

# **The Story of Iron**

BY

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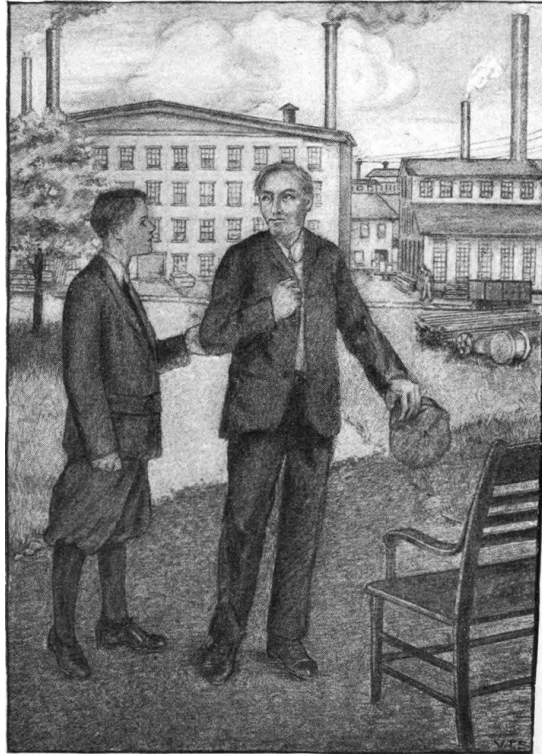
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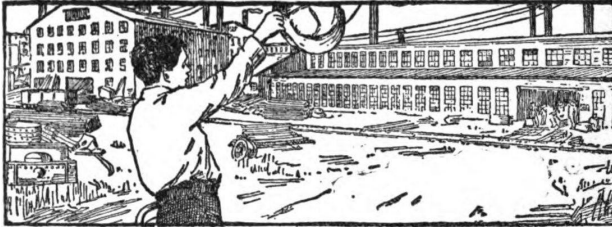
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**SEVEN MINUTES LEFT**

*To*  
*P. K. P.*

# THE STORY OF IRON



# **CHAPTER I**

## **BILLY BRADFORD**

WISHT," said Billy Bradford, standing, hands thrust deep in his trousers pockets, in the middle of the path, and looking across the broad river at the mountains beyond, "I wisht——"

"William Wallace, come here," called a voice from the door where the path ended. "It's time for you to start with your uncle's dinner."

Billy turned quickly, drew his hands out of his pockets, and in a moment was at the door.

Billy Bradford might stand still, looking away off at the mountains, and wish, but William Wallace was quite another boy. There had been a time when Billy hadn't felt that there were two of him. Then he had lived in the country. That was before the day that his father, hand on Billy's head, had smiled at him for the last time, saying, "Billy, my little man."

Then Uncle John had drawn him gently away, and Aunt Mary had kissed him, and they had brought him to the little house by the river.

That was two long years ago. Now, William Wallace had to carry dinners, six dinners a week, to the big foundry, a whole mile away. That was why there seemed to be two of him, one to do errands, and another to think.

“You must be very careful not to fall,” said Aunt Mary, as she gave him the bottle of soup, wrapped in two newspapers to keep it hot. Then she gave him the pail, saying, “Uncle John will work better all the afternoon because you are carrying him a hot dinner.”

“I shall be glad of that,” said Billy, looking up at her and smiling, as he always did, when he was doing anything for Uncle John.

Aunt Mary herself liked to do things for Uncle John, so she smiled back, at least she thought she did; but she didn’t know so much about smiles as Billy did. He had been used to the kind that go all over a face and end in wrinkles everywhere.

Billy’s smile lasted till Aunt Mary said, “Now hurry, William Wallace.”

That stopped his smile, but he settled the bundle a little more carefully under his arm and started on his way.

The day was warm, even for June. Part of the way there wasn’t any pavement, and, where there was, it was very rough; so, while he was walking along, Billy had plenty of time to think. He had a great many things to think about, too, for his birthday was coming the very next day, and then he would be thirteen years old.

The thing that was most on his mind was what he could do to earn some money. He was thinking especially about that, because, the night before, when they had supposed that he was asleep in the little corner room, he had heard Aunt Mary say that the money in the bank was getting very low. Then Uncle John had said, “Sh! sh! Billy may hear.”

June made Billy want to be out in the country. Things were so mixed up that he couldn't seem to straighten them out at all, but he trudged steadily on, because the William Wallace part of him always kept at things. Finally he gave up thinking and whistled hard, just to help his legs along.

At last he turned the corner, and there was the great mill with the square tower almost in the middle; and, at the right, the long, low building with the tall smoke-stack. That was the foundry where Uncle John worked.

Billy went through the wide gate just as the whistle blew; and, in a minute, he could see Uncle John come to the door. He didn't look as if he had been working all the morning in damp, black sand. The men in the foundry said that dirt never stuck to John Bradford. "Clean John Bradford," they called him. Clean and good he looked to Billy, as he stood there in his bright blue overalls and the gray cap that was almost the color of his hair.

"Hot soup, sir," said Billy, handing him the bundle.

"Sure to be hot, if you bring it," said Uncle John, his blue eyes smiling down at Billy. "Might burn a boy, if he fell and broke the bottle, eh, Billy, my lad?"

"Pail, sir," said Billy, his eyes growing bright, until he smiled so hard that he forgot all about his troubles.

Somehow Uncle John seemed to understand a great many things. Even if it was only the risk that a boy took in carrying a bottle of hot soup, it made Billy feel comfortable to have him understand.

“Now,” said Uncle John, “we’ll go out back of the mill, and have a good talk. Been doing anything this morning, Billy?”

Then Billy told him about the errands that he had done for Aunt Mary and about his hoeing the two rows of potatoes out by the fence.

“Well done, Billy,” said Uncle John. “Here’s a bench waiting for us. Had your own dinner?”

Billy nodded. Then he said, “Uncle John, do you like to work in the foundry?”

“As to that,” answered Uncle John, taking a sandwich from the pail, “I do. It’s hard work, and it doesn’t make a man rich; but there’s something about making things that keeps a man interested. It takes a pretty good eye and a steady hand to make the molds come out just right. They have to be right, you see; for, if they weren’t, things wouldn’t fit together. I like to think that I’m helping things in the world to go right.

“Just why are you asking me that? Can it be that you’re thinking of being a man, Billy?

“Something’s going to happen to-morrow,” he continued, looking very wise. “I’ve been thinking we’d better celebrate.”

“Celebrate!” exclaimed Billy.

“Yes,” said Uncle John, nodding his head emphatically. “Just as soon as I’ve finished this good dinner, we’ll go to the office to get permission for you to come to see me work, and to wait until we pour.”

“Honest?” said Billy, for he had wanted and wanted to see how iron could ever be poured out of a ladle. “Honest and true?”

“Honest and true,” said Uncle John, as he handed Billy one of the molasses cookies that Aunt Mary always put in the bottom of the pail.

“Ready,” said Uncle John, putting the cover on his pail.

Back they went to the foundry, then across the yard, and past lame Tom, the timekeeper, down the narrow corridor to the office where they found the young superintendent at his desk.

“Why, Bradford,” he said rising, and looking at Billy so hard that it made his cheeks feel hot, “why, Bradford, I didn’t know that you had a son.”

“I haven’t a son, sir,” said John Bradford. “This is my nephew, William Wallace Bradford.”

Billy’s cheeks cooled off very fast, and his heart seemed to move down in his side; for it was the very first time that Uncle John had ever called him by his whole name.

“You couldn’t deny that he belongs to you, even if you wanted to,” said the superintendent, “for his eyes are a real Bradford blue. Anything like you except his eyes?” he added quizzically.

“I’m glad that he belongs to me, Mr. Prescott,” answered John Bradford, putting his hand on Billy’s shoulder. “He’s a good boy, too. Can’t say just what I was, when I was thirteen.”

“There’s some difference between a boy and a man, I’ll admit,” said the superintendent; “but what I’m driving at is that I need

an office boy, this very minute, and I should like a Bradford boy. What do you say, Bradford?"

"Eh, Billy, my lad?" said Uncle John.

Even in the moment that they had been standing there, something in the tall, broad-shouldered man, who looked earnestly down at him, had touched Billy's hero-spring. As soon as he heard the question, he knew that he wanted to be Mr. Prescott's office boy. So, forgetting all about his birthday and everything else, he said, with his William Wallace promptness, "I'll begin right away, sir."

"Well then, William," said the superintendent, in his firm, business tone, "as my office boy, you must keep your eyes and your ears open, and your lips shut. Understand?"

Then, before Billy could answer, Mr. Prescott gave him a letter, saying, "Post that on the train."

Billy darted through the door, and the superintendent sat down at his desk.

"Thank you, sir," said John Bradford; and, just then, the whistle blew.

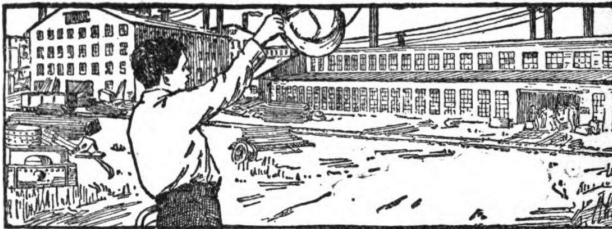
Billy did more errands that afternoon than he had ever done in a whole day; several times he had to put on extra whistle power to keep his legs going. But he was proud and happy that night when they told Aunt Mary the news. He saw the look of relief that came into her face; and, though that made him glad, it made him a little sorry, too.

After supper he went out in the path to look once more at the mountains growing dim and blue in the summer twilight. He knew, now, what he had not known in the morning; and that was, how he was going to help to take care of himself.

He stood there until his aunt called, "William Wallace, it's time to come in."

Then his wish of the morning—the wish of his heart asserted itself once more; and, as he turned to go into the house, he said, half in a whisper:

"I wisht she'd call me Billy."



## CHAPTER II

### OLD IRON

AYS don't always come out as we expect they will," said Uncle John, as he and Billy started out together the next morning. "But it's your birthday, just the same. Shut your eyes and hold out your hand."

"Ready."

Billy, opening his eyes, saw his uncle holding a jack-knife, which dangled from a chain.

"Just what I wanted," exclaimed Billy, taking the knife.

"Thought it would be handy for an office boy," said Uncle John, beaming with satisfaction.

"I'm going," said he, as Billy put his dinner pail down on the sidewalk and opened both blades, "to give you something else, something to carry around in your head, instead of in your pocket. It's an office boy motto: Whatever you do, do it right, just as right as you can."

"That isn't any new news," said Billy, looking rather disappointed; "you told me that a long time ago."

"Come to think of it, I did," said Uncle John. "It's good for any boy, any time; but it's specially good for an office boy. I should like to talk it over, but we shall have to hurry now."

Together they went through the gate, and stood in line, while lame Tom, the timekeeper, made marks against their names. Then Uncle John said cheerily, "Meet me behind the mill when the noon whistle blows."

"Sure, sir," said Billy.

Billy went on, through the great door, down the narrow corridor, and had a "good-morning" all ready to say when he opened the office door. Of course he didn't find anybody there. The office didn't seem to be in very good order; but nobody had told him what he was expected to do.

So he looked around for a moment. Then he put his pail on a stool in the corner, and picked up a pencil that lay on the floor under Mr. Prescott's desk. The point was broken. That made him think of his knife. Then he looked for a waste-basket, for Aunt Mary was very particular about not having shavings and lead on the floor. On the top of the waste-basket he found a duster. Billy knew a duster when he saw it, for dusting was one of the things that Aunt Mary had taught him to do.

When the pencil was done—it was very well done, for he used both blades of his knife to do it—he put it on top of Mr. Prescott's desk, and began to dust in good earnest.

When the postman came in, he looked a little surprised, but all he said was:

"New boy, are you?"

"Yes, sir," answered Billy.

Then he put the letters in one pile and the papers in another, and was putting a finishing touch with his duster on the rungs of Mr. Prescott's chair when he came in.

Billy was so busy that he didn't hear him till he said, "Good-morning, William."

"Good-morning, sir. Where shall I empty the waste-basket?"

"Really," said Mr. Prescott, "unexpected pleasure, I am sure—barrel outside."

Billy had hoped that Mr. Prescott would notice how well he had sharpened the pencil; but he put it into his pocket without saying a word.

Perhaps he did see more than he seemed to, for, when the expressman came in with a package, Mr. Prescott said, "William, cut the string."

When Billy took out his knife, Mr. Prescott glanced up from his papers, saying, "Unexpected pleasure, really."

Billy was beginning to feel that being an office boy wasn't a bit social, when Mr. Prescott said:

"William, why is a jack-knife called a jack-knife?"

"I don't know, sir."

"Frenchman named Jacques first made them," said Mr. Prescott.

Billy wanted very much to tell him where his knife came from; but he didn't feel sure that office boys were supposed to have birthdays.

Then the stenographer came; and, before Billy knew it, it was noon, and he went to meet Uncle John behind the mill.

"Birthday coming on pretty well, Billy?" asked Uncle John, as they both opened their pails.

"Sure," answered Billy, who was so hungry that he couldn't stop to talk.

"Sorry we couldn't celebrate," said Uncle John. "Mustn't give up the idea though, Billy. As you go around on errands, you'll see a good many things. Some day we'll piece them together. Watch for a chance and it'll come some day."

Billy, fast nearing the bottom of his pail, paused a moment to say, "Uncle John, were you ever an office boy?"

"Not just that," answered Uncle John.

"There's a lot to it," said Billy.

"I suppose there is," said Uncle John, gravely. "There is to almost anything, if you do it right."

After that, Billy's days went on, one very like another. It seemed to him that there was no end to the things he had to learn. He had very little time to spend in wishing, though every night he went out for a good look at the mountains. But he was beginning to think about the kind of man that he would like to be; and every day he was a little more sure that he wanted to be like the young superintendent.

He was so short himself that he was afraid that he would never be as tall as Mr. Prescott. So he began to stand as tall as he

could, especially when he was in the office. Then he tried to remember to breathe deep, the way that the teacher at school had told the boys to do. But he wondered, sometimes, when he looked at Mr. Prescott's broad shoulders, whether he had ever been as small as most boys.

The day that Billy had his first little brown envelope with three dollars and fifty cents in it, he stood very tall indeed. That night, at supper, he handed it to Aunt Mary, saying:

"That's for you to put in the bank."

"For Billy," said Uncle John, looking up quickly and speaking almost sternly. "I'm the one to give Aunt Mary money."

Then he said gently: "It's a good plan, Billy, to put your first money in the bank. You'll never have any more just like that."

The thing that first excited Billy's curiosity, as he went about on errands, was the big pile of old iron in the mill yard. There were pieces of old stoves, and seats from schoolhouses that had been burned, and engines that had been smashed in wrecks, and old ploughs, and nobody knew what else—all piled up in a great heap.

One day, when he carried an order to the man that tended the furnace in the cupola where they melted the iron, he saw them putting pieces of old iron on the scales; and he heard the man say to his helper: "We shall have to put in fifty pounds extra to-day."

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