

LITTLE HICKORY

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LITTLE HICKORY.

CHAPTER I.

THE BOOTBLACK AND THE DEACON.

"I vum! I eenamost feel as if I was lost, though there do seem to be plenty o' folks round."

"Black yer boots and make 'em shine; only cost ye half a dime!" cried a cheery voice at the speaker's elbow, and, looking down, the tall man was surprised to see a specimen of boyhood quite unknown to him. The features were regular enough, and would have been quite handsome had it not been for big patches of shoe blacking smeared over cheek and brow. Blue eyes peered out from the dark stains around them with a roguish twinkle, and there was a certain fearless independence in his looks and attitude which could not fail to show the most casual observer the fearlessness and self-reliance of his nature. It was his clothes, his general deportment, the air of cool contempt for everything and everybody around him which caused the stranger fresh from the country to stare upon the bootblack of the great city with speechless wonder.

"When yer eyes git done working and blinking, mister, p'raps ye will give yer tongue a chance," said the young knight of the blacking brush, beginning to remove from his shoulder the ever-handy kit of his trade. "Better hev yer brogans shined up, mister; they need it bad."

The reply of the man showed that something of greater moment to him at that time than his personal appearance was uppermost in his mind.

“Say, bub, can you tell me where there is a good tavern that a chap could stop at till to-morrer?”

“Sold ag’in, Ragged Rob!” cried one of half a dozen companions of his ilk, who had appeared upon the scene from all quarters. “When ye git through wi’ th’ ol’ hayseed, ye mought as well git out o’ bizness, for ye won’t hev blackin’ ’nough ter tip a gent’s boot. So long!” and the crowd beat a hasty retreat, to look for work in a more favorable direction.

“Get a move on you, old mossback, or the cops will haul you in for obstructing the sidewalks!” muttered a beetle-browed passer-by, who followed his words with a push which nearly threw the countryman off his feet.

“Geewhillikins, how the folks do crowd! Beats all natur’. What’s that you say, bub?”

“I say ye might find sich a stable as ye want by lookin’ in the right-hand corner. Luck to ye, ennyway,” and the bootblack was speedily lost in the crowd.

“Drat the leetle feller’s pictur! If I had my thumb and finger on him I’d pinch his throat for answering a civil question in that oncivil way.”

“What was that you said, friend?” asked a man, who had come hurrying toward him. “Why, can this be possible?” continued the newcomer, slapping him on the shoulder. “By Jove, but this is the pleasantest surprise of my life. Have you just come to New York, Mr. Reyburnbrook?”

By this time the man from the country was able to get a good view of the speaker, who was a tall, genteel, well-dressed person of middle life, and he said:

“Guess ye air mistook in your man this time, mister. I ain’t no sich name as Bumbrook at all. I’m just plain Elihu Cornhill, deacon o’ the church at Basinburg, where I wish I was this blessed minute. Things and folks air so tarnal thick round here one can’t draw a long breath, and——”

“Excuse me,” interrupted the other, “I can see my mistake now, Deacon Cornhill, and I offer a thousand apologies for troubling you. Do you know you look as like a friend of mine as a pea in the same pod? Good-day.”

“It’s funny queer!” exclaimed the bewildered Deacon Cornhill, “folks air in sich a pesky hurry they can’t stop to put one on his right track. I s’pose I must keep jogging, as if I was over in our lot looking for the cows.”

Meanwhile, the man who had left so abruptly after accosting him, sought another a short distance away, and who had evidently been waiting for him. Together the couple hastily examined a condensed New England directory, which the former produced from his pocket. After a short consultation they separated, one going at right angles to the street, followed by the unsuspecting countryman, while the other gave him pursuit.

Finding that the crowd of passers-by jostled him as he hastened on his way, Deacon Cornhill gathered his huge gripsack close under his right arm, pulled his hat down upon

his large head, and kept stubbornly on his way, regardless of the elbowing and pushing of others, saying under his breath:

“Puts me in mind o’ goin’ through Squire Danvers’ brush lot, but I reckon I can stand it if they can.”

He soon reached a corner where, if the pedestrians were less numerous, he was more than ever perplexed over the course for him to follow. On every hand the tumult of street traffic and the noise and confusion of city life bewildered him. As he stood there for a moment, looking anxiously about him, the sound of loud, angry voices arrested his attention, when he saw a small party of boys disputing and wrangling over some question. Then one of the group broke suddenly away from the others and fled, with two in furious pursuit.

Looking back over his shoulder as he ran, the youth did not seem to pay any heed to the course he took, and in spite of the deacon’s warning he struck him with such force that the startled man was hurled upon the sidewalk.

The boy fell on top of him, and the next moment the foremost of his pursuers cried:

“I’ve got ye, Slimmy! Say yer lied, or I’ll knock th’ teeth right out yer jaw!”

“Not for Joe!” retorted the fugitive, regaining his feet, but pulled down by the other.

“Won’t, won’t ye, ye sneak-eyed sinner! Oh, I’ll wallop——”

He had begun to pommel his victim unmercifully, while his companions urged him on with words of encouragement. This

was more than the kind-hearted Deacon Cornhill, who had regained his feet, could witness without interfering, and, dropping his gripsack on the sidewalk, in order to have his hands free, he went to the rescue of the smaller boy, exclaiming:

“Let him alone, you ragamuffin!” at the same time trying to catch the aggressive youngster by the collar. But the boy easily slipped from his grasp, and ran down the cross street, followed by his friends, the party giving utterance to peals of laughter.

Deacon Cornhill, in his great indignation, started to give them chase, but after going a few steps thought better of his foolishness, and turned back.

He was just in season to see the boy he had been defending dodging around the corner with his gripsack.

“Here, stop, you thief! Catch him, somebody, he’s makin’ off with my satchel,” giving pursuit as he uttered his frantic cries.

The swift-footed boy quickly disappeared around a street corner, and when the irate deacon reached the place he was nowhere to be seen. He had now left the main street, and but a few people were in sight, no one paying any heed to his distracted cries.

“Oh, shucks! What shall I do? All my spare clothes, my shirt and a big hunk o’ the church money. What will the folks say? What shall I do?”

Bewildered and disheartened, the strong man stood trembling from head to foot, while he wept like a child, as a stranger

stopped in front of him, saying in a free and easy manner, while he laid his hand on his shoulder:

“Hello, deacon! You are the last man I should have expected to meet, and here I find you in the heart of the big city. What can you be doing here? I don’t see that you have aged a bit since I saw you at your home in Basinburg four years ago. Four years, did I say? Bless me if it hasn’t been seven, or will be the coming summer. How is your good wife, and how are all the folks about town?”

Then, seeing the look of bland astonishment on the other’s florid countenance, he rattled on in a different strain:

“Is it possible you do not remember me, Deacon Cornhill? It would be perfectly natural if you didn’t, seeing I have changed considerable since we last met. Knocking about the world, my good deacon, does put age-lines on one’s face, let them differ who will. Let me refresh a memory which is seldom at fault. Remember Harry Sawyer, a nephew of your town clerk, John Sawyer, who has held the office so many years? Recall the scapegrace? I am glad to say he has improved with age. Recollect the race we had one afternoon running after the steers that tore down the fence and plundered a neighbor’s cornfield? I finally caught one of the ramping creatures, after the rest of you had cornered him. He ripped my coat from hem to collar, and I barely escaped being gored to death. That catches your memory? It does me good to grasp the horny hand of an honest man. Don’t be afraid of mine suffering; if it is soft, it is tough.”

CHAPTER II.

A BOY TO THE RESCUE.

While the voluble stranger, who had introduced himself as Harry Sawyer, kept up his innocent flow of language, Deacon Cornhill was speechless. He saw that the speaker was a well-dressed young man, and his professed friendship instantly won his confidence.

"I have been robbed!" he exclaimed. "I had my money in my satchel, and a parcel of boys came along and one o' 'em stole my money, my clothes, satchel and——"

"Stole your money?" fairly gasped the stranger, in genuine concern. "Tell me about it, quick—before it is too late to act."

In a somewhat disjointed way the other told how he had found the boys in the midst of a quarrel, and the part he had acted, to be robbed by the very one he had tried to succor.

"It was a sham fight—a dodge of those contemptible youngsters to throw you off your guard. And you were fool enough to let them get away with your money!" turning to leave the unfortunate man in apparent disgust.

"Don't leave me here alone, mister! They didn't get all my money, but my shirt, and——"

"Then you have some of your money left?" catching him by the arm with a grip which made the strong man wince. "How much did the rapscallions get?"

“Over thirty dollars.”

“How much have you left?”

“Ninety. But you are hurting my arm like time, mister, the way you hold on.”

“Excuse me, deacon; I was so excited over your loss that I forgot myself. But go on. You have ninety dollars left?”

“Jess that, as Mandy and I counted it jess afore I started. You see, I have come down here to buy our Sunday school library some new books, and I was to get some new things for Mandy, and she and me ’lowed it would be better to keep the money in separate places, though I was shallow enough to put in ten of the church money in my satchel. You see, my wallet was that crowded I couldn’t do much different. Now that has gone, with Mandy’s new things and my shirt and——”

“Let me tell you, deacon, you were lucky to have that much safe and snug in your wallet. Always carry your money in your pocket.”

“We must find the boys afore they can spend it.”

“As well to look for a needle in a haystack, deacon, as to look for a boy in New York. But come with me, and to-morrow I will see what can be done.”

“Do you think you can get my money and shirt, and——”

“Quite sure of it, deacon. I’ll put a couple of detectives on their tracks, who will run them to earth as a hound would a fox. I

don't like to mention such personal trifles, but it was providential for you that I came along as I did."

"I know it, I know it," replied the deacon, who was in better spirits now that he felt there was a prospect of getting back his money. "To think them boys should have played such a trick."

"Learned their trade young, deacon. But come with me to-night. Nothing can be gained by following, or rather trying to follow, those slippery young thieves. The police will know where to look for them."

Keeping up a continual flow of words, he who called himself Harry Sawyer led the way along street after street, each one as they advanced seeming to grow more narrow and crooked. Bewildered as he was, Deacon Cornhill finally became aware of this. There was an unfavorable aspect about everything he saw, and he began to feel there was something wrong.

"Hold on, mister, I have forgot your name, but are you sure you are on the right road? This looks pesky crooked, and——"

In the midst of his speech he saw another man come swiftly out of a dark alley on the left, and caught sight of an object coming swiftly toward him. Then the missile struck him on the side of the head, and he fell to the pavement with a low moan of pain.

"Well done, Bill," declared Sawyer. "Now, I will pull the old sheep's wool in a trice, after which we must run down the precocious youngsters who have cheated us of a goodly share of our goods."

The process of “pulling the old sheep’s wool” was evidently the stealing of the unconscious man’s pocketbook, for the speaker began to rifle him of whatever he carried of value. But he was interrupted in a most unexpected manner.

At the very moment his fingers closed on the well-filled wallet, an agile figure bounded out of the shadows of the alley, striking the stooping form of the robber with such force as to send him headlong into the gutter, the newcomer crying at the same time:

“The cop! The cop!”

This so startled the second ruffian that he turned and fled, while robber No. 1 scrambled to his feet just in season to see the boy who had given him such a blow seize the plethoric pocketbook and disappear around a corner.

“Stop thief!” cried the would-be robber. “Bill, where are you? Stop the youngster!”

The twain then gave furious pursuit.

While this chase was taking place, a passer-by was attracted by the prostrate figure of Deacon Cornhill, and thinking murder had been committed, he was about to give an alarm, when a voice at his elbow said:

“Don’t stir a noise, Jim.”

Looking abruptly around, the man was surprised to find the young bootblack beside him whom Deacon Cornhill had met at the outset of his troubles, and who was none other than the

boy who had snatched his pocketbook away from the thief. He had found little difficulty in eluding his pursuers.

“‘Twon’t do any good to get a mob here. I’ll look arter the old gent, if you’ll help me get him to Brattle’s.”

“This you, Little Hickory?”

“I reckon, Jim. Does the old gent show any signs of picking up the leettle sense he had?” and depositing his kit of tools, with the other’s gripsack, on the sidewalk, he looked closely into his face.

“‘Twas a hard clip the sandbagger give him! I could not have got here—— Hello! He’s starting his breathing machine. He’s soon going to be on his feet. So’ll the mob soon begin to corner here. Lend a hand, Jim, and we’ll see if he can stand alone.”

Curious spectators were beginning to gather near at hand, and the unfortunate man beginning to open his eyes, his friends raised him to an upright position, where, by their aid, he was able to remain.

“Mandy, where are you?” he asked, putting out his hands. “I vum, I b’lieve I’m lost!”

“Lean on me, old gent,” said the boy, “and you’ll soon be where you can ask as many questions as ye like. Just now, the least said the sooner forgot. I wouldn’t ’vise you to call all New York together. Ef I’d got sich a biff on my head in sich a silly way, I’d hold my tongue, if I had to tie a knot in it. Easy on his collar, Jim. Lean on me, old gent, as much as you wanten.”

“My money!” exclaimed the bewildered man, now recalling his loss with a vivid memory.

“Ef it’s in your wallet, it’s safe; fer I’ve got that and yer handbag safe and sound.”

Deacon Cornhill uttered a low thanksgiving, and assisted by the two he moved slowly down the street, until they came to a cheap lodging house, with the single word over the weather-beaten door: “Brattle.”

The entrance was about half its size below the sidewalk, and they descended the old steps, which trembled beneath the weight of Deacon Cornhill. At the foot Little Hickory opened a door in keeping with its rusty surroundings, and the three entered a dingy, low-walled apartment, with a desk at the farther end and a row of seats around the walls.

“You can go now, Jim,” said the young bootblack.

“That you, Rob?” asked a man behind the desk, leaving his high stool and coming out into the middle of the floor.

“I leave it with you, Brattle, to say. A body, as far as I know, is not expected to carry an introduce card pasted in his collar. I can take care of the old gent, thank you.”

“Been drinking, eh?” asked Brattle.

“Now you insult a good man, Brattle. He got a clip on the side of the head from some sandbaggers, that’s all. He’s coming ’round slick as a button. You can tip over on the seat, old gent, if you want,” when Deacon Cornhill sank upon the bench, saying:

“You said you had my money?”

“What I said you can bank on, as the big boodlers say, I reckon you don’t remember me, so I must introduce myself. I’m the chap who asked to black your boots a bit ago, and in return you asked me for a place to hang your hat for the night. Mebbe I didn’t answer you as I oughter, for your boots did need trimming and shining the wuss kind, and I set you down as a stingy old duffer from Wayback, who didn’t know what made a gempleman. Then, when you had gone, and I took ’count of stock and balanced up what a lamb you would be for the wolves, and seeing one of the critters follering you, I tuk your tracks, too. I got along in season to see the kids make off with your grip, when I took arter ’em tooth and nail. With some lively sprintin’, and a bit of scrimmage I fetched your old gripsack out’n Sodom, and then I pegged it on your track ag’in. I didn’t get along in season to save you that clip on the head, but I did get there in time to play the thief myself. I led them chaps a wild-goose chase, and here I am with the hull establishment connected, wired and running in tiptop shape!”

As the youth, who could not have been over seventeen, despite his daring feats, finished his rather lengthy explanation, he handed Deacon Cornhill his pocketbook and pushed his gripsack over by his side.

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