re a swell pal! I love you, old fish-face. Good-by.”

“I hope you get the big order,” I, called after him, as he got onto the moving train.

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Here some one shoved me to one side.

“Git out of my way,” ordered young Donner, running to catch the train, a traveling bag in one hand and a pair of wrapped-up stilts in the other.

Poppy’s head came out of a window.

“Competition, Jerry. Hot dog! It’s going to be exciting.”

Turning away from the depot, my mind a jumble of ghosts and cemeteries and fallen tombstones, I had the uneasy

feeling that I, too, was heading into something exciting.

CHAPTER XVIII

A NIGHT OF STORMS AND SHIVERS

That morning a number of curious-minded people followed the Treebury pike north through Happy Hollow to the lonely hillside cemetery where the tombstone in the lot of the dead spiritualist had been so mysteriously upset.

Was this the work of spirits? Many of the superstitious visitors said so as they waggled over the fallen stone. And queer stories were told about the strange old man who so recently had been buried here.

Poppy had said that I was to keep my eyes open while I was in the cemetery for possible clues. But I could find no clues. Upon examination I failed to see that the ground under the fallen tombstone had been disturbed. There was no hiding place there, no sign of recent digging. I examined the tombstone carefully from end to end. But there was nothing peculiar about it—it had no joints or hollow parts. I was convinced that the stone in itself held no secrets.

Could it have fallen over of its own accord? The bustling sexton said “No.” There wasn’t a particle of doubt in his mind, he declared, that the tombstone had been pushed over.

“Vandals is what did it, Jerry,” he told me, wagging his shaggy head and spitting tobacco juice out of the corner of his mouth. “Them people over thar think it was spee-rits. I swan! —it makes me laugh to hear ’em talk. But it warn’t spee-rits —it was Vandals, as I say.”

“What do you mean by Vandals?” I inquired nervously.

He put his hands on his hips and stared at me.

“Um. . . . Don’t you know what a Vandal is? Wall, it’s a man with somethin’ out of kilter in his upper story, who goes ’round destroyin’ things that he had ought to have a lot of respect for.”

Here the stoop-shouldered old man hobbled away in his brisk, bustling way, leaving me to my thoughts. And I walked around and around the fallen tombstone. Was there, I wondered, some mysterious connection between this act of “Vandalism,” as the old sexton had called it, and the hidden will? Was Poppy right in his theory that some one was secretly at work hunting for the will?

While I was in the cemetery I looked around for possible hollow trees. But there were none to be found. That was a disappointment to me. After what I had said to the leader, it would have been a feather in my cap if I could have located the hidden will in a hollow tree.

I was anxious now for my chum to come home. And thinking that he might telegraph to me in case he had landed the big order, or had found it necessary to stay in Chicago over night, I hung around the telegraph office that afternoon, but to no

success. In all truth I felt sort of helpless in his absence. I missed his quick-minded leadership. Left to myself, I didn't know what to do.

At the supper table that night I overheard Dad tell Mother that Mr. Lorrying had regained the full use of his mind and was on his way home. I was glad to hear that. The banker had been good to Poppy and me, and it had hurt us to think that he lay suffering in a hospital.

After supper, in force of habit, I went down the street to Poppy's house, where Mr. Ott entertained me for an hour or two with some of his detective lingo. He was a funny old coot. To look at him you would imagine that he didn't know beans. But he was a lot smarter than he looked.

It was fast getting dark now. A black cloud had blotted out the setting sun. The wind had changed, too. Throughout the day it had been blistering hot. But now it touched my sweaty face with fingers that seemed to have been dipped in a well.

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In the homes up and down the street the people were taking care of their awnings and porch shades, seeing that everything was safe and secure for the night. And watching these preparations against the coming storm, I figured that I had better go home and park myself in the porch swing. For I didn't want to hang around in the street and get soaked. Later on, when the storm had passed over, I would go to the depot to meet the ten-thirty train. For in the absence of a telegram I was sure that Poppy would be home.

The sight of our white lawn urn gave my thoughts a turn that shut off my breathing for a moment or two. The cemetery! Poppy had said that we would go there the next time it stormed. He had given as his opinion that there was something in the cemetery that *drummed* during a storm. And this drumming, wherever it was, had some important connection to the hidden will.

I shivered at the thought of going to the cemetery alone. Oh, I cried in my heart, I didn't want to do that! Soon it would be pitch dark. And what a weird, ghostly place the cemetery would be then. A dead man's world smothered in darkness! And to go there alone!—with the lightning flashing and the thunder rolling and the wind moaning through the trees!

But what would Poppy say when he got home if I passed up this chance of solving the mystery of the will's hiding place? Would he call me a coward? Probably not. For unlike a great many boys he didn't blurt out things like that. He had more consideration for a fellow's feelings. But down in his heart what would he *think*?

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I wanted him to believe in me and like me. More than that, I wanted him to be proud of me and glad all over that I was his best chum. It hurt me to think that in acting the coward he would get a shabby opinion of me.

I wouldn't be a coward! I'd be just as brave, or even braver, than he had said I was. I squared my shoulders. What was there to fear in the old cemetery, anyway. Its dead people couldn't harm me.

So I got my raincoat and sou'wester. I put on my rubber boots, too. Stuffing a flashlight into each side pocket of the coat, I started out.

It was raining now. But I didn't mind that, for my rubber coat protected me. In the Treebury pike several automobiles passed me with dripping headlights. I had a queer, creepy feeling as the darkness swallowed them up. I could imagine, in a crazy way, that some great monster had closed its wicked jaws on them and was crunching them between its grinding teeth.

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Br-r-r-r! I shivered as I stood outside of the cemetery gate. What was that! I could hear a moaning sound. *Oh!* . . . It was the wind in the pine trees. *Crash!* The thunderclap came so quickly on the heels of the lightning that the flash and the crash seemed to be hooked together. I got a momentary glimpse of scattered white tombstones glistening in the rain. Then everything was turned into an inkpot again.

I switched on one of my flashlights. It made a puddle of light ahead of me. I was in the cemetery now. There were tombstones all around me. They flashed somber signals to me with their polished glassy eyes as my light crept ahead and touched them.

The thing to do, I figured, was to go to the spot where we had seen the old spiritualist digging with his fire shovel. Then I would go through the bushes, as he had done. I would try and imagine what course he had taken after he had disappeared from our sight. And somewhere along that course I was hopeful that I would find the thing that *drummed*.

At sight of the still upset tombstone, and the newly made grave, I had another case of cold shivers. Golly Ned! Did the old spiritualist know that I was there? He had told Mrs. Fillingham that in death the grave couldn't hold him. So maybe he wasn't in the grave at all! Maybe he was standing beside me, or behind me, and I couldn't see him! Br-r-r-r! I got away from there in a hurry, I want to tell you.

Up ahead of me was an old tumble-down building called the "manse." To explain, at one time a "kirk" had stood on this hill. And the "dominie," as the minister was called by the Scotch people who attended the little church, made his home in the "manse." Years ago the church had burned down. And for an equal number of years the old manse had been without a tenant, except for the owls and other night creatures that flew in and out of the windowless openings.

Could it be, I suddenly asked myself, in growing excitement, that the will had been hidden somewhere in the old manse? I went to the door. Then I stepped inside. And now comes the part of my story that will make your hair stand on end.

The wind was howling through the trees. And as it swung over the old building the place was suddenly filled from top to bottom with a hideous, unearthly drumming sound. Like the rattle of a skeleton in a tin bathtub. The wind dying for a moment, the sound dropped to a hoarse, metallic gurgle. Then it broke forth like a hundred screaming ghosts.

I was scared. I could feel my knees quiver. And my heart was pounding like a sledge hammer. But even in my shivering fright I had a sort of triumphant feeling. I had solved the

mystery! Here in this room was the hidden will. And to find it I had only to trace the weird drumming sound to its source.

CHAPTER XIX

THE GHOST KILLER

However eager you may be right now to learn the secret of the wind-swept old manse, I am not going to tell you about it here. For it will be better for my story, I think, to reveal the mystery to you later on. But to this point of delay, please don't get impatient and start gnawing your fingernails! For you won't have to wait many minutes to get the whole story. And I can promise you a big surprise in the end.

The storm having passed over, leaving a moon and a starry sky in place of the earlier tumbling black clouds, I got rid of my raincoat on my return to town and hurried to the depot to meet the ten-thirty train from Chicago.

Boy, the good feeling that I had! A fellow always feels that way after doing a kind or courageous act. How proud Poppy would be of me, I thought, when he heard my story. And how his eyes would pop out when he saw what I had in my inside coat pocket. By being brave I had saved the day for the Tutter Advertising Novelty Company, all right. I had helped the town, too, and also our old friend, Mrs. Fillingham. As for young Donner and his father, the thought of them gave me the snickers.

The train was on time. And as I ran along the crowded platform to meet Poppy, who should bob up in front of me but old Mr. Lorrying himself.

“Howdy, Jerry,” the banker boomed at me. Then the big red face broke into a wide grin. “Surprised to see me, hey?”

“I was looking for Poppy,” I told him, not knowing what else to say in the sudden unexpected meeting.

“He’s here somewhere.”

I remembered my manners then.

“Gee, I’m glad you’re home again, Mr. Lorrying!”

“And I’m glad to be home, Jerry. They tried their best to lay me out. But I’m a tough old bird. Fooled ’em this trip. . . . How’s your pa and ma?”

“Fine and dandy. They were talking about you at the supper table. That is how I came to know that you were well again.”

“Um . . . I had a long talk with your young partner on the train. Found him in Chicago hiding behind a bowl of soup in the depot restaurant. Suppose you run and get a taxi, Jerry. We’ll get home quicker that way. And I’m anxious to walk in on Mother and surprise her. For she wasn’t expecting to see me till to-morrow.”

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Poppy and I having gotten into the taxicab with the banker on his invitation, my chum whispered to me, in explanation of the free ride, that there was important business on foot.

“What do you mean?” says I.

“Mr. Lorrington’s going to take us calling with him to-night.”

“Calling?” says I. “Where’bouts?”

“Oh, you’ll find out pretty soon.”

I noticed then that my chum wasn’t acting like his usual cheerful self. And I began to wonder if things had gone against him in Chicago.

“Didn’t you get the order?” I inquired anxiously, when we were alone in the taxicab at the banker’s door, the older passenger having instructed us to wait there until he came back.

“I got part of it,” was the quiet reply.

I gave him a puzzled look.

“Mr. Killburn was afraid of us, Jerry. And to that point I don’t know as I blame him very much. For it’s a fact we *are* pretty young to be running a business; and right now, as he knows, we haven’t much of anything back of us. He has to look out for his company’s interests, you know. And I guess he was afraid that our business might go to pot and get him in Dutch. So he left it this way: We’re to go ahead and make a thousand pairs of stilts, and if they’re satisfactory to him he’ll pay us forty-two cents a pair for them. Then, if everything continues to run along smoothly, we’re to get orders for more stilts, in larger quantities, at forty cents a pair.”

“Well,” says I, searching his face, “that’s fair enough, isn’t it?”

“Smarty and I were in the office together. And he got an order for a thousand pairs, too.”

“*What?*” I squeaked. “Was the mail-order company interested in those punk old stilts of his?”

“You’ll have to admit, Jerry, that the old stilts looked pretty good to us a few days ago. We were proud of them then.”

“But our design is better.”

“You and I think so. And I have a hunch that Mr. Killburn thinks so, too. But he can use the other stilts to good advantage. There’s nothing the matter with them. And if he can buy them cheaper than ours, and get better service, the old company is going to get the business.”

“Or, to put it the other way around,” says I, looking on the bright side, “if we give the best service, the business is ours, hey?”

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Poppy gloomily shook his head.

“I hate to tell you, Jerry, but Mr. Lorrington has upset the whole works for us. In our talk, on the train he told me that it would be foolish for us to think of starting up another stilt factory. He says that the thing for us to do is to get together with the Donners, now that they own the carriage factory. When I told him that young Donner was our enemy, he laughed. He thinks that our quarrel with the other boy is just a kid affair, to be

easily patched up.”

“Donner hates us,” I grunted.

“Of course he does. And no amount of money could hire him to work with us, or have anything to do with us in a business way. You and I know that. But I couldn’t convince Mr. Lorrying.”

“Where is young Donner?” I inquired, thinking further of the enemy. “Did you leave him in Chicago?”

“He was on the train to-night. Didn’t you see him get off?”

“No.”

“Both he and his father came home on the train. And that is where Mr. Lorrying is going to-night.”

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“Over to their house?” I cried in surprise.

“Sure thing.”

“And you say he’s going to take us with him?”

“That’s his plan.”

“*Good night!*” I yipped. “We’ll get kicked out.”

“Oh, I don’t think so—not when we’re with him. But I hate the thought of going there, Jerry. It galls me to have to knuckle down to Donner.”

I ran my fingers through my hair.

“And Mr. Lorrying really thinks that he can get the Donners to take us into partnership with them?”

“He’s going to try and do that. He says that one successful stilt factory is better for the town than two small factories. Donner has the manufacturing equipment, and we have the design—so the thing for us to do, he insists, is to get together. He doesn’t realize how you and I despise young Donner, or how the other boy hates us.”

In our talk I had quite forgotten about my own recent adventures in the cemetery. But now as certain things jumped up in the front part of my mind I ran my hand into my inside coat pocket and laughed.

“What’s the joke?” says Poppy gloomily.

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“Oh, I just thought of something.”

“I’ll tell the world,” the other sighed, “that *I* don’t feel like laughing. I feel pretty gosh-blamed blue. Things aren’t working out the way I thought they would. Not by a long shot.”

“It’s too bad,” says I, snickering to myself at my happy secret, “that young Donner owns the carriage factory. If it had been willed to *us* we would be all hunky-dory, hey?”

“I don’t see how you have the heart to laugh about it, Jerry. For it isn’t any laughing matter to me.”

“Did you tell Mr. Lorrying about the parrot and the hidden will?”

“Yes. But he doesn’t believe that old Mr. Donner made a new will.”

“No?”

“He just chuckled to himself, as though he had a secret, when I told him about the parrot’s queer talk. I couldn’t get him interested in our suspicions at all.”

“And did you tell him about smarty’s party?” I further inquired.

“No. I was going to tell him, but it slipped my mind.”

“Then he doesn’t know that old Mr. Donner’s spook is doing its stuff in the brick house?”

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That gave the other’s thoughts a new turn.

“By the way, Jerry,” says he, getting my eye, “did you go to the cemetery to-day?”

“Sure thing. And I saw the monument that was tipped over. It’s the Donner monument, all right. But I didn’t pick up any clues. Mr. Ump, the sexton, says that the tombstone was tipped over by some half-baked guy.”

There was a puzzled look on the other’s sober face.

“Jerry, I’m all turned around. I don’t know what to think

about the mystery now. I told you this morning that the tombstone probably had been tipped over by some one who was secretly searching for the hidden will. But if Mr. Loring is right—if there is no hidden will—if old Mr. Donner’s trip to the cemetery that stormy night was just a crazy stunt—it may be that the tipped-over tombstone is just a peculiar accident. Yet the thought hangs in my head that it *is* queer, after all, that the Donner tombstone should be the one to go over.”

My secret tickled me.

“Tra-la-la!” I giggled.

The other gave me a quick, searching look.

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“Jerry,” says he suspiciously, “you know something.”

“Tra-la-la!”

His eyes narrowed as he studied me.

“What have you been doing to-day while I was away?” he began, to corner me.

“Walking around.”

“Nothing special happened, hey?”

“Nope.”

“Then, what have you been doing to-night?”

“Cemetery-ing.”

He gave a start.

“What?”

“Kid,” says I, acting big, “any time you want a mystery solved, just call on me.”

“*Jerry!*” he cried, with the old happy ring to his voice. “Have you solved the mystery?”

“Nothing else but.”

I told him then how I had gone to the cemetery in the storm. And when I came to the spooky part he slid closer to me on the seat. The thought came to me then that I could have some fun with him. So I started in to string him along.

“The wind was blowing great guns,” says I. “It made the old manse rock like a Ford on a bumpy hill. Trying to stand up, I weaved back and forth like a drunken man. And all the time I could hear that weird *drumming* sound. It was right in the same room with me. I squinted around to find out what was making the sound. And what do you know if I didn’t see a ghost—a *real ghost*—sitting in one corner of the room jiggling a pair of drumsticks to beat the cars!”

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I had sprung the “ghost” stuff so quickly that Poppy was taken by surprise.

“What?” he squeaked, staring at me.

“It was old John Dooble’s ghost,” I went on, snickering to myself at the dizzy look on the listener’s face. “For a minute or two I was scared out of my wits. I wanted to turn and run. Then, remembering who I was, I got a grip on myself. I stiffened my shoulders—like this, see? And I swaggered across the room and gave the old ghost a swift kick in the seat of the pants. For I saw that the thing to do was to let him know right off the bat who was *boss*. Then he wouldn’t be tempted to pull any of his funny stuff on me. ‘Cut out the racket,’ I bellowed at him. He got up as huffy as you please. ‘What do you mean,’ says he, giving me a scowl, ‘by kicking me in the seat of the pants? Don’t you know that I’m a ghost? And how can I do my stuff, and scare the liver out of you in regular story-book style, if you’re going to act rough?’ I yanked his drum away from him then and rammed my foot through it. And when he started to show fight, I told him if he didn’t back up I’d use his nose for a corkscrew and yank his insides out. Well, that convinced him that I was hard-boiled. He saw he couldn’t monkey with *me*. But to further show him his place, and make him realize that no ordinary hunk of a ghost could fool with *me*, and get away with it, I yanked off one of his ears and chawed a hole in it. ‘Now,’ I fired at him, ‘tell me where that hidden will is, or I’ll chaw a hole in your other ear.’ ‘Oh! Oh!’ says he, beginning to beg for mercy. ‘Don’t make me tell.’ ‘Come on,’ I slammed at him, with a blood-and-thunder look. He started to tell me the secret then, but stopped short when another ghost meandered into the room, an old man with a cane and long whiskers, who was playing, ‘Yes, We Have No Bananas,’ on an accordion.”



“WHAT DO YOU MEAN BY KICKING ME IN THE SEAT OF THE PANTS?”

“Jerry,” Poppy cut in, sort of dry-like, “I don’t want you to suspect for one instant that I doubt the truth of this beautiful lie that you’re spilling to me, but will you please explain how a ghost with a cane could play an accordion?”

“It was a three-armed ghost,” says I glibly.

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“Oh! . . . And did you kick *him* in the seat of the pants, too?”

“Naw. But I gave his long whiskers a yank, just to let him know who was boss. Then I grabbed his accordion. That made him hot. And he whacked at me with his cane. Well, I wasn’t going to stand for any such insolence as *that*. Absolutely not! For wasn’t I a regular ghost killer? I guess yes. I hadn’t come into this old dump to be trifled with by no long-whiskered old ghost. So I grabbed his cane and rammed it down his throat, choking him to death. And all this time old John Dooble was standing behind me shivering. He was scared I’d kill him, too. For he saw plain enough that I was a hard guy. Then three more ghosts flocked into the room, attracted by the death groans of the guy with the long whiskers. But before they could make a pass at me I pulled the accordion to pieces and slammed a bunch of half notes into their faces. That made ’em stagger. And before they could steady themselves I grabbed ’em by the necks and pulled out their gizzards.”

“I bet that hurt,” purred Poppy.

“You should have heard ’em groan,” I ran on. “And while they were writhing in their death agonies, so to

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“speak, another ghost came in playing a pipe organ.”

“A pipe organ! I suppose he carried it with him!”

“Did I say a *pipe* organ? I meant a *mouth* organ.”

“And did you kill him, too?”

“Kid,” says I, swelling up, “I hate to brag on myself, for I’m naturally modest, but it’s a fact I tied him in a knot and pitched him through the roof so quickly that he never realized what had struck him.”

“Some quick worker, you are!”

“Look me over, sassafras. I’m the champion ghost killer of La Salle county. *Me?*—I came from Piety Hill, kid.”

“And what became of the mouth organ?”

I laughed.

“Would you like to see it?”

“Sure thing.”

“Well,” says I, “here it is,” and I pulled something out of my inside coat pocket and handed it to him.

CHAPTER XX

POPPY SPRINGS A SURPRISE

“It’s always been my policy never to put off till to-morrow what I can do to-day,” says the banker, as he hustled into the taxicab a few minutes later, after having instructed the chauffeur to drive to the residence of Mr. Lawrence H. Donner.

There was a light in the Donner home when we drew up at the front door. And presently we were on the porch, where the banker rang the bell.

A thin, waspish, cold-eyed man, Mr. Lawrence Donner arched his eyebrows in marked surprise when he saw who filled his doorway. Then he caught sight of Poppy and me in the background and scowled.

“This is a rather late hour for a business call,” laughed Mr. Lorrington, “but I trust that it won’t inconvenience you if we come in for a few minutes.”

“Not at all,” was the shoe man’s polite, yet cold, reply, as he stepped to one side and motioned for us to enter. Gee! I had a queer uneasy feeling as I passed him and heard the door close behind us. I half expected to get a biff on the head.

“Um . . .” says Mr. Lorrington, when we were seated in a circle around the big library table. “Is your son at home?”

“I’ll get him,” says the shoe man quietly, arising and going into the hall.

“Hello, Lawrence,” greeted the banker, when smarty slouched into the room a few moments later.

“Huh!” grunted the enemy, glaring at us. It galled him, I guess, to know that out of politeness to his father’s business associate he couldn’t kick us out. For that is what he wanted to do, all right.

“As you probably surmise,” the banker began, addressing the shoe man, “I called to see you to-night about the stilt business that was started up a few weeks ago in the old carriage factory. We all know that it was this Ott boy who thought up the idea. He came to me with his proposition, and it was largely through my friendly influence over your late brother that we got permission to use the carriage factory. As the heir to the Donner estate, that factory is now yours, which automatically gives you a heavy interest in the business. And that is all right, I think. But what strikes me as being decidedly wrong is the feeling that exists among these three boys that they can’t work together. The Ott boy has asked me to back him up in starting another factory. Frankly, I don’t want to do that. If we’re going to make Tutter a stilt manufacturing town, as I hope will be the case, let us do our manufacturing in a factory that we already have—or, to put it in other words, in *your* factory, Mr. Donner.”

The shoe man gave a cold nod to show that he was listening.

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“These boys, I think, are magnifying their trouble,” the banker went on. “I can see no reason why they can’t patch up their quarrel and work together. You people have the factory. The Ott boy has the design. By pooling your interests you can build up a sounder and better business than if you tried to run two separate competing businesses. . . . What do you think about it, Lawrence? Are you willing to meet the other boys half way?”

Thus addressed, the Donner kid scowled blackly at us.

“What?” he growled. “*Me* work with those dumb-bells? I guess not!”

There was a flash of anger in the banker’s gray eyes. But when he spoke there was no sign of anger in his controlled voice.

“Poppy and Jerry are good boys,” says he mildly.

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“Huh! I’d kick ’em out of here in a minute if *you* weren’t here. Ask Pa.”

“What seems to be the trouble between you boys, anyway?” came the quiet inquiry.

The shoe man cleared his throat.

“If I—ah—may be privileged to say a few words,” he spoke up.

“Certainly, Mr. Donner.”

“In your—ah—civic interest in the new stilt factory, you quite overlook the fact, Mr. Lorrington, that my son and I are *perfectly capable* of managing the business ourselves. We don’t need these other boys—in fact, if I may speak plainly, sir, we don’t want them, nor do we intend to be bothered with them. You speak of the Ott boy having a ‘design.’ We, too, have a quite satisfactory design. So we are going ahead. If money is required to promote the business, you—ah—know that we have ample capital behind us. What these other boys may do in the way of starting a rival factory is immaterial to us. Any such attempt on their part will result in failure. For, with our greater resources, we will outsell them every time. Furthermore, I have this to say about them,” and the smooth voice was icy cold now. “They have insulted my son upon every possible occasion. They have interfered with two of our shoe sales. And in the past week they even imprisoned my son in the factory. I could bring legal action against them if I were so disposed. However, I probably will not do that *if* they will agree to keep their young noses out of our affairs hereafter. In making myself plain to you, Mr. Lorrington, I trust that I have not given offense. I have had to speak plainly in order to show you how utterly impossible it is for my son and me to work with these boys. And why should we? We are under no obligations to them. And positively we will have nothing to do with them.”

“I am sorry, sir, that we can’t all come to a friendly understanding,” says the banker quietly. “For I still feel that the Ott boy has certain definite claims on you. You have the business that he started, and he has nothing. However, I

cannot prevail upon you to do what you plainly are determined not to do. From the town's viewpoint, and from the viewpoint of these boys, I feel that the situation is an unhappy one. . . . Well, we must be going, as it is getting late. Thank you, Mr. Donner, and you, too, Lawrence, for your courtesy in listening to our side of the case. And good evening to both of you."

Poppy got quickly to his feet.

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"May I speak a few words, Mr. Lorrying?" he inquired, looking into the banker's face.

"You!" sneered young Donner. And then he gave a contemptuous laugh as he slouched across the room.

"What is it, Poppy?" says Mr. Lorrying quietly, with a puzzled look. Knowing my chum's ways, he may have been uneasy in the thought that, if given permission to talk, the younger one might say too much!

"I would like to ask Mr. Donner a question or two."

"Um. . . . Is it about the stilt business?"

"Partly."

"Well. . . . If you think it is necessary."

Poppy faced the shoe man. And there was a change in my chum now.

"Did you know," he inquired in a steady, hard voice, "that

your brother intended leaving his housekeeper twenty thousand dollars?”

The shoe man gave a start. Then his thin face reddened.

“That is an impertinent question,” he cried angrily. “And furthermore it pertains to something that is none of your business.”

“And did you know,” Poppy went on, in the same steady, hard-voiced way, “that your brother intended leaving his big house to the town, together with enough money to change it over into a hospital?”

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“Insolence!”

“Oh, I’m insolent, am I?” and Poppy leaned across the table with flaming eyes. “I’m insolent, hey? And what are *you*? Do you want me to tell you what you are to your face? Well, sir, you’re a great big crook. That’s what *you* are.”

“Poppy!” cried Mr. Lorrington, aghast.

“Throw him out,” bellowed young Donner.

But the shoe man motioned for silence. And as I got a look at the merchant’s hard face and glittering, venomous eyes, all I could think of was a snake.

“You impertinent young scoundrel!” says he through his teeth, trembling with suppressed fury. “Do you realize what that insult is going to cost you? You’re going to find yourself in court, where you will answer to the law for every insulting

word you have just said, and for every insult and every injury that you have heaped upon my son.”

“Boo-o-o-o!” sneered Poppy. “Do you think you can scare me? Not for one minute. You just told me what *you* are going to do. Now, let me tell you what *I* am going to do. I’m going to kick you out of that carriage factory. For it isn’t your factory at all. Rob old Mrs. Fillingham, will you? Rob the town, will you? Rob a couple of boys, will you, and take their business away from them? Why, you old, wizened, thin-jawed, long-nosed thief, you’d ought to be put in the penitentiary and kept there for life.”

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“*Poppy!*” cried Mr. Lorrington again, getting up and taking my chum sharply by the arm. “Not another word! We’re going now.”

“He is a thief, Mr. Lorrington,” Poppy’s voice rang out. “He *knew* that his brother intended leaving the housekeeper twenty thousand dollars. But has he shown any intention of paying the woman her money? Not on your life! She asked him for it, and he insulted her. Oh, I know what happened! Nor does he intend to let the town have the brick house. That’s the kind of a citizen *he* is. As for us, he knows that we have a claim on the stilt business, though he denies it. And does he intend giving us a chance? Oh, yes—in a pig’s eye! He’s a money grabber. And whether he gets the money fairly or crookedly, it’s all the same to him—just so he gets it.”

“You—you—” choked the furious shoe man.

“Oh, glare at me, if you want to,” Poppy fired across the

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table. “And now let me tell you where *you* get off at.” A paper was flashed into sight. “Read that, Mr. Lorrington. It’s old Mr. Donner’s last will. Jerry found it in the cemetery to-night. It was hidden in a chimney hole in the old manse. Read what it says. The carriage factory is ours to use as long as we need it. And all the rest of the old man’s wealth, except twenty thousand dollars, goes to the town.”

Young Donner rushed across the room.

“Let me see that paper,” he bellowed.

But Poppy stepped in front of him.

“Back up, before I soak you.”

“Go for him!” I yipped, dancing. “Knock him cold.”

The shoe man’s face was as white as chalk.

“What is it, Lorrington?” he panted, and as he braced himself on the library table I saw that his arms trembled.

“The boy is right,” says the banker quietly. “This is indeed your brother’s last will.”

“Let me have it.”

“Oh, no,” smiled the banker dryly. “I can’t do that, Mr. Donner. I think I had better keep it until I can safely turn it over to the law.”

“You bet your sweet life we’re going to keep it,” put in

Poppy, sticking out his jaw at the shoe man.

The latter's voice arose to a scream. For in his defeat he went all to pieces.

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“I'll fight for my rights! I'll carry my case to the highest court in the land. This is a frame-up. It is a scheme to rob me of what is justly mine.”

“I don't think you'll have very good grounds for a lawsuit,” came dryly from the banker. “However, that is up to you. Do your worst. Good night, Mr. Donner.”

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CHAPTER XXI

THE SECRET OF THE BRICK HOUSE

When we were in the taxicab I told Mr. Lorrying the whole story of how I had found the hidden will in the old manse. A vibrating metal chimney stop, kept in motion by the wind as it whirled down the chimney, is what had caused the “drumming.”

“As soon as I saw what was making the noise,” says I, in the conclusion of my story, “I suspected that there was something hidden in the chimney. And you know what I found there!”

The banker shook his head and sighed.

“Poor Herm! His mind certainly was all topsy-turvy that night.”

“Jerry and I think,” Poppy spoke up, “that the old man taught the parrot to say ‘The will! The will!’ so that we would know that there was a hidden will.”

His thoughts thus directed to the parrot, the banker smiled.

“Did you boys know that I used to own the laughing parrot once upon a time?”

“No!” cried Poppy and I in the same breath.

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“That was more than fifteen years ago. And in those days the bird was just as queer acting as it is now. My wife got out of patience with it, for it would take stubborn spells and go for months without saying a word. She complained, too, that its jeering laughter got on her nerves. When Mrs. Donner heard that we were intending to get rid of the parrot she said that she would like to buy it, so we very cheerfully made her a present of it. As I remember, it became greatly attached to her. And when she passed away it quit talking again, probably in grief over her continued absence. *Why* it started talking to you boys I can’t say. But this ‘will’ talk is old stuff. I’ve heard it hundreds of times. In first getting the parrot, my wife and I were puzzled to understand what the bird meant by talking about a ‘will.’ Then we learned that it had been owned by a drummer in a show troupe, and had been used in a weird stage play. So you see, boys, there wasn’t half as much mystery in the bird’s talk as you imagined.”

“Now that you’ve told us that,” says Poppy, thoughtful-like, “I begin to get the drift of what happened in the cemetery that stormy night. Hearing the ‘drumming’ of the wind in the chimney, the old man instantly thought of the parrot’s similar ‘drumming.’ And in hiding his will in the chimney, he undoubtedly schemed to use the bird as the key to the will’s hiding place.”

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“And is it your belief that he did something to the parrot that started it to talking again?”

“You will remember, Jerry, that he took the bird into his room

that night, which was an unusual thing for him to do, Mrs. Fillingham said. And this special attention may be what brought the parrot out of its long silence.”

Here I lost myself in contented meditations. Everything was working out lovely for us. We had our factory back. And we could go ahead and start building our new stilts. Safe from interference from the Donners, it would be a cinch for us to make good on the Warman-Baldwin trial order. And then, of course, we would get bigger orders. That is what Mr. Killburn had promised Poppy. Nor was it impossible, I told myself, in big plans, that within a year we would be building ten thousand pairs of stilts a month for the big mail-order house instead of five thousand pairs!

A touch of Poppy’s hand brought me out of my day-dreams.

“Jerry.”

“Yes?”

“I found out to-day what’s wrong with our advertising. Mr. Killburn told me, from experience, that we never would be able to do a successful mail-order business among retail merchants. That had been tried by other specialty concerns, he said, and in practically every case the scheme had failed. For the average merchant sees dozens of traveling men every week. Naturally, in a situation like that, a lot of good propositions have to be turned down, for a merchant can’t buy everything brought to his attention. So what chance would a piece of advertising have of getting an order in competition with a live-wire salesman! What we should do in

our advertising distribution, I was told, is to fish for inquiries. Then we'll have to send out salesmen to follow up the inquiries and get the orders."

"Are you and I going to be salesmen?" I grinned.

"No, Jerry. There's more important work for us to do here."

"How many salesmen are you going to hire?"

"One, to start with. Then, as the business grows, we'll hire another, then a third."

"And are you going to be sales manager as well as president, general manager, advertising manager and chief inventor?"

He grinned.

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"You can have the job if you want it."

"No, thanks," says I. "You can do it better than I."

Mr. Lorry had been listening.

"Um . . ." he chuckled. "Aren't there any titled jobs left in your company for me?"

Poppy laughed.

"We'll let you be the official bouncer. And every time you 'bounce' young Donner, or his father, we'll raise your salary."

"It is my prediction," smiled the banker, "that you won't have

any more interference in that quarter—not after what you told them to-night!”

“Maybe I said too much,” says Poppy, in sober reflection.

“Well,” came dryly, “I did think for a moment or two that I’d have to sit on you to choke you off. But, luckily, everything turned out all right.”

“My only regret is,” says I, “that Poppy didn’t soak Donner in the snout.”

“Pshaw! You’ll never gain anything by fighting.”

Here Poppy startled us with a sudden cry.

“Look!” he pointed. “There’s a light in the upper part of the brick house!”

“Well,” grunted the banker, “what of that? Mrs. Fillingham probably.”

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My chum excitedly stopped the taxicab.

“I forgot to tell you, Mr. Lorry, that the house was closed up last night. Mrs. Fillingham isn’t there.” Then the banker was given a quick account of what had happened in the big house as a climax to smarty’s party. “And not only that,” Poppy ran on excitedly, “but last night the Donner tombstone was tipped over. A lot of superstitious people think that it’s the work of spirits. But I told Jerry this morning that it wasn’t spirits. I told him that some one was secretly at work hunting for the hidden will. And now we *know* that there’s secret work on

foot. For that light up there proves it.”

“Maybe it’s a fire,” says I, watching the house uneasily.

“It’s a hand lamp,” says Poppy. “I saw it pass a window.”

Mr. Lorry became excited now.

“Um. . . . Guess we better investigate this,” he grunted, starting briskly up the winding walk.

Well, I don’t mind telling you that I had a shaky feeling in my knees as we crawled through a kitchen window.

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The banker got hooked on a nail and ripped a big hole in the seat of his pants, but that wasn’t funny to me. I was too scared to laugh. What if we actually bumped into old Mr. Donner’s ghost? Br-r-r-r!

Getting into the kitchen at last, Mr. Lorry took the lead and we started single file up the carpeted stairs. Boy, was it ever dark! If anything had touched me, even a thing so small as a mosquito, I believe I would have jumped out of my skin.

Some one, or *something*, was moving around in the rooms directly overhead. *Pat! pat! pat!* At each peculiar footfall my heart gave a lively bound. Coming to the third floor, we saw a light moving toward us in the hall. And when we saw who was carrying the light!

“Herm!” the banker gasped. Then, with a cry I’ll never forget, the friend sprang forward. “Herm! *Oh, Herm!* They told me that you were dead. *Herm!*”

Well, this practically brings me to the end of my story. There isn't much more to write down. For I hardly need to tell you that another unfortunate victim of the railroad accident had been wrongly buried for the old manufacturer, or that this badly burned body was later taken up and properly sent away. The night of the wreck, as we heard the story later on, old Mr. Donner had restlessly gotten up and dressed. Passing into another coach, his only injury in the following fatal crash was a severe blow on the head. He must have wandered away from the wreck in a dazed condition, for the next day he "woke up" in a distant farmhouse. Not yet in full possession of his mind, he had returned to Tutter, arriving in town the night of the party. Getting secretly into the house, and learning what was going on there, his indignation can readily be imagined. It was he who slammed the doors in the upper part of the house. And it was he who threw the house into darkness by pulling a major electric switch in the attic.

It was the vague remembrance of having hidden certain valuable papers in the cemetery that took him back there that same night. The thought persisted in his disturbed mind that he had buried the papers under the family tombstone, which explains why the stone had been tipped over.

A long rest in a sanatorium did wonders for the broken-down old man. And to-day, if you were to talk with him about "spirits," he would laugh at you in his kindly, chuckling way. Somehow, since the railroad accident, all that nonsense has been crowded out of his mind, which is a mighty good thing, *I* think, for there is no doubt that he was going crazy over the silly religion. One minute he was all right and the next minute he was cuckoo. It was in his crazy spells that he

thought he saw his dead wife near him. The night he went to the cemetery with the parrot he thought the woman's spirit was guiding him. And that is why he had acted so queerly when he came down the stairs with the parrot, the latter crooning in the new attention being shown to it.

A week later we were hard at work on the Warman-Baldwin trial order, with every reason to believe that we would satisfactorily complete the thousand pairs of stilts in record-breaking time, which we did. And it was about this time, as I remember, that the business was reorganized into a stock company. The suggestion was made then that a man be placed in charge of the business. Mr. Lorrington felt that this was necessary, though, of course, in suggesting the change, he gave us full credit for starting the business. He pointed out that we had a good many years of schooling ahead of us. Then, too, the average run of stilt prospects would have more confidence in the new company, he said, if there was a man at the head of things.

“All right,” is what Poppy told the banker, when the plan was suggested to him. “I’ll give up my job to a man if you’ll let me pick the man.”

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“Um . . .” smiled our big friend. “Who would you suggest?”

“My dad,” says Poppy promptly.

So Mr. Ott is the factory head now. And, say, he isn't the same man! All spruced up and everything! And he's shrewd, let me tell you. One time I thought he was kind of dumb. But that was all on the outside, I guess. On the inside he seems to

be as smart as a whip. I can see where Poppy gets his smartness, all right.

And that goes to show you how a man who has been a failure all his life can succeed when he gets the right kind of a job. Another case of a square peg fitting into a hole of the right shape, I guess. As a detective Mr. Ott was a glorious fizzle. But as a factory manager, once he got used to the work, he was a whizz.

Of course, we don't know yet how the stilt business will turn out. As Mr. Lorrington says, a thing like that is always more or less of a gamble. Yet everything looks rosy for us now. And some day, when the business has grown, I truthfully believe that Poppy and his father are going to be rich. Maybe I'll be rich, too! For, as you know, I have a small share in the business.

And that is all for this time. But—sh-h-h-h!—here's a secret: Poppy and I have some hilarious plans under way. And usually what that kid does is worth telling about. So look for us soon in another POPPY OTT fun-mystery book, the third one of the series.

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THE END

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Would you like to know what became of the good friends you have made in this book?

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[The end of *Poppy Ott's Seven-League Stilts* by Edward Edson Lee]