The Jack-Knife Man

by Ellis Parker Butler

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*** START OF THE PROJECT GUTENBERG EBOOK THE JACK-KNIFE MAN ***

THE JACK-KNIFE MAN

By Ellis Parker Butler

Author Of “Pigs Is Pigs,” “The Confessions Of A Daddy,” Etc.

Illustrated By Hanson Booth

New York The Century Co. 1913

frontispiece

MY FATHER Whose heart has held many children.

Transcriber's Note: Chapter VI is succeeded by Chapter VIII without a designated intervening Chapter VII. DW

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I. THE JACK-KNIFE MAN

PETER LANE GEORGE RAPP, the red-faced livery-man from town, stood with his hands in the pockets of his huge bear-skin coat, his round face glowing, looking down at Peter Lane, with amusement wrinkling the corners of his eyes.

“Tell you what I'll do, Peter,” he said, “I'll give you thirty-five dollars for the boat.”

“I guess I won't sell, George,” said Peter. “I don't seem to care to.”

He was sitting on the edge of his bunk, in the shanty-boat he had spent the summer in building. He was a thin, wiry little man, with yellowish hair that fell naturally into ringlets: but which was rather thin on top of his head. His face was brown and weather-seamed. It was difficult to guess just how old Peter Lane might be. When his eyes were closed he looked rather old-quite like a thin, tired old man-but when his eyes were open he looked quite young, for his eyes were large and innocent, like the eyes of a baby, and their light blue suggested hopefulness and imagination of the boyish, aircastle-building sort.

The shanty-boat was small, only some twenty feet in length, with a short deck at either end. The shanty part was no more than fifteen feet long and eight feet wide, built of thin boards and roofed with tar paper. Inside were the bunk—of clean white pine—a home-made pine table, a small sheet-iron cook-stove, two wooden pegs for Peter's shotgun, a shelf for his alarm-clock, a breadbox, some driftwood for the stove, and a wall lamp with a silvered glass reflector. In one corner was a tangle of nets and trot-lines. It was not much of a boat, but the flat-bottomed hull was built of

good two-inch planks, well caulked and tarred. Tar was the prevailing odor. Peter bent over his table, on which the wheels and springs of an alarm-clock were laid in careful rows.

“Did you ever stop to think, George, what a mighty fine companion a clock like this is for a man like I am?” he asked. “Yes, sir, a tin clock like this is a grand thing for a man like me. I can take this clock to pieces, George, and mend her, and put her together again, and when she's mended all up she needs mending more than she ever did. A clock like this is always something to look forward to.”

“I might give as much as forty dollars for the boat,” said George Rapp temptingly.

“No, thank you, George,” said Peter. “And it ain't only when you 're mending her that a clock like this is interesting. She's interesting all the time, like a baby. She don't do a thing you'd expect, all day long. I can mend her right up, and wind her and set her right in the morning, and set the alarm to go off at four o'clock in the afternoon, and at four o'clock what do you think she'll be doing? Like as not she'll be pointing at half-past eleven. Yes, sir! And the alarm won't go off until half-past two at night, maybe. Why I mended this clock once and left two wheels out of her—”

“Tell you what I'll do, Peter,” said Rapp, “I'll give fifty dollars for the boat, and five dollars for floating her down to my new place down the river.”

“I'm much obliged, but I guess I won't sell,” said Peter nervously. “You better take off your coat, George, unless you want to hurry away. That stove is heating up. She's a wonderful stove, that stove is. You wouldn't think, to look at her right now, that she could go out in a minute, would you? But she can. Why, when she wants to, that stove can start in and get red hot all over, stove-pipe and legs and all, until it's so hot in here the tar melts off them nets yonder—drips off 'em like rain off the bob-wires. You'd think she'd suffocate me out of here, but she don't. No, sir. The very next minute she'll be as cold as ice. For a man alone as much as I am that's a great stove, George.”

“Will you sell me the boat, or won't you?” asked Rapp.

“Now, I wish you wouldn't ask me to sell her, George,” said Peter regretfully, for it hurt him to refuse his friend. “To tell you the honest truth, George, I can't sell her because it would upset my plans. I've got my plans all laid out to float down river next spring, soon as the ice goes out, and when I get to New Orleans I'm going to load this boat on to a ship, and I'm going to take her to the Amazon River, and trap chinchillas. I read how there's a big market for chinchilla skins right now. I'm goin' up the Amazon River and then I'm goin' to haul the boat across to the Orinoco River and float down the Orinoco, and then—”

“You told me last week you were going down to Florida next spring and shoot alligators from this boat,” said Rapp.

Peter looked up blankly, but in a moment his cheerfulness returned.

“If I didn't forget all about that!” he began. “Well, sir, I'm glad I did! That would have been a sad mistake. It looks to me like alligator skin was going out of fashion. I'd be foolish to take this boat all the way to Florida and then find out there was no market for alligator skins, wouldn't I?”

“You would,” said Rapp. “And you might get down there in South America and find there was no market for chinchillas. It looks to me as if the style was veering off from chinchillas already. You'd better sell me the boat, Peter.”

“You know I'd sell to you if I would to anybody, George,” said Peter, pushing aside the works of the clock, “but this boat is a sort of home to me, George. It's the only home I 've got, since Jane don't want me 'round no more. You're the best friend I've got, and you've done a lot for me—you let me sleep in your stable whenever I want to, and you give me odd jobs, and clothes—and I appreciate it, George, but a man don't like to get rid of his home, if he can help it. I haven't had a home I could call my own since I was fourteen years old, as you might say, and I'm going on fifty years old now. Ever since Jane got tired havin' me 'round I've been livin' in your

barn, and in old shacks, and anywheres, and now, when I've got a boat that's a home for me, and I can go traveling in her whenever I want to go, you want me to sell her. No, I don't want to sell her, George. I think maybe I'll start her down river to-morrow, so as to be able to start up the Missouri when the ice goes out—”

“I thought you said Amazon a minute ago,” said Rapp.

“Well, now, I don't know,” said Peter soberly. “The fevers they catch down there wouldn't do my health a bit of good. Rocky Mountain air is just what I need. It is grand air. If I can get seventy or eighty dollars together, and a good rifle or two, I may start next spring. I always wanted to have a try at bear shootin'. I've got sev'ral plans.”

“And somehow,” said Rapp, who knew Peter could no more raise seventy dollars than freeze the sun, “somehow you always land right back in Widow Potter's cove for the winter, don't you? She'll get you yet, Peter. And then you won't need this boat. All you got to do is to ask her.”

Peter pushed the table away and stood up, a look of trouble in his blue eyes.

“I wish you wouldn't talk like that, George,” he said seriously. “It ain't fair to the widow to connect up my name and hers that way. She wouldn't like it if she got to hear it. You know right well she don't think no more of me than she does of any other river-rat or shanty-boatman that hangs around this cove all summer, and yet you keep saying, 'Widow, widow, widow!' to me all the time. I wish you wouldn't, George.” He opened the door of his shanty-boat and looked out. The cove in which the boat was tied was on the Iowa side of the Mississippi, and during the summer it had been crowded with a small colony of worthless shanty-boatmen and their ill-kempt wives and children, direly poor and afflicted with all the ills that dirt is heir to. Here, each summer, they gathered, coming from up-river in their shanty-boats and floating on downriver just ahead of the cold weather in the fall. All summer their shanty-boats, left high and dry by the receding high water of the June flood,

stood on the parched mud, and Peter looked askance on all of them, dirty and lazy as they were, but somehow—he could not have told you why—he made friends with them each summer, lending them dimes that were never repaid, helping them set their trot-lines that the women might have food, and even aiding in the caulking of their boats when his own was crying to be built.

All summer and autumn Peter had been building his shanty-boat, rowing loads of lumber in his heavy skiff from the town to the spot he had chosen on the Illinois shore, five miles above the town. He had worked on the boat, as he did everything for himself, irregularly and at odd moments, and the boat had been completed but a few days before George Rapp drove up from town, hoping to buy it. Peter believed he loved solitude and usually chose a summer dwelling-place far above town, but if he had gone to the uttermost solitudes of Alaska he would have found some way of mingling with his fellow-men and of doing a good turn to some one.

He never dreamed he was associating with the worthless shanty-boatmen, yet, somehow, he spent a good part of his time with them. They were there, they were willing to accept aid of any and all kinds, and on his occasional trips to town Peter passed them. This was enough to draw him into the entanglement of their woes, and to waste thankless days on them. Yet he never thought of making one of their colony. He would row the two miles to reach them, but he rowed back again each evening. It was because he was better at heart, and not because he thought he was better, that he remained aloof to this extent. In his own estimation he ranked himself even lower than the shanty-boatmen, for they at least had the social merit of having families, while he had none. His sister Jane had told him many times just how worthless he was, and he believed it. He was nothing to anybody—he felt—and that is what a tramp is.

Once each week or so Peter rowed to town to sell the product of his jack-knife and such fish as he caught. He was not an enthusiastic fisherman, but his jack-knife,

always keen and sharp, was a magic tool in his hand. When he was not making shapely boats for the shanty-boat kids, or whittling for the mere pleasure of whittling, his jack-knife shaped wooden kitchen spoons and other small household articles, or net-makers' shuttles, out of clean maplewood, and these, when he went to town, he peddled from door to door. What he could not sell he traded for coffee or bacon at the grocery stores.

With the coming of cool weather and the “fall rise” of the river the shanty-boat colony left the cove, to float down-river ahead of the frost, and Peter hurried the completion of his boat that he might float it across to the cove. Rheumatism often gave him a twinge in winter and when the river was “closed” the walk to town across the ice was cold and long. The Iowa side was more thickly populated, too, for the Iowa “bottom” was narrow, the hills coming quite to the river in places, while on the Illinois side five or six miles of untillable “bottom” stretched between the river and the prosperous hill farms. The Iowa side offered opportunities for corn-husking and wood-sawing and other odd jobs such as necessity sometimes drove Peter to seek. These opportunities were the reasons Peter gave himself, but the truth was that Peter loved people. If he was a tramp he was a sedentary tramp, and if he was a hermit he was a socialistic hermit. He liked his solitudes well peopled.

This early November day Peter had brought his shanty-boat across the river to the cove. A fair up-river breeze and his rag of a sail had helped him fight the stiff current, but it had been a hard, all-day pull at the oars of his skiff, and when he had towed the boat into the cove and had made her fast by looping his line under the railway track that skirted the bank, he was wet and weary. His tin breadbox was empty and he had but a handful of coffee left, but he was too tired to go to town, and he had nothing to trade if he went, and he knew by experience that an appeal to a farmer—even to Widow Potter—meant wood-sawing, and he was too tired to saw wood. But he was accustomed to going without a meal now and then, and there being nothing else to do, he tightened his belt, made a good fire, took off his shoes,

and dissected his alarm-clock. He was reassembling it when George Rapp arrived.

George Rapp was a bluff, hearty, loud-voiced, duck-hunting liveryman. He ran his livery-stable for a living and, like many other men in the Mississippi valley, he lived for duck-hunting. He owned the four best duck dogs in the county. He had traded a good horse for one of them. Although George Rapp would not have believed it, it was a blessing that he could not hunt ducks the year around. The summer and winter months gave him time to make money, and he was making all he needed. Some of his surplus he had just paid for a tract of low, wooded bottom-land, in the section where ducks were most plentiful in their seasons. The land was swamp, for the most part, and all so low that the river spread over it at every spring “rise” and often in the autumn. It was cut by a slough (or bayou, as they are called farther south) and held a rice lake which was no more than a widening of the slough. This piece of property, far below the town, Rapp had bought because it was a wild-duck haunt, and for no other reason, and after looking it over he wisely decided that a shanty-boat moored in the slough would be a better hunting cabin than one built on the shore, where it would be flooded once, or perhaps twice a year, the river leaving a deposit of rich yellow mud and general dampness each time. But Peter would not sell his boat, and Peter's boat, new, clean and sturdy of hull, was the boat Rapp wanted.

“I wish you wouldn't talk that way about the widow, George,” said Peter, looking out of the open door. The liveryman's team was tied to a fence at the foot of the hills, and between the road and the railway tracks that edged the river a wide corn-field extended. A cold drizzle half hid the hillside where Widow Potter's low, white farmhouse, with its green shutters, stood in the midst of a decaying apple orchard. “I wisht the widow lived farther off. There ain't no place like this cove to winter a boat, and when I'm here I've got to saw wood for her, and shuck corn, and do odd jobs for her, and then she lights into me. I don't say I'm any better than a tramp, George, but the way the widow jaws at me, and the things she calls me, ain't right. She thinks I'm scum—just common, low-down, worthless scum! So that's all there is to that.”

“Oh, shucks!” said George Rapp.

But Peter believed it. For five years the Widow Potter had kept a jealous eye on Peter Lane. Tall and thin, penny-saving and hard-working, she had been led a hard life by the late Mr. Potter, who had been something rather worse than a brute, and since death had removed Mr. Potter the widow had given Peter Lane the full benefit of her experienced tongue whenever opportunity offered. It was her way of showing Peter unusual attention, but Peter never suspected that when she glared at him and told him he was a worthless, good-for-nothing loafer and a lazy, paltering, river-rat, and a no-account, idling vagabond she was showing him a flattering partiality. He knew she could make him squirm. It was Love-in-Chapped-Hands, but Mrs. Potter herself did not know she scolded Peter because she liked him. She counted him as a poor stick, of little account to himself or to any one else, but what her mind could not, her heart did recognize—that Peter was Romance. He was a whiff of something that had never come into her life before; he was a gentleman, a chivalrous gentleman, a gentleman down at the heel, but a true gentleman for all that.

“The way me and her hates each other, George, is like cats and dogs,” said Peter. “I don't go near her unless I have to, and when I do she claws me all up.”

“All right,” said Rapp, laughing, “but you could do a lot worse than tie up to a good house and cook-stove. If you make up your mind to go housekeeping and to sell the boat, let me know. I'll get along home. It is going to be a dog of a night.”

“I won't change my mind about the boat, George,” said Peter. “Good night.”

He closed the door and bolted it.

“George means all right,” he said, settling himself to his task of reassembling his clock, “but he's sort of coarse.”

The storm, increasing with the coming of night, darkened the interior of the cabin, and Peter lighted his lamp. As he worked over the clock the drizzle turned into a heavy rain through which damp snowflakes fluttered, and the wind strengthened and

turned colder, slapping the rain and snow against the small, four-paned window and freezing it there. It was blowing up colder every minute and Peter put his handful of coffee in his coffee-pot and set it on the stove to boil while he completed his clock job. He tested the clock and found that if he set the alarm for six o'clock it burst into song at seventeen minutes after three. A thin smile twisted the corners of his mouth humorously.

“You skeesicks! You old skeesicks!” he said affectionately. “Ain't you a caution!” He set the clock on its shelf where it ticked loudly while he drew his table closer to the bunk, his only seat, and put his coffeepot and tin cup on the table.

“Well, now,” he said cheerfully, “as long as there ain't anything to eat I might as well whet up my jack-knife.”

He whetted the large blade of his knife while he sipped the coffee. From time to time he put down the tin cup and tried the blade of the knife on his thumb, and when he was satisfied it was so sharp any further whetting meant a wire edge, he took a crumpled newspaper from under the pillow of his bunk and read again the article on the increased demand for chinchilla fur, but it had lost interest. The wind was slapping against the side of the boat in gusts and the frost was gathering on his windows, but Peter replenished his fire and lighted the cheap cigar George Rapp had left on the clock shelf.

What does a hermit do when he is shut in for a long night with a winter storm raging outside? Peter put his newspaper back under the pillow and hunted through his driftwood for a piece that would do to whittle, but had to give that up as a bad job. Then his eyes alighted on the wooden pegs on which his shot-gun lay, and he took down the gun and pulled one of the pegs from its hole. He looked out of the door, to see that his line was holding securely, and slammed the door quickly, for the night was worse, the rain freezing as it fell and the wind howling through the telegraph wires. With a sigh of satisfaction that he was alone, and that he had a snug

shanty-boat in which to spend the winter, Peter propped himself up in his bunk and began carving the head of an owl on the end of the gun peg, screwing his face to one side to keep the cigar smoke out of his eyes. He was holding the half-completed carving at a distance, to judge of its effect, when he heard a blow on his door. He hesitated, like a timid animal, and then slipped from the bunk and let his hand glide to the shot-gun lying on his table. Quietly he swung the gun around until the muzzle pointed full at the door, and with the other hand he grasped his heavy stove poker, for he knew that tramps, on such a night, are not dainty in seeking shelter, and he had no wish to be thrown out of his boat and have the boat floated away from him.

“Who's out there?” he shouted, but before he could step forward and bolt the door, the latch lifted and the door, forced violently inward by a gust of wind, clattered against the cabin wall. A woman, one hand extended, stood in the doorway. Her face was deathly white, and her left hand held the hand of a three-year-old boy. This much Peter saw before the flame of his lamp flared high in a smoky red and went out, leaving utter darkness.

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II. PETER'S GUESTS

COME right in, ma'am,” said Peter.

“Step inside and close the door. Nobody here's going to hurt you. I'll put my shoes on in a minute—”

He was feeling for the matches on his clock shelf, but he hardly knew what he was doing or saying. The ghastly white face of the woman was still blazed on his mind.

“Excuse me for being bare foot; I wasn't looking for callers,” he continued nervously, but he was interrupted by the sound of a falling body and a cry. He pushed one of the stove lids aside, letting a glare of red light into the room. The woman had fallen across his doorsill and lay, half in and half out of the boat, with

the boy crying as he clung to her relaxed fingers.

“Don't, Mama! don't!” the small boy wailed, not understanding.

Peter stood, irresolute. He was a coward before women; they drove his wits away, and his first wild thought was of flight—of leaping over the fallen body—but, as he stood, the alarm-clock, after a preliminary warning cluck, burst into a loud jangling clatter and the boy, sore frightened, howled with all his strength. That decided for Peter.

“There, now, don't you cry, son!” he begged, on his knees beside the boy in an instant. “Don't you mind the racket. It ain't nothing but my old funny alarm-clock. She goes off that way sometimes, but she don't mean any harm to anybody. No, sir! Don't you cry.”

The boy wailed, more wildly than ever, calling on his mother to get up.

“Don't cry, your ma will be all right!” urged Peter. “That clock will stop right soon, and she won't begin again—not unless she takes a notion.”

The clock stopped ringing abruptly, the boy stared at it open-mouthed.

“That's a big boy!” said Peter approvingly. “And don't you worry about your ma. I guess she'll be all right in a minute. You go over by that stove and warm yourself, and I'll help your ma in, so this rain won't blow on her.”

Peter led the boy to the stove, and lighted his lamp. He put the peg back in the wall, and placed the gun behind the boy's reach before he turned to the woman.

She was neither young nor old, but as she lay on the floor she was ghastly white, even in the glare from the smoking oil lamp, and her lips were blue. Her cheap hat was wet and weighted down with sleet, and the green dye from the trimmings had run down and streaked her face. She was fairly well clad, but not against the winter rain, and her shoes were too light and too high of heel for tramping a railway track. Peter saw she was wet to the skin. He bent down and with his knee against her

shoulder moved her inside the door and closed it.

“That's hot in there,” said the boy, who had been staring into the glowing coals of the opened stove. “I better not put my hand in there. I'll burn my hand if I put it in there, won't I?”

“Yes, indeedy,” said Peter, “but now I got to fix your ma so's she will be more comfortable.”

“I wish I had some liquor or something,” he said, looking at the woman helplessly. “Brandy or whisky would be right handy, and I ain't got a drop. This ain't no case for cold water; she's had too much cold water already. I wonder what coffee would do?”

He put his coffee-pot down among the coals of his fire and while he waited for it to heat, he drew on his shoes.

“I guess your ma will feel sort of sick when she wakes up,” he told the boy, “and I guess she'd be right glad if we took off them wet shoes and stockings of yours and got your feet nice and warm. You want to be ready to help look after your ma. You ain't going to be afraid to let me, are you?”

“No,” said the boy promptly, and held out his arms for Peter to take him. He was a solid little fellow, as Peter found when he picked him up, and his hair was a tangled halo of long, white kinks that burst out when Peter pulled off the red stocking-cap into which they had been compressed. From the first moment the boy snuggled to Peter, settling himself contentedly in Peter's arms as affectionate children do. He had a comical little up-tilt to his nose, and eyes of a deeper blue than Peter's, and his face was white but covered with freckles.

“That's my good foot,” said the boy, as Peter pulled off one stocking.

“Well, it looks like a mighty good one to me, too,” said Peter. “So far as I can see, it is just as good as anybody'd want.”

“Yes. It's my hop-on-foot,” explained the boy. “The other foot is the lame one. It

ain't such a good foot. It's Mama's honey-foot."

"Pshaw, now!" said Peter gently. "Well, I'll be real careful and not hurt it a bit." He began removing the shoe and stocking from the lame foot with delicate care, and the boy laughed delightedly.

"Ho! You don't have to be careful with it," he laughed, giving a little kick. "You thought it was a sore foot, didn't you? It ain't sore, it's only lame."

Peter put the barefoot boy on the edge of the bunk and hung the wet stockings over his woodpile. The boy asked for the jack-knife again, and Peter handed it to him.

"You just set there," he told the boy, "and wiggle your toes at the stove, like they was ten little kittens, and I'll see if your ma wants a drink of nice, hot coffee."

He poured the coffee into his tin cup and went to the woman, raised her head, and held the hot coffee to her lips. At the first touch of the hot liquid she opened her eyes and laughed; a harsh, mirthless laugh, which made her strangle on the coffee, but when her eyes met Peter's eyes, the oath that was on her lips died unspoken. No woman, and but few men, could look into Peter's eyes and curse, and her eyes were not those of a drunkard, as Peter had supposed they would be.

"That's all right," she said. "I must have keeled over, didn't I? Where's Buddy?"

"He's right over there warming his little feet, as nice as can be," said Peter. "And he was real concerned about you."

"I wouldn't have come in, but for him," said the woman, trying to straighten her hat. "I thought maybe he could get a bite to eat. It don't matter much what, he ain't eat since noon. A piece of bread would do him 'til we get to town." She leaned back wearily against the pile of nets in the corner.

"I want butter on it. Bread, and butter on it," said Buddy promptly.

"There, now!" said Peter accusingly. "I might have knowed it was foolish to let myself run so low on food. A man can't tell when food is going to come in handiest,

and here I went and let myself run clean out of it. But don't you worry, ma'am," he hastened to add, "I'll get some in no time. Just you let me help you over on to my bunk. I ain't got a chair or I'd offer it to you whilst I run up to one of my neighbors and get you a bite to eat. I've got good neighbors. That's one thing!"

The woman caught Peter by the arm and drew herself up, laughing weakly at her weakness. She tottered, but Peter led her to the bunk with all the courtesy of a Raleigh escorting an Elizabeth, and she dropped on the edge of the bunk and sat there warming her hands and staring at the stove. She seemed still near exhaustion.

"If you'll excuse me, now, ma'am," said Peter, when he had made sure she was not going to faint again, "I'll just step across to my neighbor's and get something for the boy to eat. I won't probably be gone more than a minute, and whilst I'm gone I'll arrange for a place for me to sleep to-night. You hadn't ought to make that boy walk no further to-night. It's a real bad night outside."

"That's all right. I don't want to chase you out," said the woman.

"Not at all," said Peter politely. "I frequently sleep elsewheres. It'll be no trouble at all to make arrangements."

He put more wood in the stove, opened the dampers, and lighted his lantern. Then he pinned his coat close about his neck with a blanket pin, and, as he passed the clock shelf, slipped the alarm swiftly from its place and hid it beneath his coat.

"I'll be right back, as soon as I can," he said, and, drawing his worn felt hat down over his eyes, he stepped out hastily and slammed the door behind him.

"Why did the man take the clock?" asked the boy as the door closed.

"I guess he thought I'd steal it," said the woman languidly.

"Would you steal it?" asked the boy.

"I guess so," the woman answered, and closed her eyes,

III. PETER LODGES OUT

AS Peter crossed the icy plank that led from his boat to the railway embankment he tried to whistle, but the wind was too strong and sharp, and he drew his head between his shoulders and closed his mouth tightly. He had understated the distance to Widow Potter's when he had said it was “just across.” In fair weather and daylight he often cut across the corn-field, but on such a night as this the trip meant a long plod up the railway track until he came to the crossing, and then a longer tramp back the slushy road, a good half mile in all. When he turned in at Widow Potter's open gate a great yellow dog came rushing at him, barking, but a word from Peter silenced him and the dog fell behind obediently but watchfully, and followed Peter to where the light shone through the widow's kitchen window. Peter rapped on the door.

“Who's out there?” Mrs. Potter called sharply. “I got a gun in here, and I ain't afraid to use it If you 're a tramp, you'd better git!”

“It's Peter Lane,” Peter called, loud enough to be heard above the wind. “I want to buy a couple of eggs off you, Mrs. Potter.”

The door opened the merest crack and Mrs. Potter peered out. She did not have a gun, but she held a stove poker. When she saw Peter she opened the door wide. It was a brusk welcome.

“Of all the shiftlessness I ever heard of, Peter Lane,” she said angrily, “you beat all! Cormin' for eggs this time of night when your boat's been in the cove nobody knows how long. I suppose it never come into your head to get eggs until you got hungry for them, did it?”

Peter closed the door and stood with his back to it. At all times he feared Mrs. Potter, but especially when he gave her some cause for reproof.

“I had some company drop in on me unexpected, Mrs. Potter,” he said

apologetically. “If I hadn't, I wouldn't have bothered you. I hate it worse'n you do.”

“Tramps, I dare say,” said the widow. “You 're that shiftless you'd give the shoes off your feet and the food out of your mouth to feed any good-for-nothing that come camping on you. You don't get my good eggs to feed such trash, Peter Lane! Winter eggs are worth money.”

“I thought to pay for them,” said Peter meekly. “I wouldn't ask them of you any other way, Mrs. Potter.”

“Well, if you 've got the money I suppose I've got to let you have them,” said the widow grudgingly. “Eggs is worth three cents apiece, and I hate to have 'em fed to tramps. How many do you want to buy?” Peter shifted from one foot to another uncomfortably. “Well, now, I'm what you might call a little short of ready money tonight,” he said. “I thought maybe I might come over and saw some wood for you tomorrow—”

“And so you can,” said Mrs. Potter promptly, “and when the wood is sawed they will be paid for, in eggs or money, and not until it is sawed. I'm not going to encourage you to run into debt. You 're shiftless enough now, goodness knows.”

Peter tried to smile and ignored the accusation.

“There couldn't be anything fairer than that,” he said. “Nobody ought to object to that sort of arrangement at all. That's real business-like. Only, there's a small boy amongst the company that dropped in on me and he's only about so high—” Peter showed a height that would have been small for an infant dwarf. “He's a real nice little fellow, and if you was ever a boy that high, and crying because you wanted something to eat—”

“I don't believe a word of it!” snapped Mrs. Potter. “If there is a child down there he ought to be in bed long ago.”

“Yes'm,” agreed Peter meekly. “That's so. You wouldn't put even a dog that size to bed hungry. So, if you could let me have about half-a-dozen eggs, I'll go right back.”

“Six eggs at three cents is eighteen cents,” said Mrs. Potter firmly, looking Peter directly in the eye. She was not bad looking. Her cheek bones were rather high and prominent and her cheeks hollow, and she had a strong chin for a woman, but the downward twist of discouragement that had marked her mouth during her later married years had already disappeared, giving place to a firmness that told she was well able to manage her own affairs. Peter drew his alarm-clock from beneath his coat and stood it on the kitchen table.

“I brought along this alarm-clock,” he said, “so you'd know I'd come back like I say I will. She's a real good clock. I paid eighty cents for her when she was new, and I just fixed her up fresh to-day. She's running quite—quite a little, since I fixed her.”

Mrs. Potter did not look at the clock. She looked at Peter.

“So!” she exclaimed. “So that's what you've come to, Peter Lane! Pawnin' your goods and chattels! That's what shiftless folks always come to in the end.”

“And so, if you'll let me have half-a-dozen eggs, and maybe some pieces of bread and butter and a handful of coffee,” said Peter, “I'll leave the clock right here as security that I'll come up first thing in the morning and saw wood 'til you tell me I've sawed enough.”

Mrs. Potter took the clock in her hand and looked at Peter.

“How old did you say that boy is?” she asked.

“Goin' on three, I should judge. He's a real nice little feller,” said Peter eagerly.

Mrs. Potter put the clock on her kitchen table.

“Fiddlesticks! I don't believe a word of it. Who else have you got down there?”

“Just his—his parent,” said Peter, blushing. “I wisht you could see that little feller. Maybe I'll bring him up here to-morrow and let you see him.”

“Maybe you won't!” said the widow. “If you 're hungry you can set down and I'll fry you as many eggs as you want to eat, but you can't come over me with no story

about visitors bringin' you children on a night like this! No, sir! You don't get none of my eggs for your worthless tramps. Shall I fry you some?"

Peter looked down and frowned. Then he raised his head and looked full in the widow's eyes and smiled. Nothing but the direct need could have induced him to smile thus at the widow for he knew and feared the result. When, once or twice before, he had looked into her eyes and smiled in this way—unthinkingly—she had fluttered and trembled like a bird in the presence of an overmastering fascination, and Peter did not like that. Such power frightened him. The widow, scolding and condemning, he could escape, but the widow fluttering and trembling, was a thing to be afraid of. It made him flutter and tremble, too.

When Peter smiled the widow drew in her breath sharply.

"Six—six eggs—will six eggs be all you want?" she asked hurriedly.

"Yes'm," said Peter, still smiling, "unless you could spare some bread and butter. He 'specially asked for butter," and then he looked down. The widow drew another long breath.

"I don't believe you've got a boy down there, and I don't believe you've got a visitor that deserves nothing," she said crossly. She was herself again. "I know you from hair to sole-leather, Peter Lane, and if any worthless scamp came and camped on you, you'd lie your head off to get food for him, and that's what I think you 're doing now, but there ain't no way of telling. If so be you have got a boy down there I don't want him to go hungry, but if it's just some worthless tramp, I hope these eggs choke him. You ain't got a mite of common sense in you. You 're too soft, and that's why you don't get on. You'd come up here to-morrow and do a dollar's worth of wood sawing for eighteen cents' worth of eggs, and then give the eggs to the first tramp that asked you. What you ought to have is a wife. You ought to have a wife with a mind like a hatchet and a tongue like a black-snake whip, and you might be worth shucks, anyway. You just provoke me beyond patience."

“Yes'm,” said Peter nervously.

Mrs. Potter was cutting thick, enticing slices from a big loaf and spreading them with golden butter.

“I reckon you want jam on this bread?” she asked suddenly.

“Yes, thank you!” said Peter.

“Well, maybe you have got a boy down there,” said Mrs. Potter reluctantly. “You'd be ashamed to ask for jam if you hadn't. If you had a wife and she was any account you'd have bread and jam when boys come to see you. But I do pity the woman that gets you, Peter Lane! No woman on this earth but a widow that has had experience with men-folks could ever make anything out of you.”

Peter put his hand on the door-knob, ready for instant flight. When he smiled on Mrs. Potter something like this usually resulted and that was why he tried it so seldom. It was he, now, who trembled and fluttered.

“I'm not thinking of getting married at all,” he said. “I couldn't afford to, anyway.”

“You needn't think, just because you are no-account, some fool woman wouldn't take you,” snapped Mrs. Potter. “Look at what my first husband was. Women marry all sorts of trash.”

Peter watched the progress of the bread and jam, trusting its preparation would not be delayed long.

“If they're asked,” said Mrs. Potter. She seemed very cross about something. She wrapped the slices of bread in a clean sheet of paper from her table drawer, folding in the ends of the paper angrily. “But they don't do the asking,” she added.

Peter took the parcel, and slipped the six clean white eggs into his pocket. He wanted to get away, but Mrs. Potter stopped him.

“I suppose, if there is a boy down there, I've got to give you what's left of my roast chicken,” she grumbled, “or you'll be coming up here about the time I get into bed,

routing me out for more victuals. If I had a husband, and he was like you, and he had a mind to feed all the tramps in the county, he wouldn't have to rout me out of bed to do it. He could go to the cupboard himself, and feed them."

"Now, that clock," said Peter hastily, "if I was you I wouldn't depend too much on her alarm to get you up. I can't say she's regulated just the way I'd like to have her yet. And I'm much obliged to you."

"I don't want your clock!" said Mrs. Potter, but Peter had slipped out of the door, closing it behind him. The widow held the clock in her hand for a full minute, and then set it gently beside her own opulent Seth Thomas.

"I dare say you 're about as well regulated as he is," she said, "and that ain't saying much for either of you. He ain't got the eyes to see through a grindstone!"

When Peter returned to the boat, the boy was busily trying to work one of the trot-line hooks out of the sleeve of his jacket, but the woman had dropped back on the bunk and her eyes were closed. She opened them when the rush of cold air from the door struck her face, and looked at Peter listlessly.

"I guess you don't feel like cooking a couple of eggs," said Peter, "so if you'll excuse me remaining here awhile, I'll do it for you. I'm a fair to middling fried-egg cook. Son, you let me get that hook out of you, and then see if you can eat five or six of these pieces of bread and jam. I could when I was a boy, and then I could wind up with a piece of chicken like this."

"I hooked myself," the boy explained.

"I should say you did," said Peter. "You want to look out for these hooks, they bite a boy like a cat-fish stinger, and that ain't much fun. I'm right glad you dropped in," he said to the woman, "because I've got such good neighbors. It's almost impossible to keep them from forcing more eggs and butter and such things on me than I'd know what to do with. 'Just come on up when you want anything,' they are always saying, 'and help yourself.' So it's quite nice to have somebody drop in and give me a chance

to show my neighbors I ain't too proud to take a few eggs and such. It would surprise you to see how eager they are that way."

He scraped the butter from one of the pieces of bread, needing it to fry the eggs in, and he worked as he talked, breaking the eggs into the frying-pan and watching that they were cooked to a turn.

"I certainly am blessed with nice neighbors," he said. "There's a widow lady lives a step or two beyond the railroad, and seems as if she couldn't do enough for me. She just lays herself out to see that I'm overfed. Do you feel like you could eat a small part of chicken?"

The woman let her eyes rest on Peter some time before she spoke.

"I ought to feel hungry, but I don't," she said.

"Well, maybe a soft-boiled egg would be better. I ought to have thought of that," said Peter as if he had been reproved. "You'll have to excuse me for boiling it in the coffee-pot, I've been so busy planning a trip I'm going to take I haven't had time to lay in much tinware yet."

"Where did you take the clock?" asked the boy suddenly.

Peter reddened under his tan.

"That clock?" he said hesitatingly. "Where did I take that clock? Well, the fact is—the fact is that clock is a nuisance. That's it, she's a nuisance.' I been meaning to throw that clock into the river for I don't know how long. Unless you are used to that clock you just can't sleep where she is. 'Rattelty bang!' she goes just whenever she takes a notion, like a dish-pan falling downstairs, all times of the night. So I just thought, as long as I was going out anyway, 'Now's a good time to get rid of the old nuisance!'"

"Mama would steal the clock," said the boy.

"Oh, you mustn't say that!" said Peter. "You come here and eat these two nice eggs.

I hope, ma'am, you don't think I had any such notion as that. When I have visitors they can steal everything in the boat, and welcome. I mean—”

“I know what you mean,” said the woman. “You 're the white kind.”

“I'm glad you look at it that way,” said

Peter. “The boy, he don't understand such things, he's so young yet. Maybe you'd feel better if I propped you up with the pillow a little better. I'll lay this extry blanket on the foot of the bunk here in case it should get cold during the night. You look nice and warm now.”

“I'm burning up,” said the woman.

“I judge you've got a slight fever,” said Peter. “I often get them when I get overtook by the rain when I'm out for a stroll.”

“I'll be all right if I can lie here for an hour or so,” said the woman listlessly. “Then Buddy and me will get on. Is it far to town?”

“Now, you and that boy ain't going another step to-night,” said Peter firmly. “You 're going to stay right here. You won't discommode me a bit for I've made arrangements to sleep elsewhere, like I often do.”

He gave the woman the egg in his tin cup, and while she ate he put his trot-lines outside on the small forward deck so the boy might get in no more trouble with the hooks. Then he removed the shells from his shotgun, put the remaining eggs and bread and butter and chicken in his tin box, and pinned his coat collar.

“I'm going up to the place I arranged to sleep at, now,” he said, “and I hope you'll find everything comfortable and nice. There's more wood there by the stove, and before I come in in the morning I'll knock on the door, so I guess maybe you'd better take off as many of them wet clothes as you wish to. You'll take a worse cold if you don't.”

“I'm afraid I'm too weak,” said the woman. “If you will just give me some help with

my dress—”

But Peter fled. He was a strange mixture, was Peter, and he fled as a blushing boy would have fled, not to stop running until he was far up the railway track. Then he realized, by the chill of the sleety rain against his head where the hair was thinnest, that he had forgotten his hat, and he laughed at himself.

“Pshaw, I guess that woman scared me,” he said.

He did not follow the path to Mrs. Potter's kitchen door this time, but skirted the orchard and climbed a rail fence into the cow pasture. He made a wide circle through the pasture and climbed another fence into the yard behind the barn, where a haystack stood. He was trembling with cold by this time, and wet through, and the water froze stiff in his coat cuffs, but he dug deep into the base of the haystack and crawled into its shelter, drawing the sweet hay close around him. For awhile he lay with chattering teeth, his knees close under his chin, and then he felt warmer, and straightened his knees. The next moment he was asleep.

IV. THE SCARLET WOMAN

WHEN Peter crawled out of his haystack the next morning the weather was intensely cold and the wind was gone. Every twig and weed sparkled with the ice frozen upon it. He had needed no alarm-clock to awaken him, for an uneasy sense of discomfort gradually opened his eyes, and he found his knees aching and his whole body chilled and stiff. He climbed the fence into the farm-house yard. He had no doubt now that he was hungry, and he was well aware that his head was cold where the hair was thin. Indeed, his hands and feet were cold too. But he tightened his belt another hole and made for Mrs. Potter's woodshed. Among the chips and sawdust he found a piece of white cloth which, had he known it was the remains of one of Mrs. Potter's petticoats, he would have left where it lay, but not knowing this he made a makeshift turban by knotting the corners, and drew it well down over his ears, like a

nightcap. It was more comfortable than the raw morning air, and Peter had no more pride than a tramp.

He found the wood saw hanging in the shed, a piece of bacon-rind on the windowsill, and the ice-covered sawbuck in the yard, and he set to work on the pile of pin-oak as if he meant to earn his clock, his breakfast and a full day's wages before Mrs. Potter got out of bed. The exercise warmed him, but he kept one eye on the top of Mrs. Potter's kitchen chimney, looking for the thin smoke signal telling that breakfast was under way. The pile of stove-wood grew and grew under his saw but still the house gave no sign of life. The sun climbed, making the icy coating of trees and fences glow with color, and still Mrs. Potter's kitchen chimney remained hopelessly smokeless.

“That woman must have a good, clear conscience or she couldn't sleep like that,” said the hungry Peter, “but I've got folks on my hands, and I've got to see to them. If this ain't enough wood to satisfy her I'll saw some more when I come back.”

He was worried, for no smoke was coming from the stovepipe that protruded from the roof of his shanty-boat. When he reached the boat he knocked three times without answer before he opened the door cautiously and peered in, ready to retreat should his entrance be inopportune. The woman was lying where he had left her, still in her wet clothes, and the cabin was icy cold. The boy, when Peter opened the door, was standing on the table trying to lift the shot-gun from its pegs. His face showed he had made a trip to the bread and jam. He looked down at Peter as the door opened.

“Mama's funny,” he said, and reached for the gun again.

The woman was indeed “funny.” She was in the grip of a raging fever. Her cheeks were violently red and against them the green dye from her hat made hideous streaks. Her hair had fallen and lay in a tangle over the pillow, with the rain-soaked hat still clinging to a strand. As she moved her head the hat moved with it, giving

her a drunken, disreputable appearance. She talked rapidly and angrily, repeating the names of men, of “Susie” and “Buddy,” stopping to sing a verse of a popular song, breaking into profanity and laughing loudly. All human emotions except tears flowed from her, and Peter stood with his back against the door, uncertain what to do. The table, tipping suddenly and throwing the boy to the floor, decided him.

“There, now, you little rascal!” he said, gathering the weeping boy in his arms.

“You might have broke your arm, or your leg. You oughtn't to stand on a table you ain't acquainted with, that way.”

“I wanted to fall down,” said the boy, ceasing his tears at once. “I like to fall off tables I ain't 'quainted with.”

“Well, I just bet you do!” said Peter. “You look like that sort of a boy to me. Does your ma act funny like this often? You poor young 'un, I hope not!”

“No,” said Buddy.

Peter looked at the woman, studying her. It might have been possible that she was insane, but the vivid red of her cheeks convinced him she was delirious with fever. Her hat, askew over one ear, gave Peter a feeling of shame for her, and he put Buddy down and walked to the bunk. He saw that the hat pin had made a cruel scratch along her cheek.

“Now, ma'am,” he said, “I'm just going to help you off with this hat, because it's getting all mashed up, and it ain't needed in the house.”

He put out his hand to take the hat, but the woman raised herself on one arm, and with the other fist struck Peter full in the face, so that he staggered back against the table, while she swore at him viciously.

“You hadn't ought to do that,” he said reprovingly; “I wasn't going to hurt you.”

“I know you!” shouted the woman in a rage. “I know you! You can't come any of that over me! You took Susie, you beast, but you don't get Buddy. Let me get at

you!”

She tried to clamber from the bunk, but fell back coughing.

“Now, you are absolutely wrong, ma'am,” said Peter earnestly. “You've got me placed entirely wrong. I ain't the man you think I am at all. I'm the man that got something for Buddy to eat last night. You recall that, don't you?”

The woman looked at him craftily.

“Where's Buddy?” she asked.

“I'm—I'm cooking eggs, Mama,” said Buddy promptly, and Peter turned.

“Well, you little rascal!” cried Peter. “You must be hungry.”

The boy had put the frying-pan on the floor while Peter's back was turned, and had broken the remaining eggs in it. Much of the omelet had missed the pan, decorating Buddy's clothes and the floor. The woman seemed satisfied when she heard the boy's voice, and closed her eyes, and Peter took the opportunity to kindle the fire and start the breakfast. He cooked the omelet, the condition of the eggs suggesting that as the only method of preparing them. The woman opened her eyes as the pleasant odor filled the cabin, and followed every movement Peter made.

“I know you! You'll run me out of town, will you?” she cried suddenly. “All right, I'll go! I'll go! That's what I get for being decent. You know I 've been decent since you took Susie away from me, and that's what I get. Run me out—what do I care! I'll go.”

She put her feet to the floor, but another coughing fit threw her back against the pillow, and when she recovered she burst into tears.

“Don't take her!” she pleaded. “I'll be decent—don't! I tell you I'll be decent. Don't I feed her plenty? Don't I dress her warm? Ain't she going to school like the other kids? Don't take her. Before God, I'll be decent. Come here, Susie!”

“Now, that's all right, ma'am,” said Peter, as she began coughing again. “Nobody's

going to take nobody whilst I'm in this boat, and you can make your mind up to that right off. Here's Buddy right here, eating like a little man, ain't you, Buddy?"

"Poor baby!" said the woman. "Come and let Ma try to carry you again. Your poor little leg's all tired out, ain't it?"

"It's rested," said Buddy, "it ain't tired."

"Tired, oh, God, I'm tired!" she wept. "You'll have to get down, Buddy. Ma can't carry you another step. God knows when I get to Riverbank I'll be straight. I've got enough of this. Where's Susie?"

"Now, I wisht, if you can, you'd try to lie quiet, ma'am," said Peter, "for you ain't well. Try lying still, and I'll go right to town and get a doctor to come out and see you. I didn't mean you no harm at all."

"I know you, you snake!" she cried. "You 're from the Society. You took my Susie, and you want Buddy. I'll kill you first. Come here, Buddy!"

The boy went to her obediently, and she drew him on to the bunk and ran her hand through his white kinks of hair. It seemed to quiet her to feel him in her arm.

"Now, ma'am," said Peter, "you see nobody's going to take Buddy at all, and you can take my word I won't let anybody take him whilst I'm around. You can depend on that, I'm going to town, now, and I guess I'd better leave Buddy right here, for you'll be more comfortable knowing where he is. Don't you worry about nothing at all until I get back, and if you find the door locked it's just so nobody can't get in and bother you."

He looked about the cabin. It was comfortably warm, and he poured water on the fire. He wished to take no chances with the woman in her present state. He even took his shot-gun and the heavy poker as he went out. Buddy watched him with interest.

"Are you stealing that gun?" he asked.

“No, son,” said Peter gravely. “Nobody's stealing anything. You want to get that idea out of your head. Nobody in this cabin—you, nor me, nor your ma, would steal anything. Your ma's sick and don't know what she's doing, but she don't mean no real harm. I guess she ain't been treated right, and she feels upset about it, but a boy don't want, ever, to say anything bad about his ma.”

He went out and closed and locked the door. Involuntarily he glanced at Widow Potter's chimneys. No smoke came from any of them.

“Now, I just bet that woman has gone and got sick, just when I've got my hands plumb full!” he said disgustedly. “I've got to go up and see what's the matter with her, or she might lie there and die and nobody know a thing about it.”

The cold had frozen the slush into hardness, and Peter cut across the corn-field. He tried Mrs. Potter's doors and found them all locked—which was a bad sign, unless she had gone to town while he was in the shanty-boat—but he knocked on the kitchen door noisily, and was rewarded after a reasonable wait, by hearing the widow dragging her feet across the kitchen.

“Is that you, Peter Lane?” she asked.

“Yes'm,” Peter answered.

“Well, it's time you come, I must say,” said the widow, between groans. “You the only man anywheres near, and you'd leave me die here as soon as not. You got to feed the cows and the horse and give the chickens some grain and then hitch up and fetch a doctor as fast as he can be fetched. I might have laid here for weeks, you 're that unreliable. I'll put the barn key on the kitchen table, and when the doctor comes I'll be in my bed, if the Lord lets me live that long. I'll be in it anyway, I dare say, dead or alive, if I can manage to get to it. And don't you come in until I get out of the way, for I ain't got a stitch on but my night-gown.”

“I won't,” said Peter, and he didn't. He gave Mrs. Potter time to get into twenty beds, if she had been so minded, before he opened the kitchen door a crack and peeped in.

He hurried through the chores as rapidly as he could, feeding the stock and the chickens and milking the cows. He had eaten part of the omelet Buddy had commenced, but he thought it only right he should have a satisfying drink of the warm milk, and he took it. He made a fire in the kitchen stove and saw that the iron tea-kettle was full of water, and then he harnessed the horse and drove briskly to town and sought a doctor.

It was the hour when physicians were making their calls and the first two Peter sought were out, but Dr. Roth, the new doctor who had come from Willets to build a practice in the larger town, happened to be in his office over Moore's Drug Store, and he drew on his coat and gloves while Peter explained the object of his visit.

“I ain't running Mrs. Potter's affairs,” said Peter, “for there ain't no call for her to have nobody to run them, but, if I was, I'd get a sort of nurse-woman to go up and take care of her. She's all alone, and I don't know how sick she is.”

“Then you are not Mr. Potter?” asked the doctor.

“I ain't nothing at all like that,” said Peter. “I'm a shanty-boatman and my boat is right near the widow's place, and I do odd chores for her. Old Potter died and went where he belongs quite some time ago.”

The doctor agreed to pick up Mrs. Skinner on his way, Mrs. Skinner being one of those plump, useful creatures that are willing to do nursing, washing, or general housework by the day.

“And another thing, doctor,” said Peter, as the doctor closed his office door, “whilst you are out there I want you to drop down to the cove below the widow's house, to a shanty-boat you'll see there, and take a look at the woman I've got in it. So far as I can make out she's a mighty sick woman. I'll try to get back before you get through with the widow, but you'd better take my key, if I shouldn't. I'll pay whatever it costs to treat her. I'm quite ready to do that.”

“Why not drive out with me?”

“I got some business to transact,” said Peter. “But mebby it might be just as well to wait till I do get there. She's sort of out of her mind, and she might think you had come to do her some harm if I wasn't there.” The business Peter had to transact took him to George Rapp's Livery, Sale and Feed Stable, and by good luck he found George in his stuffy, over-heated office, redolent of tobacco smoke, harness soap and general stable odors. Like all men who brave cold weather at all hours George liked to be well baked when in-doors.

“Well, George,” said Peter, “since I seen you yesterday circumstances has occurred to change my mind about making any trips this year in my boat. For a man of my constitution I've made up my mind it would be just the worst thing to go south at all. It ain't the right air for my lungs, and when you got to talking about chinchillas going out of fashion, I seen it wasn't worth the risk. What I need is cold climate, George, and it's an unfortunate thing this here Mississippi River don't run any way but south, because there's one fur never does go out of style, and that's arctic fox—.”

“All right, I'll give you forty dollars for the boat,” laughed Rapp, putting his hand in his pocket.

“Now, wait!” said Peter. “I don't want you to think I'm doing this just because I want to sell the boat, George. That ain't so. I guess maybe I could raise what money I need to outfit, one way or another, but I can't afford to pay a caretaker to take care of that boat whilst I'm away up in Labrador, or Alaska, or wherever I'm going, and it ain't safe to leave a shanty-boat vacant. Tramps would run away with her.”

“When do you aim to start north?” asked Rapp, grinning.

“My mind ain't quite made up to that,” said Peter. “I want to look over a map and see where Labrador is before I start out. I thought maybe you'd let me remain in the shanty-boat awhile, George.”

“Stay on her as long as you like,” said Rapp. “You can live right in her all winter. All I want is to get her down to my place right away before the river closes, so she'll

be there when the ducks fly next spring."

"Now, that's another thing," said Peter uneasily. "With all the preparations I have to make for my trip I'll have to be round town more or less this winter, and as your place is a long way down river, I thought maybe you might let the boat stay where she is this winter, George?"

"You can sleep in my barn any time you want to, Peter," said Rapp. "I might as well let that boat lie where she is forever as leave her there all winter. I want her down there when the ducks fly north. I'll give you five dollars extra for floating her down, and a dollar or so a week for taking care of her, but if she can't go down she ain't any use to me."

"The way the ice is beginning to run I'd have to start her down to-day or to-morrow," said Peter regretfully. "It upsets my plans, but I got to have some ready cash. If the wind shifts your slough will be ice-blocked, and there ain't no other safe place to winter a boat down there."

"You don't have to sell her if you don't want to," said Rapp. "You can put off your trip. Seems like I've heard you put off trips before now, Peter."

"Well, I guess I'll sell, George," said Peter. "Maybe I can trap muskrats or something down there, I'll make out some how."

He took the money Rapp handed him and once more Peter was homeless. He was no better than a tramp now. His plans were vague as to the sick woman, but forty-five dollars seemed a great deal of money to Peter. He might hire a room from Mrs. Potter, if that lady would permit, and have the sick woman cared for there, or he might, have her brought to town and lodged somewhere, if any one would take her in. There was no hospital in Riverbank. But he was happy. Somehow, he did not doubt he could care for the woman, for he had money in his pocket. To turn her over to the county poor-farm did not enter his mind. He would not have given a dog that fate.

He drove to Main Street first and tied his horse before the grocery that received his infrequent patronage. Here he bought a bag of flour and six packages of roasted coffee, some bacon and beans, condensed milk and canned goods, sugar and other necessities, and then let his eyes wander over the grocer's shelves. He had about decided to buy a can of green gage plums, as a dainty he loved and never indulged in, and therefore suitable to buy for the sick woman, when he saw the small white jars of beef extract, and he bought one for the sick woman.

While his parcels were being wrapped he picked up the copy of the Riverbank News that lay on the counter and glanced over it, for a newspaper was a rare treat for Peter. On the first page his eye caught the headline “Pass Her Along.” It was at the head of an article in the News reporter's best humorous style, and told how Lize Merdin, a notorious character, had been run out of Derlingport, the next town up the river, and ordered never to return under pain of tar and feathers. “The gay girl hit the ties in the direction of Riverbank at a Maud S. pace, yanking her young male offspring after her by the arm,” wrote the reporter, “and when last seen seemed intending to favor River-bank with her society, but up to last reports nothing has been seen of her there. It is a two days' jaunt for a gentle creature like Lize, but when she hits the River Street depot she will find Riverbank a regular springboard, and the bounce she will get here will impress on her receptive mind the fact that Riverbank is not hankering for her company. Pass her along!”

Peter folded the paper and laid it on the counter. So that was who his visitor was, and how she came to be tramping the railway track! He walked to where great golden oranges glowed in a box, near the door, and chose half a dozen and laid them beside his other purchases. These too were for the sick woman. Then he selected a dozen big, red apples and laid them beside the oranges. They were for Buddy. It was Peter's method of showing his disapproval of the bad taste of the News" article.

When Peter reached the widow's farmhouse the doctor's horse still stood in the

bam-yard, and Peter put up his own horse, while waiting for the doctor to come out.

“How is the widow? Is she bad off?” he asked when the doctor appeared.

“Mrs. Potter thinks she is a very sick woman, and she isn't a well one,” said the doctor. “She'll stay in bed a week, anyway. That's some woman. She has Mrs. Skinner hopping around like a toad in a skillet already, and she sent orders by me that you are to come and sleep in the kitchen, to be handy if she has a relapse in the night. You are to take care of her stock, and saw the rest of her cord wood, and do the odd chores, and if the pump freezes thaw it out, before it gets frozen any worse.”

“Now, ain't that too bad!” said Peter. “Just when I've got to get started down river this afternoon. Things always happen like that, don't they?”

He led the way across the frozen corn-field to his shanty-boat, and opened the door. Buddy had managed to turn the table upside down and was “riding a boat” in it. The doctor gave the boy and the cabin one glance and had Peter classed as one of the shiftless shanty-boatmen before he had pulled off his fur gloves. Then he turned to the woman. She was lying with her face toward the wall. He bent over her, and when he straightened his back and turned to Peter his face was very serious.

“Your wife is dead,” he said.

Peter's pale blue eyes stared at the doctor vacantly.

“Dead?” he stammered. “My wife? Why, doctor, she ain't—”

“Yes,” said the doctor, not waiting to hear the conclusion of Peter's sentence. “She has been dead an hour, at least. A weak heart, overtaxed, I should say. What do you mean by leaving her in these damp clothes? I should have been called long ago.”

“Now, ain't that too bad! Ain't that too bad!” said Peter regretfully. “It ain't nobody's fault but mine. I ought to have gone for you last night, and there I was, a-sleepin' away as comfortable as could be!”

“She should have been under treatment for some time,” said the doctor severely. He

was a young doctor, and important, and not inclined to spare the feelings of a mere shanty-boatman. Here he could be severe, who had to be suave and politic with better people. He told Peter brutally that the woman had not been properly cared for; that with her constitution, she should have had delicacies and comforts and kindness. “If you want my candid opinion, you as much as killed her,” said Dr. Roth.

He was nettled by Peter's apparent heartlessness, for while Peter showed that the death had shocked him, he gave way to no outburst of sorrow such as might be expected from a bereaved husband. But now deep regret in Peter's eyes touched him.

“I shouldn't have said that,” he said more kindly. “I might not have been able to do anything. Probably not much after all. But if you don't want the boy to go the same way, treat him better. You have him left.”

Peter turned and looked at Buddy who, all unconscious, was rowing his table boat with a piece of driftwood for oar.

“That's so, aint it?” said Peter. “She's left the boy on my hands, ain't she? I guess I got to take care of him. Yep, I guess I have!”

When the doctor left the boat, half an hour later, he shook his head as he closed the door.

“Shiftless and unfeeling!” he muttered to himself. “'Left the boy on my hands!' Poor boy, I'm sorry for you, with a father like that.”

For he did not see Peter drop on his knees beside the curly headed child as soon as the door was closed, and he did not see how Peter took the boy in his arms. He could not hear what Peter said.

“Buddy boy,” said Peter, “how'd it be if you and Uncle Peter just sort of snuggled up close and—and et a big, red apple?”

V. BUDDY STEERS THE BOAT

NOW, don't you fret, Buddy-boy," said Peter Lane with forced cheerfulness, "because I'm going to let you do something you never did before, and that I wouldn't let many boys do. You are going to help Uncle Peter steer this boat, just like you was a big man."

Buddy stood in the skiff which was drawn up on the bank. Peter, with a rock and his stove-poker, was undoing the frozen knot that held his shanty-boat to the Rock Island Railway System, and by means of that to the State of Iowa. He was preparing to take the shanty-boat down the river to George Rapp's place. His provisions were aboard, the rag of a sail lay ready to raise should the wind serve—but it promised not to—and the long sweep that had reposed on the roof of the boat was on its pin at the bow, if a boat, both ends of which were identical, could be said to have a bow.

"I like to steer boats," said Buddy out of his boyish optimism.

"I bet you do," said Peter, "and a mighty good steerer you'll make. I don't know how Uncle Peter could get down river if he didn't have somebody to steer for him. Now, you let me push that skiff into the water, and we'll row around the boat, and before you know it you'll be steering like a regular little sailor."

He threw the mooring rope on to the stern deck of the shanty-boat, pushed the skiff into the water and poled to the other end of the boat where the long sweep was held with its blade suspended in the air, the handle caught under a cleat on the deck. Peter lifted Buddy to the deck, made the skiff's painter fast, and climbed to the deck after the boy.

"Now, Buddy, we'll be off in a minute and a half," he said, "just as soon as I fix you the way they fix sailors when they steer a ship in a big storm."

He drew a ball of seine twine from his pocket, knotted one end about Buddy's waist, cut off a generous length, and tied the other end to the cleat.

"Don't!" said Buddy imperatively. "I don't want to be tied, Uncle Peter."

"Oh, yes, you do!" said Peter. "Why, a sailor-man couldn't think of steering a great

boat like this unless he was tied to it."

"No!" shouted Buddy, and Peter stood, holding his end of the cord, studying the boy.

"Now, Buddy-boy," he said appealingly. "Don't holler like that. Ain't I told you we must keep right quiet, because your ma is asleep in there."

"But I don't want to be tied!" cried the boy.

"But Uncle Peter's going to be tied, too," said Peter. "Yes, siree, Bob! Just as soon as I get this boat out into the river, I'm going to be tied like you are, and no mistake. You didn't know that, I guess, did you?"

The boy looked at him doubtfully.

"Are you?" he asked.

"If I say I am, I am," said Peter. "You can always be right sure that when Uncle Peter says a thing, he ain't trying to fool you, Buddy. No, sir! You can just believe what Uncle Peter says, with all your might. I might lie to grown folks now and then, but I wouldn't lie to a little boy. No, sir!"

"I ain't a little boy. I'm a big sailor-man!" said the boy. "And you said I could steer, and I want to steer."

"Right away you can," said Peter. "You're going to steer with one of them skiff oars, but first I've got to row this boat out into the river a ways so you'll have plenty of room. So don't you fret. You watch Uncle Peter."

He made the skiff fast to the boat with a length of rope, took the oars, and as he rowed, the heavy boat moved slowly from behind the point out into the river current. Peter towed her well out into the river before he let the skiff drop back. He meant the shanty-boat to float sweep first—it was all the same to her—and he fastened the painter of the skiff to the shanty-boat's stern, and edged his way along the narrow strip of wood that marked the division between the hull and the superstructure,

holding himself by clasping the edge of the roof with his cold fingers, and sliding an oar along the roof as he went. It would have been much simpler and safer to have passed through the cabin.

To satisfy Buddy, he tied a length of seine cord about his own waist and fastened the end to the deck ring, and then he lashed Buddy's oar to a small iron ring. The boy could take a few steps and splash the water with the oar without falling into the river. Then Peter took the heavy sweep handle in his hands and the shanty-boat was under way.

It was time. The rising water had dislodged heavier ice than had yet come down, and the river was filling with it. The wind, such as there was, while it blew almost dead upstream, was an aid in that it swept the floating ice toward the Illinois shore, leaving Peter's course clear, and an occasional dip of the sweep was sufficient to keep the boat head-on in the current. The wind made the river choppy, but the shanty-boat, not having had time to water-log since Peter put her in the water, floated high.

For a while Buddy steered energetically, splashing the water with the blade of his oar, but Peter was ready for the first sign of weariness.

“My! but you are a fine steerer!” he said approvingly. “When you grow just a bit bigger, Uncle Peter is going to teach you how to row a boat, and a song to sing while you row it. Hurry up, now, and help Uncle Peter steer.”

“Let's sing a song to steer a boat,” said Buddy.

“No, I guess we won't sing to-day,” said Peter. “Some other day we'll sing.”

For Peter and Buddy were not taking the voyage alone. When Peter, assisted by Mrs. Skinner, had completed the preparations he felt were due any woman who is making the Great Journey, he found his money too little to afford her a resting-place in the town, but Peter Lane could not let one who had knocked at his door, seeking shelter, go from there to the potter's field, any more than he could let her boy go to the

county farm. While the smart reporter was wondering whether the power of the press, in his article “Pass Her Along,” had warned Lize Merdin to take the road to some other town, and while Dr. Roth was telling of the shanty-boatman whose wife had died without medical attendance, Peter, by roundabout questions regarding George Rapp's place, learned of a small country burying ground not too far from the spot where the shanty-boat was to be moored for the winter. There he was taking Lize Merdin who, “decent” at last and forever, lay within the cabin.

Through the long forenoon Peter leaned on the handle of his sweep, pressing his breast against it now and then to swing the shanty-boat into the full current. There was no other large boat on the river. Here and there a fisherman pulled at his oars in a heavy skiff, or moved slowly from hook to hook of his trot-line, lifting from time to time a flop-pily protesting fish, but gave the shanty-boat no more than a glance.

The boat floated past the empty log-boom of the upper mill—silent for the winter—and past the great lumber piles, still bearing their covering of sleet. Peter could hear the gun-like slap of board on board coming from where some man was loading lumber in a freight car, and occasionally a voice came across the water with startling distinctness:

“I told him he could chop his own wood, I wouldn't do it.”

“What did he say to that?”

“He said he could get plenty of men that would do it.” He knew the men must be sitting close to the water's edge, and finally his sharp eyes made them out below the railway embankment—two black specks crouched over a small, yellow blaze. He recognized one voice, the voice of one of the town loafers. The other was strange to him, probably that of some tramp.

Below that, dwellings fronted the river and the streets of the town opened in long vistas as the boat came to them, closing again immediately as it passed. The hissing of a switch-engine, sidetracked to await the passing of a train soon due, and the

clanking of a poker on the grate bars as the fireman dislodged the clinkers, came to Peter's ears distinctly. Then the boat slipped past George Rapp's stable, with its bold red brick front, and as he passed the door, Peter could hear for an instant the scrape of a horse's hoof in the stall, although the boat was a good half mile out in the river. Beyond the stable was the low-lying canning factory, and the row of saloons, and the hotel, and the wholesale houses, partly hidden by the railway station on the river side of Front Street, and the packet warehouse on the river's edge. Then the low rumbling of the dusty oatmeal mill, cut by the excited voices of small children playing at the water's edge, became the prominent voice of the town.

From the edge of the river the town rose on two hills, showing masses of gray, leafless trees, with here and there a house peeping through. From Peter's boat it looked like the dead corpse of a town, but he knew every street of it, and he knew Life, with its manifold business of work and play, was hurrying feverishly there, and he knew, too, that not one of all those so busy with Life knew he was floating by, or if knowing it, would have cared.

“That there is a town, Buddy,” said Peter. “That's Riverbank.”

“Is it?” said Buddy, without interest. He gave it but a glance.

“Yes, sir!” said Peter. “That's the town. And it's sort of funny to think of that whole townful of people rushing around, and going and coming, and doing things that seem mighty important to them whilst your—whilst this boat goes floating down this river as calm and peaceful as if the day of judgment had come and gone again. It's funny! Probably there ain't man or woman in that whole town but, a couple of days ago, was better and whiter than—than a certain party; and now there ain't one of 'em but is all smudgy and soiled if compared with her. Yes, sir, it's funny!”

He worked his sweep vigorously to carry the shanty-boat to the east of the large island—the Tow-head—that lay before the lower-town. The screech of boards passing through the knives of a planing-mill drowned the rumble of the oatmeal

mill. A long passenger train hurried along the river bank like a hasty worm, and stopped, panting, at the water tank, and went on again. The boat, as it passed on the far side of the island, seemed to drop suddenly into silence, and the chopping of the waves against the hull of the boat made itself heard.

“Yes, sir, towns is funny!” said Peter. “Now, take the way going behind this island has wiped that one out. So far as you and me are concerned, Buddy, that town might be wiped off the earth, and we wouldn't know. We wouldn't hardly care at all. The folks in it ain't nothing to us at all, right now. And yet, if I go into that town, I'm interested in every one of the folks I meet, and it makes me sort of sick to see any of them cold and hungry. Maybe that's what towns is for. Maybe I live alone too much. I get so all I think about is sleep and eat. And eating ain't a bad habit. How'd you like to?”

Buddy was willing. He was willing to eat any time. He ate two apples and eight crackers, and watched the apple cores float beside the boat.

“Now, you 're going to fish,” said Peter. “Right here looks like a good place to fish. Maybe you'll catch a whale. You're just as apt to catch a whale here as anything else.”

“Ain't Mama hungry?” asked Buddy so suddenly that Peter was startled.

“Now, hear that!” he said. “Ain't you just as thoughtful! Why, no, Buddy. It's real nice for you to think of that, but your ma ain't hungry. She ain't going to be hungry or cold or wet any more, so don't you bother your little head about it one bit. She don't want anything but that you should grow up and be a big, fine man.”

“Like you, Uncle Peter?” asked Buddy. “My land, no!” said Peter impulsively. “I mean, no, indeed. Don't you take me for no model, Buddy. You want to grow up and be—I'll explain when you get older. I want you to grow up to be a good man; the kind of man that takes some interest in other folks. You don't want to be a dried-up old codger like me.”

“What's a codger?” asked Buddy.

“A codger is a stingy, old, hard-shell cuss—” Peter began. “I guess you could eat another apple,” he finished, and Buddy did.

The island they were passing was low and fringed with willows, now bare of leaf, and the shanty-boat kept close in until the current veered to the Illinois shore, with its water-elms and maples, and tangles of wild grapevines. Peter knew every mark of this part of the river well. The current swung from shore to shore, now crossing to the Iowa side again, where the levee guarded the fields, and now swinging back to the Illinois bottom-land. For the boy the scene held little interest; for Peter it was a new chapter of an old story he loved. Here a giant sycamore he had known since youth had been blackened and shortened by lightning; there an elm, falling, had created a new sand-bar on which willows were already finding a foothold. In time it might be quite an island, or perhaps the next spring “rise” might sweep it away entirely. A farm-house high on the Illinois bluff had a new windmill. A sweet-potato bam on the other side of the river was now a blackened pile of timbers. Rotting sand-bags told the spot where the river, on its last “rampage” had threatened to cut the levee.

Buddy fished patiently until even a more interested fisherman would have given it up as a bad job, and Peter fed him a slice of bread and butter. For half an hour he watched Peter whittle a nubbin off the end of the sweep and fashion it into a top, but at the first attempt to spin it the top bounded into the water, and floated away, and this suggested boats. For the rest of the afternoon Peter doled out pieces of the pile of driftwood on the deck, and they went over the side as boats, Peter naming each after one of the river steamers, until Buddy himself said, “This is the War Eagle, Uncle Peter,” or “This is the Long Annie. She'll splash!” Peter did not grudge his firewood; there was an abundance of driftwood to be had in the slough for which they were making. The last piece he fitted with a painter of twine, and Buddy let it

drag in the water, enjoying its “pull,” until the afternoon grew late and the sun set like a huge red ball that almost reached from bank to bank, and made the river a path of gold and copper.

As they floated down this glowing way, Peter fed the boy again. Little as he knew about boys, he knew they must be fed.

“There, now!” he said when the tired boy could eat no more, and the tired eyes blinked, “I guess you'll sleep like a sailor to-night, and no mistake, Buddy-boy, and I'm going to give you a treat such as boys don't often have. You see that great, big, white moon up there? I'm going to let you go to bed outdoors here, so you can look right up at that moon and blink your eyes at it, and see if it blinks back at you. That's what I'm going to do; and whenever you want to, you can open your eyes and you'll see that big old moon, and those stars, and Uncle Peter.”

“I don't want to go to sleep,” said Buddy.

“Nobody said you had to go to sleep,” said Peter. “You stay awake, if you want to, and watch that funny old moon. You'd think we'd float right past it, but she floats along up there, like a sort of shanty-boat up in the sky, and the stars follow along like the play boats you put in the water. You wait until you see the bed Uncle Peter is going to make for you!”

Buddy fixed his eyes very seriously on the moon, while Peter unlocked the cabin door and brought out an armful of nets and blankets and a pillow. Close against the cabin Peter built a bed of nets and blankets.

“There, now!” he said. “That's some bed! I hope that moon didn't blink at you. Did she?”

“No, she didn't,” said Buddy. “But she almost did.”

“You crawl in here where you'll be nice and warm, then,” said Peter. “Uncle Peter has to have somebody to watch that moon and tell him if she blinks, and you can lie here and look up, like the sailors do. If she blinks, you tell me, won't you?”

“Yes,” said Buddy seriously, and Peter tucked him in the blankets. “Uncle Peter,” he said, after a minute, “she blinked.”

“Did she, now?” said Peter, but Buddy said no more. He was asleep.

But the moon did not blink much. Big and clear and cold she filled the river valley with white light through which sparkles of frost glittered, and through the evening and late into the night Peter Lane stood at his sweep, looking out over the water and thinking his own strange thoughts. Now and then he stooped and arranged the blanket over Buddy's shoulders, and now and then he knelt and dipped water from the river with his cupped hand to pour upon the sweep-pin lest it creak and awaken the boy. When he swung the sweep he swung it slowly and carefully, so that only the softest gurgle of water could be heard above the plashing of the small waves against the hull.

After midnight the night became intensely cold and Peter's fingers stiffened on the sweep handle, and he warmed them by hugging them in his arm-pits. It was about two in the morning when the shanty-boat slipped into the mouth of the slough that cut George Rapp's place, and floated more slowly down the narrow winding water until the soft grating of sand on the bottom of the hull told Peter she was going aground on a bar. Very quietly, then, Peter poled the boat close to the low, muddy bank—frozen now—and made her fast. His voyage was over.

He gathered driftwood and made a fire, well back from the boat so the light might not disturb the boy's slumber, and sat beside it, warming his hands and feet, until the sun lighted the east. It was a full hour after sunrise before Buddy awakened, and then he looked expectantly at the sky.

“The moon got lost, Uncle Peter,” he said with deep concern.

“Well, we haven't time to bother about any moon this morning,” said Peter briskly. “This is the day you are going to have a real good time, because a farmer man lives not so far away from here, and he has more pigs than you ever heard of, and horses,

and cows, and chickens, and turkeys, and guinea-hens, and I don't know what all, and I dare say he's wondering why you haven't come to see them by this time. Yes, sir, he's wondering why Buddy hasn't come yet. And so are the pigs, and the cows, and the horses, and the chickens, and the guinea-hens."

"And the turkeys," said Buddy, eagerly.

"Yes, siree, Bob!" said Peter. "So we'll hurry up and wash our faces—"

Buddy scrambled to his feet, all eagerness, and then, with the sudden changefulness of a small boy, he turned from Peter, toward the cabin door.

"I want my mama to wash my face!" he said.

Peter Lane put his thin brown hand on Buddy's shoulder.

"Son," he said, so seriously that Buddy looked up, "do you recall to mind the other night when you and your ma come a knocking at my door, and how cold and wet and tired in the leg, and hungry you was? Well, Buddy, your ma was awful sorry you was so tired out and all. I guess I couldn't half tell you how sorry she was, son, not in a week. You took notice how your ma cried whilst you was on that trip, didn't you?"

"Yes, Mama cried," said Buddy.

"Yes, she cried," said Peter. "And the reason she cried was because she had to take you on that trip that she didn't know what was to be the end of. That's what she cried for, because she had to let you get all tired and hungry. And you wouldn't want to make your ma cry any more, would you?"

"No," said Buddy simply.

"Well, then," said Peter, clearing his throat, "your ma she has had to go on another trip, unexpected, and she says to me, in a way, so to speak, 'Uncle Peter,' she said, 'here's Buddy, and he just can't go with me on this trip, and I want you to take him and—and—show him the pigs and—'"

“And cows,” Buddy prompted. “And horses. And turkeys.”

“Why, yes,” said Peter Lane. “So to speak, that's what she meant, I guess. The horses and turkeys and the things in the world. So she went away, and she wouldn't like to have you fret too much just because she couldn't take you along.”

“All right,” said Buddy, quite satisfied. “Let's go see the pigs, and the cows, and the turkeys.”

For Peter it was a long day, from the time he carried Buddy on his shoulder to the farm-house two miles back on the bluff to the time he stopped for him at the farm-house again, late in the afternoon, and bore him back to the boat, with a chunk of gingerbread in his hand, and the farmer's kind wife standing in the door, wiping her eyes on her blue apron.

When Peter had tucked the boy in the bunk, and had said “Good night,” he took out his jack-knife to shape a wooden spoon. The boy, raising his head, watched him, and Peter, looking up, saw the blue eyes and thought he saw a reproach in them.

“That's so!” he said. “That's so! I forgot it teetotally last night.”

He seated himself on the edge of the bunk and leaned over the boy, taking the small hands in his.

“I don't know if your ma had you say your prayers to her or not, Buddy,” he said, “and I don't rightly remember how that 'Our Father' goes, so we'll get along the best we can 'til I go up to the farm again and I find out for sure. You just say this after Uncle Peter—'O God, make us all well and happy to-morrow: Buddy and Uncle Peter, and Aunt Jane,'”

“And Aunt Jane,” repeated Buddy.

“And—and Mrs. Potter,” said Peter.

“And Mrs. Potter,” said Buddy, “and the pigs, and the horses, and the cows, and the chickens, and the turkeys.”

“Well—yes!” said Peter. “I guess it won't do any harm to put them in, although it ain't customary. They might as well be well and happy as not.—Amen!”

“Uncle Peter,” said the boy suddenly, “will Mama come back?”

“Oh, yes!” said Peter Lane, in his unpreparedness, and then he opened his mouth again to tell the boy the truth, but he heard the sigh of satisfaction as Buddy dropped his head on the pillow and closed his eyes.

“I got to take that lie back to-morrow,” said Peter gravely, but he never did take it back, never! It stands against him to this day, but it is quite hidden in the heaped up blossoms of his gentle kindness.

VI. “BOOGE”

NO, siree, Buddy!” said Peter, shaking his head, “my jack-knife is one thing you can't have to play with. There's two things a man oughtn't to trust to anybody; one's his jack-knife and one's his soul. He ought to keep both of them nice and sharp and clean. If I been letting my soul get dull and rusty and all nicked up, it's no sign I'm going to let my jack-knife get that way. What I got to do is to polish up my soul, and I guess there ain't no better place to do it than down here where there ain't nobody to bother me whilst I do it. You hain't no idee what a soul is, but you will have some day, maybe. I ain't right sure I know that, myself.”

The shanty-boat was moored in Rapp's slough, and had been there three days. The cold weather, which continued unabated, had sealed the boat in by spreading a sheet of ice over the surface of the slough, but Peter did not like the way the river was behaving. Between the new-formed ice and the shore a narrow strip of water appeared faster than the cold could freeze it and the ice that covered the slough cracked now and then in long, irregular lines, all telling that the river was rising, and rising rapidly. This meant that the cold snap was merely local and that up the river unseasonably warm weather had brought rains or a great thaw. There was no great

danger of a long period of high water so late in the season, for cold waves were sure to freeze the North soon, but the present high water was not only apt to be inconvenient but actually dangerous for the shanty-boat. A rise of another foot would cover the lowland, and if the weather turned warm Buddy and Peter would be cut off from the hill farms by two miles of water-covered “bottom,” to wade across which in Peter's thin shoes would be most unpleasant.

The danger was that the wind which now blew steadily toward the Iowa side and down stream, might force the huge weight of floating ice into the head of the slough, pushing and pressing it against the newly formed slough ice and crumbling it—cracked and loosened at the edges as it was—and thus pile the whole mass irresistibly against the little shanty-boat. In such an event the boat would either be overwhelmed by one of those great ice hills that pile up when the river ice meets an obstruction or, borne before the tons of pressure, be carried out of the slough with the moving ice and forced down the river for many miles, perhaps, before Peter could work the boat into clear water and find shelter behind some point. The water reached the height of the bank of the slough the third day, and Peter made every possible preparation to save the boat should the ice begin to move. There was not much he could do. He unshipped his small mast and drove a spike in its butt, to use as a pike pole, stowed his skiff in a safe place between two large trees on the shore, and saw to the hitch that held the boat, that he might cast off promptly if the strain became too great.

Peter did not blame himself for the position in which the untimely rise had placed him. The slough should have been a safe place. Once let the ice firmly seal the slough—any slough—and all the weight of all the floating ice of the whole river could not disturb the boat. When the ice moved out of the river in the spring it would pile up in a mountain at the head of the island formed by the slough, choking the entrance, and not until the slough ice softened and rotted and honeycombed and at last dissolved in the sun, could anything move the shanty-boat. A big rise in

November is rare indeed.

“But I want your jack-knife, Uncle Peter,” said the boy insistently. “I want to whittle.”

“And I wouldn't give two cents for a boy that didn't want to whittle,” said Peter. “A jack-knife is one of the things I've got to get you when I go up town, and I'll put it right down now.”

From his clock shelf—still lacking its alarm-clock—he took a slip of paper and a pencil stub. It was his list of goods to be bought, and it was growing daily.

Coffee Rubber boots for B Lard Sweter for B. red one Bibel Sope Hymn Book Stokings for B A. B. C. blocks for B 60 thread. 80 too

Under this he added “Jack-knife for B.” and replaced the list and pencil. He shook his head as he did so. He had forty cents in his pocket, and the small pile of wooden spoons that represented his trading capital had not increased. Getting settled for the winter had taken most of his time, and while his jack-knife was busy each evening its work was explained by the toys with which Buddy had littered the floor. These were crudely whittled and grotesque animals—a horse, a cow, two pigs and a cat much larger than the cow, all of clean white maplewood—the beginnings of a complete farm-yard. Of them all Buddy preferred the “funny cat,” and a funny cat it was.

Peter had his own ideas on the question of when a small boy should go to bed, but Buddy had other ideas, and Peter was not sorry to have the boy playing about the cabin long after normal bed-time. When, on the night of the funeral, it became a matter of plain decency for Buddy to retire, and he wouldn't, Peter had compromised by agreeing to whittle a cat if Buddy would go to bed like a little soldier as soon as the cat was completed. The result was a very hasty cat. Peter made it with twenty quick motions of his jack-knife—which was putting up a job on Buddy—but Buddy was satisfied. The cat had no ears. It might have been a rabbit or a bear, if Peter had

chosen to call it so. It was a most impressionistic cat. But Buddy loved it.

“Ho! ho!” he laughed, throwing his legs in the air, as was his way when he was much amused. “That's a funny cat, Uncle Peter. Make another funny cat.”

“You get to bed, young Buddy!” said Peter. “I said I'd make you a cat, and you say that's a cat, and you said you'd go to bed, so to bed you go.”

And to bed Buddy went, with the cat in one hand. Next to Peter himself Buddy loved the cat more than anything in the world. He loved to look at the cat. It was the sort of cat that left something to the imagination. That may be why he liked it. Children are happiest with the simplest toys.

In Peter's list of prospective purchases the “Bibel” had been put down because Peter, watching Buddy's curly head as it lay beside the cat on the pillow of the bunk, had suddenly perceived that a child is a tremendous responsibility. Buddy's hair did it. He noticed that Buddy's hair, which had been almost white, had, in the few days Peter had had him in charge, turned to a dirty gray. He had not minded Buddy's dirty face and hands—they were normal to a boy—but the soiled tow hair shamed Peter. Even a mother like Buddy's had kept that hair as it should be, and Peter was shocked to think he was already letting the boy deteriorate. If this continued Buddy would soon be no better than himself—a shiftless (as per Mrs. Potter), careless, no-account scrub of a boy, and it made Peter wince. He thought too much of the freckled face, and the little tow-head to have that happen.

It made him down-hearted for a minute, but Peter was never despondent long. If the cold chilled his bones it suggested a trip to New Orleans or Cuba, and he instantly forgot the cold in building one detail of the trip on another, until he had circumnavigated the globe and decided he would go to neither one nor the other, but to Patagonia or Peru.

If that was the way Buddy's hair looked after a few days under the old Peter, then Peter must turn over so many new leaves he would be in the second volume. He

would be a tramp no more. He would have money and a home and be a respected citizen, with a black silk watch fob, and go to church—and that suggested the "Bibel." With "sope" and the Scripture on his list Peter felt less guilty.

The "hymn book" was a sequential thought. Bibles and hymn books go hand in hand. Peter meant to start Buddy right, and he was going to begin with himself. He meant, now, to be a good man, and a prosperous one—perhaps a millionaire. His idea was a little vague, including a shadowy Prince Albert coat and a silk hat, but he thought a Bible and a hymn book, at least, ought to be in the stock of a man that was going to be what Peter meant to be. The A. B. C. blocks on the list were to be the cornerstone of Buddy's education, and on them Peter visioned a gilded structure of college and other vague things of culture. Peter's plans were always dreamlike, and all the more beautiful for that reason. He was forever about to trap some elusive chinchilla on some unattainable Amazon.

"Make a funny cat, Uncle Peter," said Buddy when he was convinced he could not coax the jack-knife from Peter.

"Oh, no!" said Peter. "You've got one funny cat. I guess one funny cat like that is enough in one family. Uncle Peter has to keep his eye out to watch if the ice is going to move this morning. He can't make cats."

"Make a funny dog," said Buddy promptly. "Well, Buddy, if I make you a funny dog," said Peter, "will you be a good boy and play with it and let Uncle Peter get some stove wood aboard the boat?"

"Yes, Uncle Peter," said Buddy. He had the smile of a cherub and the splendid mendacity of youth. He would promise anything. Only the most unreasonable expect a boy to keep such promises, but it does the heart good to hear them.

Peter took a thin slice of maplewood from his pile, and seated himself on his bunk. He held the wood at arm's length until he saw a dog in it, and Buddy leaned against his knee.

“Now, this is going to be a real funny dog,” said Peter, as his keen blade sliced through the wood as easily as a yacht's prow cuts the water. “S'pose we put his head up like that, hey, like he was laughing at the moon?” Two deft turns of the blade. “And we'll have this funny dog a-sitting on his hind legs, hey?” Four swift turns of the knife.

“That's a funny dog!” laughed Buddy. “Give me the funny dog.”

“Now, don't you be so impatient,” said Peter. “This is going to be a real funny dog, if you wait a minute. There, now, he's scratching that ear with this paw, and he's ready to shake hands with this one, and”—two or three quick turns of the knife—“there he is, cocking his eye up at you, like he was tickled to death to see you had your face washed this morning without howling no more than you did.”

“Ho, ho!” laughed Buddy; “that's a funny dog! Now make a funny rabbit, Uncle Peter.”

“No, siree, Buddy!” said Peter sternly.

“You promised to be good if I made a dog, so you just sit down and be it. When a body makes a promise, he'd always ought to keep it, if it ain't too inconvenient. So you stay right here and don't touch the stove or anything, whilst I get in some wood. That's my duty, and when a man has a duty to do he ought to do it, unless something he'd rather do turns up meanwhile.”

Peter took his shot-gun. There was always a chance of a shot at a rabbit. He crossed the plank to the shore, but there was not much burnable driftwood along the slough. What there was had been frozen in the ice, and Peter pushed his way up to where the slough made a sharp turn. In such places abundant driftwood was thrown against the willows at high water, and Peter set his gun against a log and filled his arms. He was stooping for a last stick when a cotton-tail darted from under the tangled pile and zig-zagged into the willow thicket.

Peter dropped his wood and grasped his gun and ran after the rabbit, but his foot

turned on a slimy log and he went down. He had a bad fall.

For a man just beginning a career of superhuman goodness Peter swore quite freely as he sat on the log and hugged his ankle, grinning with pain. It relieved his mind, and the rubbing he gave his ankle relieved the pain, and he felt better all through when he put his foot to the ground and tried it. He limped a little, but he grinned, too, for he knew Buddy would be amused to see Uncle Peter limping “like Buddy.” Buddy could see something funny in anything.

Peter limped back to his driftwood, but as he pushed through the leafless willows he dropped his gun and hobbled hastily toward the shanty-boat. Forced by the weight of river ice pressing in at the head of the slough, the slough ice was “going out,” and it was going out rapidly. Already, as far as Peter could see down the slough, the surface was covered with hurrying river ice, borne along by wind and current.

In his concern for the shanty-boat and Buddy, Peter forgot his ankle. He knew well the power of the ice, and he fought his way along the shore through the willow thickets, fearing at each glimpse to see the shanty-boat crushed against some great water-elm and heaped high with ice, and fearing still more to see nothing of it whatever. Once let the shanty-boat find the mouth of the slough and pass out into the broad Mississippi and, he well knew, he might have a long fight to overtake it. The boat might travel for days jammed in the floating ice, before he could reach it, or it might be crushed against some point or in some cove. What would then be Buddy's fate? What, indeed, might not be the boy's fate already, if he had been frightened by the grinding of the ice against the boat, by the snapping of the shore cable or by the motion of the boat, and had attempted to reach the shore? Peter beat the willow saplings aside with his arms as he tried to make haste, jumping into them and thrusting them aside like a swimmer.

In places the water had overflowed the feet of the willows, and through this Peter splashed unheeding. Once, in trying to keep outside the willow fringe, he would

have slipped into the slough had he not saved himself by clinging to the bushes, and he was wet to the waist. Here and there the bank lay a foot or two higher, and there were no willows, but a tangle of dead grapevines impeded him. In other places the shore dipped and the water stood as deep as Peter's knees, and he crashed through the thin ice into icy water. He did not dare venture back from the shore lest he pass the shanty-boat, stranded against some tree.

Cold as the air was the sweat ran from Peter's face, and he panted for breath. To pass leisurely along the bank of such a slough is strenuous work, but to fight along it as Peter was fighting, is real man's work, and Peter—thin, delicate as he looked—was all iron and leather. For a mile and a half he worked his way, until he reached a great sycamore, known to all the duck hunters as the “Big Tree.” Below the Big Tree the slough widened into a broad expanse of water known as Big Tree Lake. Peter stopped short. In the middle of the lake, knee-deep in water and holding fast to a worn imitation-leather valise from which the water was dripping, stood a man. The shanty-boat, thrown out of the main current, had been pushed into shallow water, where it had grounded unharmed, and it was for the shanty-boat the man with the valise was making, swearing heartily each time he took a new step in the icy water. Peter yelled and the man turned, and looked back. At the first glimpse of the face Peter picked up a stout slab of driftwood.

The man wore the ragged remnant of a felt hat on a mass of iron-gray hair that hung over his beady eyes, and all his face but his eyes and a round red nubbin of a nose was hidden by a mat of brown beard. When he saw Peter he scowled and splashed recklessly toward the boat, swearing as he went.

The western side of the lake was overgrown with wild rice, a favorite feeding spot for the migrating ducks. Indeed, the entire lake was apt to disappear during very low water, leaving only sun-baked mud with the slough running along the eastern margin. Through the shallow ice-topped water Peter splashed after the tramp,

breaking the ice as he went. Until he was well out in the lake the ice had not been broken, and Peter could not understand this. It was as if the tramp had jumped a hundred yards from the shore. But Peter did not give it much thought. He had something more important to think of.

The tramp had reached the shanty-boat and had clambered aboard, and with the pike pole Peter had left lying on the roof, was trying frantically to pole the boat off the bar into deeper water. A boat adrift is any one's boat, if he can keep it, and once the boat swung clear of the bar into deeper water the tramp could laugh at Peter. He rammed the pike-pole into the sand-bar and threw his weight upon it, straining and jumping up and down while Peter splashed toward him.

But the boat would not budge. The pike-pole found no grip in the soft sand of the bar, and Peter came nearer, holding up one arm to protect his head. He expected the tramp to strike him down with the heavy pike-pole, and he was ready to make a fight for it, but as Peter's hand touched the deck the tramp put down a hand to help him aboard.

“All right, pardner,” he said in a voice so gruff it seemed to come from great depths, “I'll give you half the vessel. I've been dyin' for company since I come aboard. It's lonely on this yacht.”

Peter grinned a grin he had when he was angry, that made his face wrinkle like a wolf's.

“This is my boat,” he said briefly, and threw open the door. Buddy sat on the floor as Peter had left him, playing with the “funny” dog. As Peter entered he looked up.

“My funny dog ain't got no tail, Uncle Peter,” he said.

“Yes, he has, Buddy,” said Peter, with a great sigh of relief. “He's got a tail, but you can't see it because he's sitting on it.”

But Buddy was looking past Peter at the tramp. The man, his thumbs in the torn armholes of his coat, his head on one side, one leg raised in the air, was making

faces at Buddy. As Peter turned, the tramp put the toe of his boot through the handle of his valise and raised it, tossing it in the air with his foot.

Buddy laughed with glee.

“That's a funny man, Uncle Peter,” he said. “Who's him?”

The tramp stepped aside and put his wet valise on the floor. Then he took off his hat and laid it across his breast and bowed low to Buddy.

“Yer royal highness,” he said gravely. “I am knowed from near to far as The No-Less-Talented-Stranger-Who-Came-Out
Of-the-East-and-Got-His-Permanent-Set-back-In-the-Booze. Can you say that?”

Buddy laughed.

“Booge,” he said. “That's a funny name.”

Peter stood with one hand on the door and the tramp's dripping valise in the other, but it was evident Booge did not mean to accept Peter's attitude as an invitation to depart. He went inside and seated himself on the edge of the bunk and pulled off first one wet boot, and then the other. He paid no attention to Peter whatever but from time to time he screwed up his hairy face and winked at the boy.

“My name's Buddy,” said Buddy. “Buddy?” queried Booge. “That's a bully name for a little feller. First the Bud, an' then the Flower, an' then the Apple green an' sour.”

Peter had never seen a tramp just like Booge. He had seen tramps as dirty, and as ragged, and as hairy, but he had never seen one that little boys did not fear, and it was plain that Buddy was captivated by Booge's good-nature. But a tramp was a tramp, no matter how captivating, and a tramp was no companion for a boy who was to grow up to be a bank president, or goodness knows what, of respectability. He hardened his heart.

Booge continued to Buddy: “You didn't know I was a teacher, did you? Oh, yes, indeed! I'm an educated feller, and I figured to teach you, but it seems some folks

want you to grow up just as ignorant as possible. Oh, yes!”

Peter hesitated. At any rate there was no need of making the fellow walk through the ice-covered lake again.

“What can you teach him?” he asked.

“Well, there's soprano,” rumbled Booge. “I can teach him soprano. That's a good thing for a young feller to know. Soprano or alto, just as you say—or bass. I can teach bass if the board is good. How is the board on board?”

Peter ignored the question. He was trying to guess what sort of strange creature this was.

“Well, if it's as good as you say,” said Booge, “I'll teach him all three. That's liberal. I'll give you a sample of my singin'.”

“You don't need to,” said Peter. “When I want any singing, I'll do my own.”

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“Well, since you urge it that way,” said Booge, “I can't refuse,” and tapping his bare foot on the floor he sang. He found, somewhere in his head, a high, squeaky falsetto. It seemed to dwell in his nose. He sang:—

Go wash the little baby, the baby, the baby; Go wash the little baby, and give it toast and tea; Go wash the little baby, the baby, the baby, Go wash the little baby, and bring it back to me.

He let the last word drone out long and thin, and as it droned he made faces at Buddy, screwing up his eyes, wriggling his nose, and waggling his chin.

“Sing it again, Booge!” cried Buddy enthusiastically. “Sing it again.”

The tramp arose and bowed gravely, first to Buddy and then to the frowning Peter.

“That's enough of that,” said Peter.

“Sing it again, Booge!” commanded Buddy, and the tramp standing with his hand inside his coat, sang, in his deepest bass:—

Don't swear before the baby, the baby, the baby, Don't swear before the baby, or cheat or steal or lie, Don't swear before the baby, the baby, the baby, Don't swear before the baby, but give it apple pie.

“Now, laugh! shouted Buddy.

“Ha, ha! Ha, ha, ha!” said Booge, exactly as it is printed.

“I want your face to laugh!” ordered Buddy.

Booge screwed up his thin face, and Buddy looked and was satisfied. Booge was satisfied, too. He knew Buddy was boss of the boat, now, and he knew he stood well with Buddy.

VIII. RIVALS

THUNDERING cats!” cried Peter with exasperation when the tramp had “ha, ha'd” and grinned through two more verses of the idiotic song; “I've got to go outside and tend to this boat!”

“You play with your toys a minute, now, Buddy,” said Booge, as soon as Peter was outside. “My voice is such a delicate voice I got to rest it between songs or it's liable to get sick and die away for good. You wait 'til I rest it and I'll sing about that funny dog you've got there, if you remember to ask me.”

He took his few belongings from the valise and hung them before the fire and then, crawling into the bunk, settled himself comfortably, and went to sleep. When Peter came in a minute later, with feet and legs chilled, Booge was snoring.

“Get up, here!” said Peter, shaking him.

“You better not wake up Booge, Uncle Peter,” said Buddy, “he's got to get his voice rested up.”

“You get up and get your boots on quick, and come out here and help me,” Peter commanded the tramp. “We got to get this boat afloat quick or we'll be here all

winter."

"All right, Captain Kidd," said Booge cheerfully. "And you remember to ask me to sing you that song about the funny dog," he told Buddy.

The slough was now free from floating river ice, but Peter noticed that the wind was still from the east. This should have kept the ice running through the slough. He knew the ice must have jammed at the head of the slough, and that it might act as a dam, lowering the water in the slough enough to make it impossible to move the boat. He was working at the pike-pole, but with poor success, and when Booge came out their combined efforts seemed to accomplish no more. But Peter knew the boat must be moved, and long after Booge wanted to give it up as a bad job, Peter made him labor at the pole. By standing on the landward edge of the deck and joggling the boat as they pushed on the pole they succeeded in inching the shanty-boat toward deeper water, and at length she floated free and swung down the current. Where the lake narrowed and ended Peter ran the boat against the shore, letting her rest against a fallen tree. It was a precarious position, and one in which it would not be safe to leave the boat if the river ice ran again, but just above this where the lake widened, Peter saw a safe harbor. Fifty feet out from the southern shore of the lake a bar had formed, and between the bar and the shore there was deep water enough to float the boat. To break the ice of this cove, warp the boat around the point and into this snug harbor was Peter's intention. His only cable had snapped close to the boat when she broke away, and he made Booge hold the bow of the boat close against the bank while he hastily twisted a makeshift rope of trot-lines—hooks and all.

With Booge on the shore dragging at the rope end, and Peter breaking the ice with his pike-pole from the deck, and pushing with the pole, the shanty-boat moved slowly out of the current of the slough and into the quiet water where, as the river fell, it would be stranded with its hull in the mud, as safe from danger as if on top of one of the hills two miles back from the slough.

It was hard work—the hardest Booge had tackled for years—and it consumed the balance of the day. When the two men went inside Peter did not complain when Booge threw himself on the bunk.

If Booge imagined he had won an easy and permanent victory, leading to a life of listless ease, he misestimated Buddy and Peter. Buddy alone could have kept him busy, but Peter let Booge know immediately that if he was to stay even a day he must earn his food and lodging.

The tramp was an odd combination of good nature and laziness; of good intentions and poor fulfilments. He could twang a banjo, when he had one to twang, and his present low estate was due to the untimely end of the career of a “medicine show,” one of those numerous half-vaudeville, half-peddling aggregations that at that time filled the country, charging a dime for admission to the “show” and a dollar a bottle for the “remedy.” Out of a hidden past Booge had dropped into the position of general “roustabout” for the show, caring for the tent, doing a banjo “turn” when the “artist” went on his regular spree, and driving the wagon when the show moved from town to town. When the final catastrophe came, Booge sold his banjo and started on the trail of another medicine-show. It fled as he advanced, and his garments decayed, were replaced with cast-off clothes, until he awoke one morning with a sharp realization that he was no longer a specialist seeking a position, but a common, every-day tramp. It did not annoy him at all. Being a tramp had advantages. He accepted it as his ultimate destiny.

Caught near Riverbank by the cold weather, he recalled Lone Tree Lake, where the duck hunters usually had a shack or a shanty-boat, vacant at this season, and he left the main road only to find nothing but the scant shelter of the duck blind. Peter's boat, when it appeared, had seemed a gift from the gods.

The shore against which the boat now lay was a thicket of willows so close of growth that it was almost impossible to fight through them, and while most were no

larger than whips some were as large as a man's wrist. Against the low bank the boat lay broadside and so close that the willow branches reached over her roof, and as soon as Booge had brought his valise inside Peter reached far under the bunk and brought forth an ax.

“Now, Booge ain't going to have time to sing songs to you daytimes, Buddy, because everybody that lives in this boat has work to do,” said Peter, “and as I've got to make some spoons, Booge is going to take this ax and clear away a path through the willows. And you want to cut them off close down to the roots,” he warned Booge, “or you'll have to do it over again. You cut a path from the front door through that willow clump, so we can pass in and out and get fire-wood, and when you 've got the path you can fetch the fire-wood. I'm going to stay in to-day and make spoons.”

Booge took the ax and looked at it quizzically.

“Well, if this ain't my old friend wood-splitter I've been dodging for years and years,” he said good naturedly. “How-do, wood-splitter? How's your cousin buck saw? Is all the little saw-bucks well?”

“You'd better get at them willows,” said Peter.

“I just wanted to enquire about them old friends of mine,” said Booge.

“You'll have time enough to talk to Mr. Wood-ax before you get done with him,” said Peter dryly, and Booge laughed and went out.

That evening, when Buddy was in bed Peter put down his jack-knife long enough to scribble down the new variations of the “Tell the Little Baby” song.

“Writin' a book?” Booge asked.

“Writing home to my folks to tell them how much I'm enjoying your visit,” Peter said, “and how sorry I am you 've got to be moving along in a day or so.”

But Booge did not move along. After Peter had ostentatiously bathed once or twice

Booge became painfully clean. He would come in from the jobs Peter set him and wash his face and hands violently.

“You 're getting as clean as them fellows that get five dollars' worth of baths at the Y. M. C. A., ain't you?” Peter said scornfully.

“A feller can get lots of things at the Y. M. C. A. for five dollars that he can't get without it,” said Booge good naturedly. “You don't want to knock me all the time, Peter. A horse crops grass one way, and a cow crops it another way, and the Lord is the maker of them all, as the feller said. So long as a man has a clean conscience and a clear eye he can walk right up to any bull alive—if the bull wants to let him.”

“I'm glad you got a clean conscience,” said Peter. “Maybe that's why you don't worry.”

“If you feed a pig regular it don't ask to be petted,” said Booge, “and that's the way with me, but you ought to give me some credit for the way I pitched in and labored in this here driftwood vineyard when you said to. I bet the prodigal son hated to get down to work after his pa's party, and yet he got to be quite a respected feller in his neighborhood. You oughtn't to think a man can't work because he don't. There's lots of fellers never seen the sea that has eat salt codfish.”

“I guess you read that in a book,” said Peter.

“I guess not,” said Booge. “I never read but one book in my life. I read the Bible, unexpurgated edition, when I was a kid, and it sort of cured me of book readin'. There ain't hardly a comfortable word in it for an easy-goin' man. If the Bible had been published to-day it would have got some mighty severe criticism.”

“Booge,” said Peter suddenly, “how'd you ever happen to become a tramp?”

“How'd you ever happen to become a shanty-boatman?” asked Booge, grinning, but Peter was serious.

“I guess you 're right about that,” he said. “I hadn't ought to object to what you are,

when I'm what I am. I just let myself slide, was how. I had bad lungs was what was the matter with me, when I was a kid, so my pa bought me a farm and put a man on it to run it for me, and I just fooled around and tried to get husky and stout and by the time I was old enough to run the farm Father busted, and then a—certain circumstances took the farm from me, and I took to the river. It seemed like me and the river was old friends from ever so far back. So I stuck to it and it stuck to me, and—that's the story."

"Just run down hill," commented Booge cheerfully. "It's funny, ain't it, that water's about the only thing that don't get blamed for runnin' down hill? You and the river sort of run down together. What started me was something just about as common as lungs—it was wives. Yes sir, just plain wives!"

"Don't mean to say you had two of 'em?" asked Peter.

"Almost," said Booge. "I had one-half of that many. I'm a naturally happy man, and I've had all sorts of ups and downs, and as near as I can make out, a man can be happy in most any circumstances except where he don't give his wife the clothes she wants. My notion of hell is a place where a man has fifty wives and no money to buy clothes for 'em. My wife got to goin' through my pockets every night for money to buy clothes, so I skipped out."

"You don't mean to say a woman would rob a man's pockets whilst he was asleep?" asked Peter. "Was that what she done? Took money from them?"

"No, the trouble was she didn't find no money to take," said Booge. "Light on money and strong on breath was what was my trouble."

He made an expressive drinking motion with his hand.

"Booze," he said. "Booze done it."

"You'd ought to quit it," Peter said. "You don't seem like a common tramp. I wouldn't let you stay here if you was. Look at the harm booze done you. Look at what it done when you went to sleep in that duck-blind."

“That's so,” agreed Booge. “It got me a good shanty-boat to sleep in and three square meals a day and a place to practise my voice in. But I suppose you mean it got me where I have to listen to temp'rance lectures from you.”

That was sort of hard on Peter, although he would not have admitted it, he was growing fond of the careless, happy-go-lucky tramp. Booge had a fund of rough philosophy and, more than all else, he was good to Buddy, and had not Peter resolved to be a different man himself on Buddy's account, he would have liked nothing better than to have Booge make his winter home in the shanty-boat, but he felt that Booge must go. The trouble was to drive him away. Booge would not drive, and Peter thought of a hundred quite impossible schemes for getting rid of him before he hit on the one he finally decided to put into effect.

He had noticed that the farmer on the hill back of the lake, where Buddy had spent the day of his mother's funeral, had a huge pile of cord wood in his yard, and he tramped across the lowland to the farmer's house and dickered for the sawing of the wood. It was a large contract, and Peter as a rule did not care to saw wood except in dire straits, but he had decided that if he was to be a man of worth he must be a man of work to begin with, and the wood pile was opportunity. It was while walking home after making his bargain with his farmer friend that he had his happy idea—Booge must saw wood! His food supply would be cut off otherwise!

He explained it to Booge that evening. Here they were in the shanty-boat, Peter explained, the two of them and Buddy, all eating from the common store of food, and that store dwindling daily. Buddy could not work, but Peter could, and Booge must. Then he explained about the pile of wood, a good winter's work for the two of them. Booge listened in silence. He was silent for several minutes after Peter ceased talking, and then he grinned.

“The man that says he wouldn't rather find a silver dollar in the road than earn five dollars a-workin', is like that man that got killed with a thunderbolt for careless

conversation," he said cheerfully, "so I won't say it. Wood-sawin' and me has been enemies ever since I became a tourist. I guess I'll have to go—"

"I bet you would!" said Peter.

"Yes," said Booge, "I'll have to go—up to that farmer's and saw wood."

His eyes twinkled as he saw Peter's face fall. And he was as good as his word. The two men, taking turns carrying Buddy or leading him by the hand, walked across the snow-covered bottom to the farm the next morning, and while Booge did not over-exert himself, he at least sawed wood. He sawed enough to prevent any unduly harsh criticism from Peter.

For Buddy the trips were pleasure jaunts. He was able to play all day with the farmer's little daughter, just enough older than he to hold her own against his imperious little will, and Booge might have developed into an excellent sawer of wood, but one morning, the little girl did not come out to play with Buddy. She was sick, and in due time Buddy became sick too—plain, simple measles.

"Now, then," said Peter when one morning he awakened to find Buddy's face covered with the red spots and the boy complaining, "one of us has got to stay here in the boat and take care of Buddy."

"You'd better stay," said Booge promptly. "You stay, Peter, and I'll go on up and saw wood. I'm gettin' quite fond of it."

Peter hesitated. He ran his hand over the boy's white head lovingly.

"Who do you want to stay with you, Buddy?" he asked.

"I don't care, Uncle Peter," said Buddy listlessly.

It was a full minute before Peter took his hand from Buddy's curls.

"I guess you'd better stay, Booge," he said then. "You can sing what he likes better'n I can."

"Well, if you think I can amuse him better'n you can, I'll stay, Peter," said Booge

reluctantly. “If he seems to hanker for you, I'll fire the shot-gun and you can come to him.”

So one of these two men went to his work, and the other seated himself on the floor of the cabin with his back against the wall and sang “Go Tell the Little Baby, the Baby, the Baby,” through his nose, and made faces, to amuse a freckle-faced little boy with a very light attack of the measles.

IX. PETER GIVES WARNING

THE weather turned extremely cold. Peter came back from his wood-sawing one evening and found Buddy astride a rocking-horse. The table was on top of the bunk to make room for the horse, and Booge, robed in one of the blankets, was playing the part of a badly scared Indian after whom Buddy was riding in violent chase. For a week Buddy had been well, but Booge managed to make Peter think he could still see spots on the boy. Booge had no desire to begin sawing wood again. It was much pleasanter in the shanty-boat with Buddy.

The rocking-horse was the oddest looking horse that ever cantered. Among the driftwood Booge had found the remains of an old rocking-chair, and on the rockers he had mounted four willow legs, with the bark still on them, and on these a section of log for the body. With his ax he had cut out a rough semblance of a head and neck from a pine board. The tail and mane were seine twine. But Buddy thought it was a great horse.

“Looks like you was a great sculpist, don't it?” said Peter jealously, as he stood watching Buddy riding recklessly over the prairies of the shanty-boat floor. “So that's why you been trying to make me think freckles was measles. It's a pity you didn't have a saw to work with.”

Booge looked at Peter suspiciously.

“I guess maybe by to-morrow I can find one for you,” continued Peter. “I saw a right

good one up at the farm. And quite a lot of cord wood to practise on."

"If you ain't just like a mind reader, Peter!" exclaimed Booge. "You must have knowed I been hankerin' to get back there at that pleasant occupation. But I hated to ask you, you 're so dumb jealous of everything. It's been so long since you've invited me to saw wood I was beginnin' to think you wanted the whole job for yourself."

"You won't have to hanker to-morrow," said Peter dryly.

"To-morrow? Now, ain't that too bad!" said Booge. "To-morrow's just the one day I can't saw wood. I been hired for the day."

"Uncle Booge is going to make me a wagon," said Buddy.

"Uncle Booge is going to take you up to the farm while he saws wood," declared Peter. "Uncle Peter will make you a wagon later on, Buddy."

"I want Uncle Booge to make me a wagon to-morrow," Buddy insisted. "He said he would make me a wagon to-morrow. With wheels."

"And a seat into it," added Booge.

"All right," said Peter with irritation, "stay here and make a wagon, then," but that night when Buddy was in the bunk and asleep, Peter had a word for Booge.

"I don't want to hasten you any, Booge," he said, trimming the handle of a wooden spoon with great care as he spoke, "but day after to-morrow you'll have to pack your valise and get out of here. I don't want to seem inhospitable or anything, but when a visitor gets permission to stay over night to dry his boots, and then camps down, and loafs, and stays half the winter, and makes wagons and horses there ain't no room for in the boat, he's done about all the staying he's entitled to."

"Buddy's been askin' to have me go again!" said Booge.

"No, he ain't," answered Peter. "He—"

He caught the twinkle in Booge's eye and stopped.

"Let's wake Buddy up and ask him," said Booge.

“Buddy ain't got anything to say on this matter,” said Peter firmly. “And I ain't sending you away because you are trying to play off from doing your share of wood sawing, neither. I'm Buddy's uncle, and I've got to look out for how he's raised, and I don't want him raised by no tramp, and that's how he's being raised. Every day I think I'll chase you out to saw wood, and every day you come it over me somehow, and I go, and you don't. I don't know how you do it, but you're smart enough to make a fool of me. That's why you got to go.”

“Is it?” asked Booge placidly. “I thought it was because you was jealous of me. Yep, that's what I was just thinkin'. He's jealous and he don't care nothin' for what Buddy likes, or wants, or—”

“Nothing of the sort,” said Peter indignantly. “You ain't no sort of example to set the boy. I heard you swear this morning when Buddy stuck a fork into you to wake you up. No man that uses words like you used is the sort of man I want Buddy to be with.”

Booge grinned. There was no use in rebutting such an accusation. Indeed, he felt he had no call to argue with Peter. Day after to-morrow was a distant future for a man who had lately lived from one meal to the next. Booge believed Buddy would be the final dictator in the matter, and he was sure of Buddy now.

“So I guess you'll have to go,” continued Peter. “For a tramp you ain't been so bad, but it crops out on you every once in awhile, and it's liable to crop out strong any time. If it wasn't for the boy I'd let you stay until the ice goes out. I'd got just about to the point where I wasn't no better than a tramp myself, but when—but I've changed, and I'm going to change more.”

Booge nodded an assent.

“I can almost notice a change myself,” he said, “but the way you 're going to change ain't a marker to the way I'm goin' to change. I've been planning what I'd change into ever since I come here. I ain't quite decided whether to be an angel cherub, like

you—or a bank president. I sort of lean to being a bank president. Whiskers look better on a bank president than on an angel cherub, but if you think I'd better be an angel cherub, I'll shave up—and make a stab at—”

“You might as well be serious, my mind's made up,” said Peter coldly. “You got to go.”

“Suppose,” said Booge slowly, “I was to withdraw out of this here uncle competition and leave it all to you? Suppose I let on I lost my singin' voice?”

“No use!” said Peter firmly. “My mind's settled on that question. The longer you stay the harder it'll be to get you to go. I'm givin' you 'til day after to-morrow because I've got' to go up to town to-morrow. We 're shy on food. If it wasn't for that I'd start you off to-morrow.”

“Now, suppose I stop bein' Uncle Booge. Say I start bein' Gran'pa Booge, or Aunt Booge,” proposed Booge gravely. “I'll get a gingham apron and a caliker dress—”

“You'll get nothin' but out,” said Peter firmly. “You'll be nothin' but away from here.”

The trip to town had become absolutely necessary. Peter had drawn ten dollars from the farmer and he had some spoons ready for sale. The farmer was going to town and Peter had at first decided to take Buddy with him, but the spoon peddling excursion would, he feared, tire the boy too much, and he ended by planning to let Booge and Buddy stay in the shanty-boat.

It was an index to Peter's changed opinion of the tramp that he felt reasonably safe in leaving Buddy in Booge's care. For one thing Booge was sure to stay with the boat as long as food held out and work was not too pressing. The river had closed and the boat was solidly frozen in the slough. There was no possibility of Booge's floating away in it.

“I won't be back until late,” said Peter the next morning as he pinned his thin coat close about his neck, “and it's possible I won't get my spoons all sold out to-day. If I

don't I'll stay all night with a friend up town and get back somewhere to-morrow. And you take good care of Buddy, for if anything happens to him I'll hunt you up, no matter where you are, and make you wish it hadn't."

"Unless this horse runs away with him there ain't nothin' to happen," said Booge. "You needn't worry."

"And, Buddy, if you are a good boy and let Booge put you to bed, if I don't get back, Uncle Peter will bring you something you've been wanting this long while."

"I know what you 're going to bring me," said Buddy.

"I bet you do, you little rascal," said Peter, thinking of the jack-knife. "We both of us know, don't we? Good-by, Buddy-boy."

He picked up the boy and kissed him.

"You don't know what Uncle Peter is going to bring me, Uncle Booge!" said Buddy joyfully, when Peter was gone.

"No, sir!" said Booge.

"No, sir!" repeated Buddy. "Cause I know! Uncle Peter's going to bring me back my mama."

X. A VIOLENT INCIDENT

BOOGE waited until he knew Peter was well on his way. Then he took Buddy on his knee.

"Where is your ma, Buddy?" he asked. "Mama went away," said Buddy vaguely. "Did she go away from this boat?"

"Yes. Let's make a wagon, Uncle Booge," but Booge was not ready. He considered his next question carefully.

"We'll make that wagon right soon," he said. "Was Uncle Peter your pa before your ma went away?"

“I don't know,” said Buddy indefinitely. “You'd ought to know whether he was or not,” said Booge. “Didn't you call Uncle Peter 'pa,' or 'papa' or 'daddy' or something like that?”

“No,” said Buddy. “You said you'd make a wagon, Uncle Booge.”

“Right away!” said Booge. “What did you call Uncle Peter before your ma went away, Buddy?”

The child looked at Booge in surprise. “Why, 'course I didn't call him at all,” he said as if Booge should have known as much. “He wasn't my Uncle Peter, then.”

“Your ma just sort of stayed around the boat, did she?”

“No, my mama comed to the boat, and I comed to the boat, and my mama went away. But Uncle Peter and Buddy didn't not go away. I want to make a wagon, Uncle Booge.”

“Just one minute and we'll make that wagon, Buddy,” said Booge. “I just want to get this all straight first. What did your ma do when she came to the boat?”

“Mama cried,” said Buddy.

“I bet you!” said Booge. “And what did your ma do then, Buddy?”

“Mama hit Uncle Peter,” said Buddy, “and Mama went away, and Uncle Peter floated the boat, and I floated the boat. And I steered the boat.”

“And your ma left you with Uncle Peter when she went away,” said Booge. “What was your ma's name, Buddy. Was it Lane?”

“It was Mama,” said Buddy.

“But what was your name?” insisted Booge. “What did you say your name was when anybody said, 'What's your name, little boy?'”

“Buddy,” said the boy.

“Buddy what?” urged Booge.

“Mama's Buddy.”

Booge drew a deep breath. For five minutes more he questioned the boy, while Buddy grew more and more impatient to be at the wagon-making. Of Buddy's past Peter had, of course, never told Booge a word, but the tramp had his own idea of it. He felt that Peter was no ordinary shanty-boat man, and he imputed Peter's silence regarding the boy's past and parentage to a desire on Peter's part to shake himself free from that past. Why was Peter continually telling that he had begun a more respectable life? Peter's wife might have been one of the low shanty-boat women, a shiftless mother and a worse than shiftless wife, running away from Peter only to bring back the boy when he became a burden, taking what money Peter had and going away again. Possibly Peter had never been married to the woman. In digging into Buddy's memories Booge hoped to find some thread that would give him a hold on Peter, however slight. Booge liked the comfortable boat, but deeper than his love of idleness had grown an affection for the cheerful boy and for simple-minded Peter. If Peter had chosen this out-of-the-way slough for his winter harbor—when shanty-boat people usually came nearer the towns—in order that he might keep himself in hiding from the troublesome wife, veiling himself and the boy from discovery by giving out that he and Buddy were uncle and nephew, it was no more than Booge would have done.

“I suppose, when your ma come to the boat, she slept in the bunk, didn't she?” asked Booge.

“Yes, Uncle Booge,” said Buddy. “I want you to make a wagon.”

“All right, bo!” said Booge gleefully. “Come ahead and make a wagon. And when Uncle Peter comes back we'll have a nice surprise for him. We'll shout out at him, when he comes in, 'Hello, Papa!' and just see what he says. That'll be fun, won't it?”

Booge worked on the wagon all morning.

Toward noon he made a meal for himself and Buddy, and set to work on the wagon

again. He had found a canned-corn box that did well enough for the body, and he chopped out wheels as well as he could with the ax. He wished, by the time he had completed one wheel, that he had told Buddy it was to be a sled rather than a wagon, but he could not persuade the boy that a sled would be better, and he had to keep on.

He worked on the clean ice before the shanty-boat and he was deep in his work when Buddy asked a question.

“Who is that man, Uncle Booge?” he asked.

Booge glanced up quickly. Across the ice, from the direction of the road a man was coming. He was well wrapped in overcoat and cap and he advanced steadily, without haste. Booge leaned on his ax and waited. When the man was quite near Booge said, “Hello!”

“Good afternoon,” said the stranger. “Are you Peter Lane?”

Booge's little eyes studied the stranger sharply. The man, for all the bulk given him by his ulster and cap, had a small, sharp face, and his eyes were shrewd and shifty.

“Mebby I am,” rumbled Booge, crossing his legs and putting one hand on his hip and one on his forehead, “and mebby I ain't. Let me recall! Now, if I was Peter Lane, what might you want of me?”

The stranger smiled ingratiatingly and cleared his throat.

“My—my name,” he said slowly, “is Briggles—Reverend Rasmer Briggles, of Derlingport. My duty here is, I may say, one that, if you are Peter Lane, should give you cause only for satisfaction. Extreme satisfaction. Yes!”

Booge was watching the Reverend Mr. Briggles closely.

“I bet that's so!” he said. “I sort of recall now that I am Peter Lane. And I don't know when I've had any extreme satisfaction. I'll be glad to have some.”

“Yes,” said Mr. Briggles rather doubtfully. “Yes! I am the President of the Child Rescue Society, an organization incorporated to rescue ill-cared-for children,

placing them in good homes—”

“Buddy,” said Booge roughly, “you go into that boat And you stay there. Understand?”

The child did as he was told. Booge's tone was one he had never heard the tramp use, and it frightened him.

“It has come to my attention,” said Mr. Briggles, “that there is a child here. You will admit this is no place for a tender little child. You may do your best for him but the influence of a good home must be sadly lacking in such a place. In fact, I have an order from the court—”

He began unbuttoning his ulster.

“I bet you have!” said Booge genially. “So, if you want to, you can sit right down on that bank there and read it. And if it's in po'try you can sing it. And if you can't sing, and you hang 'round here for half an hour, I'll come out and sing it for you. Just now I've got to go in and sing my scales.” He boosted himself to the deck of the shanty-boat and went inside, closing and locking the door. In a moment Mr. Briggles, out in the cold, heard Booge burst into song:

Go tell the little baby, the baby, the baby, Go tell the little baby he can't go out to-day; Go tell the little baby, the baby, the baby, Go tell the little baby old Briggles needn't stay.

Mr. Briggles stood holding the court order in his hand. Armed with the law, he had every advantage on his side. He clambered up the bank and stepped to the deck of the shanty-boat. He rapped sharply on the door. “Mr. Lane, open this door!” he ordered. The door opened with unexpected suddenness and Booge threw his arms around Mr. Briggles and lifted him from his feet. He drew him forward as if to hug him, and then, with a mighty out-thrust of his arms, cast him bodily off the deck. Mr. Briggles fell full on the newly constructed wagon, and there was a crash of breaking wood. Booge came to the edge of the deck and looked down at him. The

man was wedged into the rough wagon box, his feet and legs hanging over. He was bleeding at the nose, and his face was rather scratched. He was white with fear or anger. Booge laughed.

“I owed you that,” he rumbled. “I owed you that since the day you married me. And now I'll give you what I owe you for coming after this boy.”

He jumped down from the deck, and Mr. Briggles struggled to release himself from the wagon-box. He was caught fast. He kicked violently, and Booge grinned. If he had intended punishing the interloper further, he changed his mind. The lake lay wide and smooth, with only a pile of snow here and there, and Booge grasped the damaged wagon and pushed it. Like a sled it slid along on its broken wheels, and Booge ran, gathering speed as he ran, until, with a last push, he sent the wagon and Mr. Briggles skimming alone over the glassy surface of the lake toward the road. Then he went into the shanty-boat and closed and locked the door.

XI. PETER HEARS NEWS

PETER reached town about noon, and set about his peddling at once, going to the better residential sections, where his spoons were in demand, and so successful was he that by three o'clock he had but a few left to trade at the grocer's. He made his purchases with great care, for his list had grown large in spite of the refillings of his larder from time to time through the errands in town done for him by the farmer. He bought the Bible and the A. B. C. blocks, and a red sweater, stockings for Buddy and socks for himself, and the provisions he needed, and a bright, new jack-knife for Buddy. All these he tied in a big gunny-sack, except the knife, slung the sack over his shoulders, and went down to report to George Rapp, stopping at the Post Office, where he asked for mail. The clerk handed him, among the circulars and other advertising matter, a letter.

Peter turned the letter over and over in his hand. He had a sister, but this letter was

not from her. It was addressed in pencil and bore the local postmark. Peter held it to the light, playing with the mystery as a cat plays with a mouse, and finally opened it. It was from Mrs. Potter.

“Now I know all about you, Peter Lane,” it ran, “and not much good I must say, although I might have expected it, and I am much surprised and such shiftlessness and you might have let me know that woman was sick for I am not a heathen whatever you may think. I want you to come and get your clock out of my sight and if you have time to saw me some wood I will pay cash. Mrs. Potter.”

Peter folded the letter slowly and put it in his pocket. He knew very well the widow had no cause to single him out to saw her wood, and that she would not be apt to write him for that reason, howevermuch she might underscore “cash.” That she should write him about the clock was not sufficient excuse for a letter. There was no reason why she should write to him at all, unless the underscoring of “that woman” meant she had heard how he had taken the woman and her boy in and it had given her a better opinion of him. If that was so Peter meant to keep far from Mrs. Potter! He began to fear George Rapp might be right, and that the widow had an eye on him—a matrimonial eye. When widows begin writing letters!

When Peter entered George Rapp's livery stable, Rapp was superintending the harnessing of a colt.

“Hello!” he called heartily. “How's Peter? How's the boat? Friend of yours was just enquiring for you in here. Friend from up the river road.”

“She—who was?”

“You guess it!” laughed Rapp. “Widow Potter. Say, why didn't you tell me you were married?”

“Me? Married to Widow Potter?” cried Peter, aghast. “I never in my life married her, George!”

“Oh, not her!” said Rapp. “Not her yet; the other woman. You with a boy three or

four years old, posing around as a goody-goody bachelor. But that's the way with you too-good fellows. Hope you can keep your little son."

"My son?" stammered Peter. "But he's not my son—not my own son."

"Gee whiz! Is that so!" said Rapp with surprise. "She was that bad, was she? Well, it does you all the more credit, taking him to raise. Anybody else would have sent him to the poor farm or to old snoozer Briggles. You beat anything I ever seen, with your wives nobody ever guessed you had, and your sons that ain't your sons. What makes you act so mysterious?"

Peter put his gunny-sack on the floor.

"I don't know what you 're talking about, George," he said. "What is it you think you know?"

"I think I know all about it," said Rapp laughingly. "Come into the office. What a man in the livery stable don't hear ain't worth finding out. I know your wife come back to you at the shanty-boat, Peter, when she was sick and played out and hadn't nowhere else to go, and I know you took her in and got a doctor for her, and I know she brought along her boy, which you say ain't your son. And I know you sold me your boat so you could take her down river and bury her decent, just as if she hadn't ever run off from you—"

"Who said she was my wife? Who said she run off from me?" asked Peter. "You tell me that, George!"

"Why, Widow Potter said so," said Rapp. "Everybody knows about it. There was a piece in the paper about it. The Doc you had up there told it all around town, I guess. And Widow Potter is so interested she can't sit still. She's just naturally bothering the life out of me. She says she's buying a horse from me, but that's all gee whiz. Anyway, she's dropped in to look at a colt near every day lately, and sort of enquires if you've been up to town. She says she can understand a lot of things she couldn't before. She says she can forgive you a lot of things, now she knows what kind of a

wife you had. She says it's some excuse for being shiftless. She's anxious to see you, Peter."

"She ain't in town now, is she?" asked Peter nervously. "You didn't tell her I was likely to stop in here?"

"I just naturally had to tell her something," Rapp said. "She's plumb crazy. She says she's willing to let by-gones be by-gones; that it's all as plain as day to her now."

"All what?" asked poor Peter.

"Why, all," said Rapp. "Everything. The whole business. Why you didn't marry her long ago, I reckon. She didn't say so in that many words, but she spoke about how curious it was a man could hang around a woman year in and year out, and saw three times as much wood for her as need be, and take any sort of tongue lashing as meek as Moses, and look kind of marriage-like, and not do it. She said a woman couldn't understand that sort of thing, but it was easy to understand when she knew you had a wife somewhere. She said she's sorry for your loss, and she'd like you to come right up and see her."

Rapp lay back in his chair and laughed.

"Did she honestly say that?" asked Peter, very white.

"Did she!" said Rapp. "You ought to hear what she said, and me trying to sell her that bay colt of mine all the time. 'Good withers on this animal, Mrs. Potter.''Well, he may be considered worthless by some,' says she, 'but I've studied him many a year, and the whole trouble is he's too good.' 'And he's a speedy colt, speedy but strong,' says I. 'Having a wife like that is what did it,' says she, 'for a wife like that chastens a man too much, but I guess he'll be more human now she's gone, and look after his own rights.' 'Want the colt?' I says, and she just stared at the animal without seeing him and says, 'For my part I'd enjoy having a small boy about the house.'"

"Did she say that?" asked Peter. "She didn't say that!"

“I never told anything nearer the truth,” Rapp assured him. “She said that she believed, now, you were a fully proper person to raise a small boy, but that if Briggles was bound to take the boy, she—”

“Briggles?” asked Peter breathlessly. “Who is Briggles? What has he got to do with it?”

“Don't you know who Briggles is?” asked Rapp with real surprise. “He used to be a Reverend, but he got kicked out, I hear say. He hires a team now and again to take a child out in the country.”

“What does he take children to the country for?”

“To put them in families,” Rapp explained, and he told Peter how Mr. Briggles hunted up children for the Society he had organized; how he collected money and spent the money, and put the children in any family that would take them, and paid himself twenty dollars a child for doing it, charging mileage and expense extra. “Last time he come down here he had a nice little girl from Derlingport,” said Rapp. “Her name was Susie. He put her with a woman named Crink.”

“Susie? Susie what?” asked Peter.

“I don't know, but I felt sorry for her. He might as well have put her in hell as with that Crink woman. He'll probably get twenty dollars by-and-by for taking her out and putting her somewheres else, if they don't work her to death. It's 'God help the little children but give me the money,' so far as I see. He gets an order from the court, just like he did in your case—”

Peter had let himself drop into a chair as Rapp talked but now he leaped from it.

“What's that? He ain't after Buddy?” he cried aghast.

“He drove down to-day,” said Rapp. “I told him—”

But Peter was gone. He slammed the office door so hard that one of the small panes of glass clattered tinklingly to the floor. He slung his gunny-sack over his shoulder

and was dog-trotting down the incline into the street before George Rapp could get to his feet, for Rapp was never hasty. Along the street toward the feed-yard, where his farmer friend had put up his team, Peter ran, the heavy sack swinging from side to side over his shoulder and almost swinging him off his feet. He had spent more time at Rapp's than he had intended, but he met the farmer driving out of the feed-yard and threw the sack into the wagon bed.

“Whoa-up!” said the farmer, pulling hard on his reins, but Peter was already on the seat beside him.

“Get along,” he cried. “I want to get home. I want to get home quick.”

Through all the long ride Peter sat staring straight ahead, holding tight to the wagon seat. The cold wind blew against his face but he did not notice it. He was thinking of Buddy—of tow-headed, freckled-faced, blue-eyed, merry Buddy, perhaps already on his way to a “good home” like the “good home” to which Susie had been condemned. There were no hills and the horses, with their light load and a driver with several warming drinks in his body, covered most of the distance at a good trot, but when the track left the road to avoid the snow-drifts that covered it in places, and the horses slowed to a walk, Peter longed to get down and run. It was long after dark when they reached the gate that opened into Rapp's lowland, and Peter did not stop to take his purchases from the wagon. He did not wait to open the gate, but cleared it at one leap and ran down the faintly defined path, between the trees and bushes, as fast as he could rim.

Years in the open had mended the weak lungs that had driven him to the open air, but long before he came in sight of the shanty-boat his breath was coming in great sobs and he was gasping painfully. But still he kept on, falling into a dog-trot and pressing his elbows close against his sides, breathing through his open mouth. The path was rough, rising and falling, littered with branches and roots. The calves of his legs seemed swelled to bursting. Time and again he fell but scrambled up and ran on

until at last he caught sight of the light in the cabin-boat window. He stopped and leaned with his hand against a tree, striving to get one last breath sufficient to carry him to the boat, and as he stopped he heard the shrill falsetto of Booge:

Go wash the little baby, the baby, the baby, Go wash the little baby, and give it toast and tea, Go wash the little baby, the baby, the baby, Go wash the little baby and bring it back to me.

It was Buddy's supper song.

frontispiece

“Sing it again, Uncle Booge! Sing it again!” came Buddy's sharply commanding voice, and Peter wrapped his arms around the tree trunk, and laid his forehead against it. He was happy, but trembling so violently that the branches of the small elm shook above his head. He twined his legs around the tree, to still their trembling, and hugged the tree close, for he felt as if he would be shaken to pieces. Even his forehead rattled against the bark of the trunk, but he was happy. Buddy was not gone!

He clung there while his breath slowly returned, and until his trembling dwindled into mere shivers, listening to Booge boom and trill his songs, and to Buddy clamor for more. And as he stepped toward the boat Booge's voice took up a new verse; one Peter had never heard:—

We took the old kazoozer, kazoozer, kazoozer, We grabbed the old kazoozer and tore his preacher clothes; We kicked the old ka-boozer, ka-doozer, ka-hoozer, We scratched the old ka-roozer and smote him on the n-o-s-e!

Peter opened the door. Buddy flew from his seat on the bunk and threw himself into Peter's arms.

“Uncle Peter! Uncle Peter!” he cried. “Did you bring me my mama?”

“No, Buddy-boy,” said Peter gently. “She's off on the long trip yet. We mustn't fret

about that. Ain't you glad Uncle Peter come back?"

"Yes—and—and Uncle Booge made me a wagon," said Buddy, "and it got broke."

"A feller sort of fell on it," explained Booge carelessly, "and busted it. He come visiting when we wasn't ready for comp'ny."

Peter listened while Booge told the story of Mr. Briggles's arrival, reception and departure.

"And he failed on the wagon and broke it," said Buddy, "and Booge slided him. And Booge is going to mend my wagon."

"Maybe Uncle Peter'll mend it for you, Buddy," said Booge. "I guess Booge has got to take a trip, like your ma did, to-morrow."

"You couldn't talk sense if you tried, could you?" said Peter with vexation. "You are going to stay here every bit as long as I do. Ain't he, Buddy-boy?"

XII. THE RETURN OF "OLD KAZOOZER"

I'm much obliged to you, Peter," said Booge after a minute, "but I'm afraid I can't stay. I got a telegram saying Caruso's got a cold and I've got to go to New York and sing grand opry."

"You 're real welcome to stay," said Peter, warming his hands over the stove. "I'd like you to stay. That feller is sure to come back."

"He's got a court order," said Booge. "I guess he heard you was so kind hearted you'd hand Buddy right over to him and say, Thank you, mister.' I surprised him." Booge looked at Buddy, playing on the floor.

"Ain't it funny how you get attached to a kid?" he asked. "I was just as mad when that old kazoozer said he was going to take Buddy as if he was after my own boy, instead of yours."

"I guess they think this ain't a good enough home for him," said Peter.

He looked about the cabin with new interest. To Peter it had seemed all that a home need be, and he had been proud of it and satisfied with it, but now it looked poor and shabby. There were no chairs with tidies on them, no chairs at all; there was no piano lamp; nor even a hanging lamp with prisms; no carpet, not even a rug. It was not a “good home,” it was only a shanty-boat, not much better than any other shanty-boat, and it was not even Peter's shanty-boat. It was George Rapp's.

Booge was ramming his belongings into his valise.

“Not a good enough home?” he growled.

“What do they want for a home? A town hall or an op'ry house?”

“It's all right for you or me, Booge,” said Peter, “but what would be a good home for a couple of old hard-shells like us ain't what a boy like Buddy ought to have. I'll bet we 're eight miles from a Sunday school.”

“My, my!” said Booge. “I wouldn't have remained here a minute if I had thought I was that far from Sunday school.”

“And we 're two miles from a woman. A boy like Buddy ought to be nearer a woman than that. When I was a little tyke like him I was always right up against my ma's knee.”

“And look how fine you turned out to be,” said Booge.

“Well, a place ain't a home unless there's a woman in it,” said Peter gravely. “I can see that now. I thought when I built this boat I had a home, but I hadn't. And when I got Buddy I thought I had a home for sure, but I hadn't. I never thought there ought to be a woman. I went at it wrong end to. I'd ought to have looked up a woman first. Then I could have got a house. And the boy would tag on somewheres along after. Only it wouldn't have been Buddy. I guess I'd rather have Buddy.”

Booge snapped his valise shut and looked about for any stray bit of clothing belonging to him.

“You won't have him if you don't look out,” he said. “You'd stand there until that old kazoozer come back and took him, if I'd let you. Of course, if you 're the sort to give him up, I ain't got a word to say.”

“I ain't that sort!” said Peter hotly. “If that man comes back I've got the shot-gun, ain't I? Of course,” he said more gently, “unless Buddy wants to go. You don't want to go away from Uncle Peter, do you Buddy?”

“No!” said Buddy in a way that left no doubt.

“I can't do anything until that man comes back,” said Peter helplessly. “Maybe he won't come.”

“Don't you fret about that; he'll come,” said Booge, grinning. “He's got my address and number scratched on his face, and I'd ought to clear out right now, but you see how I've got to help you out when trouble comes. You 're like a child, Peter. You and Buddy would do for twins. When old kazoozer comes back he'll bring a wagonload of sheriffs and a cannon or something. What would you do if you come to me with a peaceable court order, and got throwed all over a toy wagon?”

“If he can shoot, I can shoot,” said Peter. “I bet! And get Buddy shot all full of holes? We've got to skedaddle and scoot and vamoose,—listen!”

In the silence that followed they could hear voices—a number of voices—and Buddy crept to Peter's side and clung to his knee, frightened by the tense expression on the two uncles' faces. Peter stood with one hand resting on the table and the other clutching Buddy's arm. Suddenly he put out his free hand and grasped his shot-gun. Booge jerked it away from him and slid it under the bunk.

“You idiot!” he said. “What good would that do you? Listen—have you got any place you can take the kid to if you get away from here?”

“I've got a sister up near town—”

“All right! Now, I'm going to sing, and whilst I sing you get Buddy's duds on, and

your own, and be ready to skin out the back door with him. I can hold off any constable that ever was—long enough to give you a start, anyway—and then you've got to look out for yourself."

Peter hurried Buddy into his outer coat and hat, and Booge searched the breadbox for portable food, as he sang in his deepest bass. He crowded some cold corn cake into Peter's pocket, and some into his own as he sang, and as his song ended he whispered: "Hurry now! I'm goin' to put out this lamp in a minute, and when it's out you slide out of that back door—quick, you understand?" He let his voice rise to his falsetto. "Sing it again, Uncle Booge!" he cried, imitating Buddy's voice. "No, Buddy's got to go to sleep now," he growled and the next instant the shanty-boat's interior was dark. "Scoot!" he whispered, and Peter opened the rear door of the cabin and stepped out upon the small rear deck. He stood an instant listening and dropped to the ice, sliding in behind the willows, and the next moment he was around the protecting point, and hurrying down the slough on the snow-covered ice, with Buddy held tight in his arms. He heard Booge throw open the other door of the boat and begin a noisy confab with the men on the shore. Booge was bluffing—telling them they had lost their way, that they had come to the wrong boat, that there was no boy there. Peter had crossed the slough and was on the island that separated it from the river when he saw the light flash up in the shanty-boat window. He slipped in among the island willows and crouched there, listening, but he heard nothing for he was too distant from the boat to hear what went on inside, and he pushed deeper into the willows and sat there shivering and waiting.

It was an hour later, perhaps, when he heard Booge's voice boom out, deep and cheerful, repeating one song until his words died away in the distance:

Go tell the little baby, the baby, the baby, Go tell the little baby we won't be back to-day; Go tell the little baby, the baby, the baby, Go tell the little baby they're takin' Booge away.

“Come now, Buddy,” said Peter, “we can go back to the boat. Uncle Booge says there ain't nobody there now.”

XIII. AUNT JANE

PETER approached the shanty-boat cautiously but there was no sign of danger. Indeed, finding Buddy gone, the five men who had come to the boat were quite satisfied to get Booge. Four were but little interested in helping Briggles pick up a small boy, and nobody wanted Peter, but Booge, being a tramp and having assaulted a bearer of a court order, was a desirable capture. Booge, when he felt reasonably sure Peter had reached safety, ended his half-joking parley abruptly, and said he was willing to accompany his captors in peace. He was satisfied he would not be given much more than six months in the county jail for the assault, and six months would carry him through the winter, into good, warm, summer weather. There was nothing to be gained by a struggle against five men except more trouble.

Once more in his cabin, Peter put Buddy to bed in the dark, and ate his much delayed supper. Buddy seemed to take the flight as a matter of no moment. Flights, he probably thought, were a part of every small boy's life, and he dropped asleep the moment he was tucked in the bunk. Peter, however, did not sleep. He had much to think over. When an hour had elapsed he lighted his lamp, knowing it could not be seen from any distance, and set to work preparing to leave the boat forever. He had few portable belongings worth carrying away. What food was left he made into a parcel. He cut, with his jack-knife, strips from one of his blankets to wind about his legs, and sliced off other pieces in which to tie his feet, for his shoes were thin and worn through in places. He cut a hole in the center of what was left of the blanket, making a serape of it for Buddy. Later he cut a similar hole in the other blanket for himself. All Buddy's toys he stored away under the bunk, with his shotgun. Then he baked a corn cake and stowed pieces of it in his pockets. He was ready for his flight.

His sister Jane should afford a refuge for him and the boy.

Long before sunrise he awakened Buddy and fed him, ate his own breakfast, tied his feet in the pieces of blanket and left the shanty-boat. They were two strange looking objects as Peter worked his way down the slough, taking care to avoid the snow patches and keeping to that part of the ice blown clear by the wind. Peter had dressed Buddy and himself for comfort and not for show. The blue serape enveloped Buddy and hung below his feet as Peter carried him, and both Peter and Buddy had strips of blanket tied over their heads to protect their ears. Peter, in his own gray blanket, tied about the waist with seine twine, looked like an untidy friar, his feet huge gray paws.

A quarter of a mile below the shanty-boat Peter turned and crossed the island, and, issuing on the other side, the whole broad river lay before him. It was still dark as he began his long tramp across the river, and on the vast field of ice it was frigidly cold. There the wind had a clearer sweep than in the protected slough, and one could understand why Peter had risked the return to the boat for additional garments after having once fled from it. The wind carried the snow in low white clouds, lifting it from one drift to deposit it in another, piling it high against every obstruction on the ice. Without their blanket serapes it would have been impossible for Peter, hardened as he was, to withstand the cold of the long journey he had planned.

For a quarter of a mile, after leaving the island, Peter had to struggle over the rough hummocks that had been drift ice until the river closed, but beyond that the going was smoother. In places the ice was so glassy that he could not walk, but had to slide his feet along without lifting them. The wind cut his face like a knife and the blowing snow gathered on his eye lashes, and Buddy grew heavier and heavier in his arms. He could have carried him all day pickaback, but he did not dare risk that mode lest he slip and fall backward on the little fellow. His arms and back ached with the strain, but still he kept on, making straight across the river, and not until he

had passed the middle did he set Buddy down. Then, believing he was beyond the jurisdiction of an Iowa court order, he rested, sitting flat on the ice with Buddy in his lap.

“I can walk, Uncle Peter,” said Buddy.

“Uncle Peter will carry you awhile yet, Buddy,” said Peter. “By and by, when he gets tired again he'll let you walk. Uncle Peter is in a hurry now.”

He lifted the boy again and plodded on, and when he reached the roughly wooded Illinois shore he pushed in among the grapevine festooned trees until he was well hidden from the river. There he made a fire and rested until he and Buddy were warmed through. Then out upon the river again and, keeping close to the bank, up stream. Here he was sheltered from the cutting wind, and the walking was surer, for the sand had blown upon the ice in many places, but his progress was slow for all that. About noon he halted again and made a fire and ate, and then went on. Toward four o'clock, coming abreast of a tall, lightning scarred sycamore, Peter plunged into the brush until he came to a clearing on the edge of a small slough. Here stood an old log cattle shed, and here, with a fire burning on the dirt floor, they spent the night, Buddy huddled in Peter's arms, with his back to the fire.

They had covered half the distance to Riverbank.

“Where are we going now, Uncle Peter?” asked Buddy the next morning.

“I guess we won't go nowhere to-day,” said Peter. “We ain't likely to be bothered here, this time of the year, so we'll just make a good fire and stay right here and be comfortable, and to-night we 're going to start over across to your Aunt Jane's house.”

“Is Aunt Jane's house like this house?” asked Buddy.

“Well, it's quite considerable better,” said Peter. “You'll see what it's like when you get to it. If everything turns out the way I hope it will, you and me will live at Aunt Jane's quite some time.”

Not until well toward nine o'clock did Peter awaken Buddy that night. He was haunted by the fear that, once he touched Iowa soil, every eye would be watching for him and every hand eager to tear Buddy from him. If, however, he could get Buddy safely into Jane's care Peter believed he could make a fight against Briggles or any other man, for Jane's house was a home—there was a woman in it—Peter meant to time his trip to reach Jane's in the early morning.

The moon was full and bright, glaring bright on the river, as Peter started, and the cold was benumbing.

The long, diagonal course across the river brought Peter and Buddy to the Iowa shore some three miles below Riverbank, just before sunrise. On shore new difficulties met him. A road ran along the shore, but Peter's destination lay straight back in the hills, and two miles of sandy farm land, in frozen furrows, crossed by many barbed wire fences, lay between Peter and the foot of the hills. The sun came up while he was still struggling across the plowed land, and by the time he reached the road that led up the hillside it was glaring day. Twice early farmers, bound to town, passed him as he trudged along the winding road, staring at him curiously, and Peter dropped to the creek bed that followed the road. Here he could hide if he heard an approaching team. Just below his sister's house the road crossed the creek and here Peter climbed the bank. A wind had risen with the sun and Peter's blanket flapped against his legs. At his sister's gate he paused behind a mass of leafless elderberry bushes, and deposited Buddy on the low bank that edged the road.

“Now, you stay right here, Buddy,” said Peter to the boy, “and just sort of look at the landscape over there whilst I run up and tell your Aunt Jane you're coming. She don't like to be surprised.”

“But I don't want to look at the landscape, Uncle Peter,” Buddy complained. “I want to go with you.”

“It ain't much of a landscape, and that's a fact,” said Peter, glancing at the bare clay

bank across the creek, “and if it wasn't very important that I should speak to your Aunt Jane first I wouldn't ask you to wait here. I know just how a boy feels about waiting. My goodness! Did I see a squirrel over there? A little gray squirrel with a big bushy tail?”

“No,” said Buddy.

“Well, you just keep a sharp eye on that clay bank, and maybe you will. Maybe you'll see a little jumpy rabbit.”

“I don't want to see a rabbit. I want to go with you,” said Buddy.

Peter looked at the house. It was hardly more than a weather-beaten shanty. Its fence, once an army of white pickets, was now but a tumble-down affair of rotting posts and stringers with a loose picket here and there, and the door yard was cluttered with tin cans and wood ashes. The woodshed, as free from paint as the house, was well filled with stove wood, for Peter had filled it in the early fall. Beyond the woodshed the garden—Peter worked it for his sister each spring—was indicated by the rows of cabbage stalks with their few frozen leaves still clinging to them. The whole place was run down and slip-shod, but it was a house, and it held a woman.

“Goodness me!” said Peter. “Of course you don't want to look for rabbits! I've got that jack-knife I bought for you right here in my pocket, and now I guess you'll want to wait here for Uncle Peter! You will if Uncle Peter opens the big blade and gets you a stick to whittle.”

“I want to whittle,” said Buddy promptly. “I want to whittle a funny cat.”

Peter looked about for a stick.

“There!” he said. “There's a stick, but if I was you I'd make a funny snake out of it. That stick don't look like it would make a cat. You make a snake, and if it don't turn out to be a snake, maybe it'll be a sword. Now, you stay right here, and Uncle Peter won't be gone very long. I'm going to put you right back in among these bushes, and

don't you move."

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"I won't," said Buddy.

When Peter left the shanty-boat he had felt that he could walk up to Jane with the front of a lion and demand shelter for himself and for Buddy all the advantages of a home. From that distance it had seemed quite reasonable, for he owned the house and the small plot of ground on which it stood. Ownership ought to give some rights, and he had planned just what he would say. He would tell Jane he had come. Then he would tell her he had reformed, and how he had reformed, and that he was a changed man and was going to work hard and make things comfortable for her, and give up shanty-boating and the river and all the things he had loved. He would say he now saw all these were bad for his character. Then, when she got used to that, he would incidentally mention Buddy, and tell her what a nice little fellow he was, and what a steadying effect the boy would have on his shiftless life. Then he would get Buddy, and his sister would see what a fine boy Buddy was, and wrap her arms around him, and weep. Peter was sure she would weep. And there would be a home for Buddy with a woman in it!

But if Jane objected—as she might—Peter meant to set his foot down hard. It was his house and he could do what he wished with it. That he had allowed Jane to possess it in single peace was well enough, but it was his house. That would bring her to time—it——

The nearer he had approached the house, however, the more doubtful he had become that Jane would welcome him and that she would, after a little talk, order him to bring Buddy in. The closer he came to Jane the better he recalled the many times he had fled precipitately after doing her chores, and his many moist and mournful receptions.

Now he walked to the kitchen door and knocked, and Jane's voice bade him enter.

He took off his hat as he entered. His sister was sitting at the kitchen table where, despite the lateness of the hour, she had evidently just finished her breakfast. As she turned her head all Peter's optimism fled, for Jane's eyes were red with weeping. When her sorrows pressed heavily upon Jane she was a very fountain of tears. She threw up her hands as she saw Peter.

“Oh, mercy me, Peter Lane!” she cried in a heart-broken voice. “Look what you've come to at your time of life. Nothing to wear but old rags and horse blankets on back and foot! It does seem as if nothing ever went right for you since the day you were born. Just poverty and bad-health and trouble, and one thing after another.” She wiped her eyes to make room in them for fresh tears. “Every time I think of you, freezing to death in that shanty-boat, and going hungry and cold, I—it makes me so miserable—it makes me feel so bad—”

“Now, Jane,” said Peter uncomfortably, “don't cry! Don't do it! It ain't so bad as all that. Every time I come to see you, you just cry and carry on, and I tell you I don't need it done for me. I'm all right. I get along somehow.”

“Never, never once, have I said an unkind word to you, Peter,” said Jane damply. “You shouldn't upbraid me with it, for I know it ain't your fault you turned out this way. I know you ain't got the health to go to work and earn a living, if you wanted to. I do what I can to keep your house from falling down on my head. When I think what would become of this house if you didn't have me to do what I can to mend it up—the roof's leakin' worse than ever.”

“As soon as spring comes, I'm going to get some shingles and shingle up the leaky places,” said Peter. “Maybe I'll put a whole new roof on. Now, just listen to what I want to say, please, Jane.”

“It's that makes me feel so awful bad, Peter,” said Jane, shaking her head. “You mean so well, and you promise so much, and you see things so big, and yet you ain't got money to buy shoes nor clothes nor anything, and for all I know you might be

lying sick without a bite to eat, and me having all I can do to hold body and soul together in a house like this. Time and again I've made up my mind to go and leave it, and I would if it wasn't for you. I feel my duty by you, and I stay, but work in a house like this wears me to the bone. It does. To the bone!”

It may have worn some one to the bone but not Jane. She was one of those huge, flabby women who are naturally lazy; who sit thinking of the work they have to do but do not do it; and who linger long over their meals and weep into them. To Peter her tears were worse than Mrs. Potter's sharp tongue, for Mrs. Potter's reproaches were single of motive, while Jane's tears were too apt to be a mask for reproaches more cutting than Mrs. Potter's out and out hard words. Jane did not weep continually; she had the knack of weeping when tears would serve her purpose.

From time to time, as the spirit moved her, Jane went to town and did plain sewing. She had had a husband (but had one no more) and he had left her a little money which she had kept in the bank, drawing four per cent, regularly. It did not amount to much, only a couple of hundred dollars a year, but this she used most sparingly, leaving the greater part of the interest to accumulate. Perhaps she was sincere in her mourning for Peter, but she certainly did not want him in the house. As a provider Peter had never been a success—he was too liberal—and in his periods of financial stringency he had been known to ask Jane for money. Not that he ever got it, but it was a thing to be guarded against. Jane guarded against it with tears. In fifteen minutes of tearful reproaches she could make Peter feel that he was the most worthless and cruel of men. She had so often reduced him to that state that he had come to fall into it naturally whenever he saw Jane, and he was usually only too glad to escape from her presence again and go back to the river life. Tears proclaim injustice, and a man like Peter, seeing them, falls easily into the belief that he must be in the wrong, and very badly in the wrong. In flying from Jane he fled from the self-incrimination she planted in him. Now he sighed and took a seat on one of the kitchen chairs.

“Jane,” he said, “this house is my house, aint it?”

“You know it is, Peter,” she said reproachfully. “No need to remind me of that, nor that I ain't any better than a pauper. If I was, it would be far from me to stay here trying to hold the old boards together for you. Many and many a time I wish you had health to live in this house, so I could go somewhere and live like a human being, and let you take care of this cow-pen—for it ain't no better than that—yourself. It would be a blessed thing for me, Peter, if you ever got your health. I could go then.”

Peter moved uneasily, and frowned at the fresh tears.

“I wisht you wouldn't cry, Jane,” he said. “I want to talk sort of business to you this morning.” He paused, appalled by the effect his revelation would be apt to have on Jane. It must be made, however, and he plunged into it. “I've got a boy. I've got a little feller about three years old that come to me one night when his ma died, and he ain't got anybody in the world but me, Jane, to take care of him. I've had him some months, down at my boat, and he's the cutest, nicest little tyke you ever set eyes on. Why, he's—he's no more trouble 'round a place than a little kitten or a pup or something like that. You'd be just tickled to death with him. My first notion,” he said more slowly, “my first idee was to have him and me come here, so you could be a sort of ma to him, and I could be a sort of pa, so we'd make a sort of family, like. What he's got to have is a good home, first of all, and a shanty-boat ain't that. I see that. But I can see how easy-going I am, and how I might be an expense to you, for awhile anyway, so I thought, maybe, if you would take the boy in—now wait a minute, Jane! Wait a minute! You're bound to hear me out.”

His sister had forgotten her sorrows in open-mouthed amazement as Peter talked, but as the startling proposal became clear she dabbled at her eyes, and sniffled. Peter knew what was coming—a new torrent of tears, an avalanche of sorrow.

“For Heaven's sake shut up for a minute 'til I get through!” he cried in exasperation. “You ain't done nothing but weep over me since I was knee high. Give me a rest for

one time. I don't need weeping over. I'm all right. Ain't I just said I'll go away again?"

"You never understand me," wept Jane.

"Yes, I do, too!" said Peter angrily. "I understand you good. All you want is to weep me out of house and home, and I know it. I'm a sort of old bum, and I know that, too, but I've been fair to you right along, and all I get for it is to be wept over, and I'm sick of it. You ain't a sister, you 're a—a fountain. You 're an everlasting fountain. You let me come up and saw your wood, and you weep; and you let me make your garden, and you weep, and if you do give me a meal while I'm working for you it's so wept into that my mouth tastes of salt for a week. I've put up with it just as long as I'm going to."

"I'll go," said Jane, sniveling. "I'll go. I never thought to get such unkind words from my brother!"

"Brother nothing!" said Peter, thoroughly exasperated. "What did you ever give me but shoves, wrapped up in sorrow and grief? What did you ever do but jump on me, and tear me to pieces, and pull me apart to show me how worthless I was, whilst you let on you was mourning over me? I guess I've had it done to me long enough to see through it, Jane, so you may as well shut off the bawling. You ain't no sister—you 're a miser!"

"Peter Lane!"

"That's what you are, a miser!" said Peter, rising from his chair. "You 're a weeping miser, and you might as well know it. That's why you don't want me 'round, you 're afraid I might cost you a nickel sometime. For two cents I'd put you out of the house. You'd bawl some if you had to pay rent."

Peter should have felt a sense of shame, but he did not. In some inexplicable way a huge weight seemed lifted from his chest. He felt big, and strong, and efficient. It was a wonderful thing he had discovered. He, who had for so many years, cringed

before his sister's cruelty was making her wince. He, Peter Lane, was not feeling worthless and mean. He was talking out as other men do. He was having a rage, and yet he was so self-controlled that he knew he could stop at any moment. He was not the tool of his anger, the anger was his instrument. His pale eyes blazed, but he ended with a scornful laugh.

Jane did not flare up. She dropped her head on her table and cried again, but with real self-pity this time.

“Now, it ain't worth while to cry,” said Peter coldly. “I've said all I've got to say on that subject. All I've got now is a business proposition, and you can take it or not. If you want to take Buddy in and feed him and sleep him and treat him white, the way he deserves, I'll pay you for it just as soon as I earn some money, and I'm going to get work right away. If you won't do that you can take the house and have it, and I'm through with you.”

He stood with his hat in his hand, waiting. It seemed to him that Jane was waiting too long, that she was calculating the chances of getting her pay if she took the boy, and Peter knew his past record did not suggest any very strong probability of that.

“You'll get your money,” he said. “I'm going to look for a job as soon as I go out from here. Don't you be afraid of that. You won't lose anything.”

Her reply came so suddenly that it startled

Peter. She jumped from her chair and stamped her foot angrily.

“Oh!” she cried, clinching her fists, while all her anger blazed in her face. “Hain't you insulted me enough? Get out of my house! Don't you ever come back!”

Peter put on his hat. He paused when his hand was on the door-knob, his face deathly white.

“If you ever get sick, Jane,” he said, “you can leave word at George Rapp's Livery stable. I'll come to you if you are sick,” and he went out, closing the door softly.

Buddy was waiting where Peter had left him.

“I'm making a funny snake for you, Uncle Peter,” he said.

“Well, I should think you were!” said Peter, summoning all his cheerfulness. “That's just the funniest old snake I ever did see, but you better let Uncle Peter have your jack-knife now, Buddy. We'll get along.”

He gathered the boy, who obediently yielded the knife, into his arms.

“I'm going to see Aunt Jane, now,” said the boy contentedly.

“No, I guess we won't go see your Aunt Jane to-day, Buddy,” said Peter, holding the boy close. “Put your head close up against Uncle Peter's shoulder and he can carry you better. You ain't so heavy that way.”

Buddy put his head on Peter's shoulder and crooned one of Booge's verses contentedly. They walked a long way in this manner, toward the town. From time to time Peter shifted the boy from one shoulder to the other, and once or twice he allowed him to walk, but not far. He wanted to feel Buddy in his arms.

“I shouldn't wonder,” said Peter as they entered the outskirts of the town, “if I had to go on a trip right soon. I can't seem to think of any way out of it.”

“I like to go on trips with you, Uncle Peter,” said Buddy.

“Well, you see, Buddy-boy,” said Peter, “this here trip I can't take you on, so I've got to leave you with a man—a man that looks a good deal like that kazoozer man, but you mustn't be afraid of him, because all he is going to do is to take you for a ride in a horse and buggy out to where you'll stay. It may be some time before I see you again, but I want you should remember me. I guess you will, won't you?”

“Yes, Uncle Peter.”

“That's right! You just remember Uncle Peter every day, but don't you worry for him, and some day maybe I'll come and get you. I've got a lot of work to do first that you wouldn't understand, such as building up a new man from the ground to the top

of his head, but I'll get it done some time, and I'll come for you the first thing after I do. You want I should, don't you?”

“Yes” said Buddy.

For the rest of the way to town Peter held the boy very close in his arms, and did not think of his tired muscles at all. He was thinking of his perfidy to the trusting child, for he was without money and without it he could see nothing to do but deliver the boy to Briggles and the Unknown.

XIV. A RAY OF HOPE

THE Marcy's Run Road, on which Peter's sister lived, led into Riverbank past the cemetery, and near the cemetery stood a group of small stores. One of these, half grocery and half saloon, was even more unkempt than the others, but before its window Peter stopped. A few small coins—the residue after his purchasing trip of the day before—remained in his pocket, and in the window was a square of cardboard announcing “Hot Beef Soup To-day.”

Hot beef soup, when a man has tramped many miles carrying a heavy child, is a temptation. Buddy himself would be glad of a bowl of hot soup, and Peter opened the door and entered.

The store was narrow and dark. A few feet, just inside the door, were occupied by the scanty stock of groceries, tobacco and cheap candy, and back of this was the bar, with two small tables in the space before it. The whole place was miserably dirty. It was no gilded liquor palace, with mirrors and glittering cash-registers. The bar was of plain pine, painted “barn-red,” and the whole arrangement was primitive and cheap. Beyond the bar room a partition cut off the living room, and this completed “Mrs. Crink's Place.”

Mrs. Crink had a bad reputation. During the stringent prohibition days she had run a “speak-easy” without paying the town the usual monthly disorderly house fine, and

had served her term in jail. After that she was strongly suspected of boot-legging whisky, and she had purchased this new place but a few days since. She was a thin, sour-faced, angular woman, ugly alike in face and temper. When Peter opened the door a bell sounded sharply, but the high voice of Mrs. Crink in the living room drowned the bell. She was scolding and reviling at the top of her voice—swearing like a man—and a child was sobbing and pleading. Peter heard the sharp slap of a hand against a face, and a cry from the child, and Mrs. Crink came into the bar room, her eyes glaring and her face dark with anger.

“Well, what do you want?” she snarled.

“I'd like to get two bowls of soup for me and the boy, if it ain't too much trouble,” said Peter.

“Everything's trouble,” whined Mrs. Crink. “I don't expect nothing else. A woman can't make a living without these cranks tellin' her what she shall and what she shan't. Shut up that howlin', you little devil, or I'll come in there and bat your head off.”

She went into the living room and brought out the two bowls of soup, placing them on one of the small tables. Peter lifted Buddy into a chair. Mrs. Crink began wiping off the beer-wet bar.

“I wonder if you could let me have about a dime's worth of crackers and cheese?” he asked, and Mrs. Crink dropped the dirty rag with which she was wiping the bar.

“Come out here, and shut up your bawlin', and swab off this bar,” she yelled, and the door of the back room opened and a girl came out. She was the merest child. She came hesitatingly, holding her arm before her face, and the old hag of a woman jerked up the filthy, wet rag and slapped her across the face. It was none of Peter's business, but he half arose from his chair and then dropped back again. It made his blood boil, but he had not associated with shanty-boat men and women without learning that in the coarser strata of humanity slaps and blows and ugly words are

often the common portion of children. He would have liked to interfere, but he knew the inefficiency of any effort he might make, and like a shock it came to him that it was for things like this that Briggles rescued,—or pretended to rescue—little children. It was not so bad then, after all. If he must give up Buddy there would be some compensation in telling Briggles of this poor child, who deserved far more the attention of his Society. All this passed through his mind in an instant, but before he could turn back to his bowl of soup Buddy uttered a cry of joy and, scrambling from his chair, ran across the floor toward the weeping girl.

“Oh! Susie! Susie! My Susie!” he shouted and threw himself upon her.

The impetus of his coming almost threw the child off her feet, and she staggered back, but the next instant she had clasped her arms around the boy, and was hugging him in a close, youthful embrace of joy.

“My Buddy! My Buddy!” she kept repeating over and over, as if all other words failed her, as they will in an excess of sudden surprise. “My Buddy! My Buddy!”

The woman stared for an instant in open-mouthed astonishment, and then her eyes flashed with anger. She reached out her hand to grasp the girl, but Peter Lane thrust it aside.

His own eyes could flash, and the woman drew back.

“Now, don't you do that!” he said hotly.

“You git out of my store, then!” shouted Mrs. Crink. “You take your brat and git out!”

“I'll get out,” said Peter slowly, “as soon as I am quite entirely ready to do so. I hope you will understand that. And I'll be ready when I have ate my soup.”

The woman glared at him. She let her hand drop behind the bar, where she had a piece of lead pipe, and then, suddenly, she laughed a high, cackling laugh to cover her defeat, and let her eyes fall. She slouched to the front of the shop for the crackers

and cheese and Peter seated himself again at the small table, and looked at the children.

“Where's Mama?” he heard the girl ask, and Buddy's reply: “Mama went away,” and he saw the look of wonder on the girl's face.

“Come here,” Peter said, and the girl came to the table.

“I guess you 're Buddy's sister he's been tellin' me about, ain't you?” said Peter kindly, “and I'm his Uncle Peter He's been staying with on a shanty-boat. Your ma”—he hesitated and looked at the girl's sweet, clear eyes—“your ma went away, like Buddy said, Susie, but you don't want to think she run away and left him, for that wouldn't be so, not at all! She had to go, or she wouldn't 've gone. I guess—I guess she'd 've come and got you. Yes, I guess that's what she had on her mind. She spoke of you quite a little before she went on her trip.”

“I want you should take me away from here,” said the girl suddenly.

“Well, now, I wish I could, Susie,” said Peter, “but I don't see how I can. Maybe I can arrange it—” He poised his soup spoon in the air. “Did Reverend Mr. Briggles bring you here?”

“Not here,” said Susie. “Mrs. Crink didn't live here, then.”

“Well, that's all the same,” said Peter. “I just wanted to enquire about it. You'd better eat your soup, Buddy-boy. Well, now, let me see!”

Peter stared into the soup, as if it might hold, hidden in its muggy depths, the answer to his riddle.

“Just at present I'm sort of unable to do what I'd like to do myself,” he said. “I'd like to take you right with me, but I've got a certain friend that was quite put out because I didn't bring your ma to—to see her when your ma stopped in at my boat, and I guess maybe”—Mrs. Crink was returning with the crackers and cheese, and Peter ended hurriedly—“I guess maybe you better stay here until I make arrangements.”

It was a strange picture, the boy eating his soup gluttonously, Peter Lane in his comedy tramp garb of blanket and blanket-strips, and the little girl staring at him with big, trustful eyes. Mrs. Crink put the crackers and cheese on the table.

“If you've got through takin' up time that don't belong to you, maybe I can git some work out of this brat,” she snapped.

“Why, yes, ma'am,” said Peter politely. “It only so happened that this boy was her brother. We didn't want to discommode you at all.”

Susie turned away to her work of swabbing the bar, and Peter divided the crackers and cheese equally between himself and Buddy.

“I don't care much to have tramps come in here anyway,” said Mrs. Crink. “I never knew one yit that wouldn't pick up anything loose,” but Peter made no reply. He had a matter of tremendous import on his mind. He felt that he had taken the weight of Susie's troubles on his shoulders in addition to those of Buddy, and he had resolved to ask Widow Potter to take the two children!

The parting of the two children had for them none of the pathos it had for Peter. When Buddy had eaten the last scrap of cracker he got down from his chair.

“Good-by, Susie,” he said.

“Good-by, Buddy,” she answered, and that was all, and Peter led the boy out of the place.

There are, in Riverbank, alleys between each two of the streets parallel with the river, and Peter, now that he had once more resolved not to allow Briggles to have Buddy, took to the alleys as he passed through the town. The outlandishness of his garb made him the more noticeable, he knew, and he wished to avoid being seen. He traversed the entire town thus, even where a creek made it necessary for him to scramble down one bank and up another, until the alleys ended at the far side of the town. There he crossed the vacant lot where a lumber mill had once stood, and struck into the river road.

The boy seemed to take it all as a matter of course, but Peter kept a wary eye on the road, ready to seek a hiding-place at the approach of any rig that looked as if it might contain the Reverend Briggles, but none appeared. A farmer, returning from town with a wagon, stopped at a word from Peter, and allowed him to put Buddy in the wagon and clamber in with him. They got out again at Mrs. Potter's gate.

The house was closed, and the doors locked. Peter tried them all before he was convinced he had had the long tramp for nothing, and then he led Buddy toward the barn. As he neared the barn the barn door opened and a man came out, carrying a water bucket. He stared at Peter.

“Mrs. Potter is not at home, I guess?” said Peter.

“Nope,” said the man. “Anything I can do for you?”

“It's business on which I'll have to see her personally,” said Peter. “She wasn't expecting I'd come. Is she going to be back soon?”

“Well, I guess she won't be back to-day,” said the man. “She only hired me about a week ago, so she ain't got to telling me all her plans yet, but she told me it was as like as not she'd go up to Derlingport to-day, and maybe she might come home to-morrow, and maybe not till next day. Want to leave any word for her?”

“No,” said Peter slowly, “I guess there's no word I could leave. I guess not. I'm much obliged to you, but I won't leave no word. Come on, Buddy-boy, we got to go back to town now, before night sets in.”

“Where are we going now, Uncle Peter?” asked the boy.

“Now? Well, now we 're going to see a friend I've got. You never slept in a great, big stable, where there are a lot of horses, did you? You never went to sleep on a great big pile of hay, did you? That'll be fun, won't it, Buddy-boy?”

“Yes, Uncle Peter,” said the child cheerfully, and they began the long, cold walk to town.

XV. AN ENCOUNTER

THAT horse," said George Rapp, slapping the colt on the flank, "is as good a horse as you can get for the money in ten counties, and you won't find anybody that will offer what I do in trade for your old one. Nowhere."

"You'd say that anyway, George Rapp," said Mrs. Potter. "You ain't here to run down what you want to sell. Seems to me the colt acts skittish."

"What you said you wanted was a young horse," said Rapp with a shrug. "I don't know what you want. You want a young horse, and this is young, and you don't want a skittish horse, and all young horses are more or less that way."

"What I want is a young, strong horse—" Mrs. Potter began.

"You've told me that a million times and two, and if you tell me it again I'll know it by heart well enough to sing it," said Rapp. "There he stands, just like you say—a young, strong horse."

"A skittish animal like this colt ain't fit for a woman to drive," said Mrs. Potter.

"And you ought to have a driver to drive him, as you said about ten thousand times before," said Rapp with good-natured tolerance, "but Peter Lane ain't come up to town yet, if that's what you're working round to."

"Oh, get along with you!" said Mrs. Potter. "I got a hired man now."

"Well, you meant Peter, didn't you? Why don't you come right out and say so? But I guess you won't get Peter to drive this colt for a while yet."

"He ain't sick?"

"No. Nor he ain't dead. But as near as I can make out Peter is goin' to jail."

Mrs. Potter turned sharply and George Rapp grinned. He could not help it, she showed such consternation.

"Peter—in—jail?" she cried.

“Well, not yet,” said Rapp, chuckling at her amazement. “They 're out hunting him now. The dogs of the law is on his trail. That feller Briggles I told you of got his head broke by a tramp Peter took into my boat, and he's real sore, both in head and feelings. Last night him and a sort of posse went down to get the whole crowd, but Peter had skipped out with the kid.”

“Good for Peter! Good for Peter!” exclaimed Mrs. Potter. “I never looked for so much spunk. It was his boy as much as anybody's, wasn't it?”

“Looks so to me,” said Rapp, “but this here United States of Riverbank County seems to think different. Maybe Peter ain't been washin' the boy's face regular, three times a day. Anyhow, Briggles got a court order for the boy and he's goin' to jug Peter.”

“You talk so much nonsense, I don't know what to believe,” complained the widow.

“Anything I say is apt to be more or less nonsense, except when I'm talkin' horse,” said Rapp, “but this ain't. Briggles and the dep'ty sheriff is out now, swearin' to bring Peter in by the seat of his pants or any way they can get him.”

“Well, if Peter Lane had a wife to look after him and tell him how-so once in a while, he wouldn't get into trouble like this,” said Mrs. Potter, with aggravation. “He's enough to drive a body crazy.”

George Rapp's eyes twinkled. “The next time I see Peter I'll say, 'Peter, I been tryin' to sell a colt to Mrs. Potter since Lord-knows-when, and she's holdin' off until she gets a husband to tend the colt. I don't want to hurry you none,' I'll say to him, 'but when you get done servin' them ten years in the pen'tentiary, just fix it up for me. I'd like to sell this colt before he dies of old age.”

“You think you 're smart, George Rapp,” said Mrs. Potter, reddening, “but when you talk like that, when I've heard Peter Lane say, a dozen times, that you're the best friend he's got in the world, it's time somebody took hold for him. I wouldn't buy a horse off you, not if it was the only one in the world!”

George Rapp patted the colt on the neck and ran his hand down the sleek shoulder.

“Now, Mrs. Potter,” he said, “you know better than that. I'm just as much Peter's friend as anybody is. I'll bail him out if he gets in jail, and I'll pay his fine, if there is one. But don't you worry. Peter ain't a fool. By this time Peter and that boy is in Burlington. Peter's safe—”

It seemed as if Rapp's cheerful prediction had been fulfilled, for, as he spoke, horses' hoofs clattered on the plank incline that led into the stable. Rapp led the colt out of the way as the two-horse rig, containing the Reverend Rasmer Briggles and the deputy sheriff, reached the main floor. It was evident they had not found Peter.

“Wild goose hunt this time, George,” said the deputy as he jumped from the carriage.

“That so?” said Rapp, walking around the team. “Got the team pretty hot for such cold weather, didn't you?”

“We drove like blazes,” said the deputy, “but I didn't get heated much. Colder than th' dickens. H'ar you, Mrs. Potter? George robbin' you again?”

Mr. Briggles was climbing from the carriage slowly. He was bundled in a heavy ulster with a wide collar that turned up over his ears. He wore ear-mufflers, and a scarf was tied over his cap and under his chin. On his hands were thick, fur-lined mittens, and his trouser legs were buckled into high arctics. Over his nose and across one cheek a strip of adhesive plaster showed where Booge had “hit the old kazoozer and scratched him on the nose,” as he had sung.

Mr. Briggles was not in a good temper. Under his arrangement with his society this had been an unprofitable week, for he had not “rescued” a single child (at twenty dollars per child). He slowly untied his scarf, removed his ear-tabs and unbuttoned his ulster. He affected ministerial garb under his outer roughness; it had a good effect on certain old ladies as he sat in their parlors coaxing money from them (forty per cent, commission on all collected), and his face had what George Rapp called

“that solemncholy sneaker” look. You expected him to put his finger-tips together and look at the ceiling. There are but few Briggleses left to prey on the gullibly charitable to-day, and thank God for that. Their day is over. Most of them are in stock-selling games now.

“We were on sheriff's business to-day, Brother Rapp,” said Briggles, when he had opened his coat. “You can charge the rig to the county.”

“How about that, Joe?” Rapp asked the deputy.

“What's the diff.?” asked Joe carelessly. “The county can stand it.”

He had entered the office, where Rapp always kept his barrel-stove red hot, and was kicking his toes against the foot-rail of the stove.

“Want the team again to-morrow?” asked Rapp.

“I want it to-morrow,” said Joe. “I got to go to Sweetland to put an attachment on to a feller's hogs. I don't know what your friend Briggles wants.”

“I want you to help me find this boy, Brother—” Briggles began, but the deputy merely turned his back to the stove and looked at him over one shoulder.

“Oh, shut up!” he said. “I ain't your brother.”

“What's the matter with you, Joe?” asked Rapp. “You act sore.”

“Sore nothin'! I'm sick at my stummik. You'd be if you had to drive a pole-cat around the county all day.”

“Now, Brother Venby,” said Mr. Briggles pleadingly, “you misunderstood me entirely. If you will let me explain—”

“You go and explain to your grandmother,” said Joe roughly. “You can't explain to me. If I didn't have on my dep'ty sheriff badge, I'd come out there and do some explainin' with a wagon spoke on my own account. Say, George, did this feller get a rig from you once to take a young girl that he brought down from Derlingport, to a 'good home'? Nice little girl, wasn't she? Where d'you suppose he took her? Mrs.

Crink's! Say, come in here a minute."

Rapp went into the office and Joe closed the door. A hostler led the team to the rear of the stable, and Mr. Briggles, as if feeling a protective influence in the presence of Mrs. Potter, moved nearer to her. He pushed back his cap and wiped his forehead.

"In this charity work we meet the opposition of all rough characters, Madame," he began suavely, but she interrupted him.

"You 're the man that's pestering Peter Lane, ain't you?" she asked.

"Only within the law, only within the law!" said Mr. Briggles soothingly. "I act only for the Society, and the Society keeps within the law."

"Law—fiddlesticks!" said Mrs. Potter. "What's this nonsense about putting Peter Lane in jail?"

"We fear we shall have to make an example of him," said Mr. Briggles. "The ungodly throw obstructions in our path, and we must combat them when we can. This Lane has evaded a court order. We trust he will receive a term in prison. We have faith that Judge Bennings will uphold the right."

"Huh! So that old rascal of a Bennings is the man that let you bother Peter Lane, is he? Seems to me he's getting pretty free with his court orders and nonsense! But I guess he ain't heard from me yet!"

She turned her back on Mr. Briggles and almost ran down the incline into the street. Unluckily for Judge Bennings, he was almost too convenient to Rapp's Livery, Feed and Sale Stable, living in an old brick mansion that occupied the corner of the block but, luckily for him, he was not at home. Mrs. Potter poured out her wrath on the German servant girl.

When Mrs. Potter had hastened away, Mr. Briggles hesitated. He could see the deputy sheriff and George Rapp through the smoky glass of the office door, and Joe was talking steadily, only stopping now and then to expectorate, while Rapp's

good-natured face was scowling. Mr. Briggles buttoned his ulster. From the look on George Rapp's face he felt it would be better to be out of the stable when Rapp came out of the office. He turned. Peter Lane was staggering wearily up the incline into the stable, his back bent with fatigue, and Buddy, sound asleep, in his arms. Mr. Briggles watched the uncouth, blanket-draped pair advance, and when Peter stood face to face with him, a smile of satisfaction twisted his hard mouth. Peter looked into the fellow's shrewd eyes and drew a long breath.

“Your name's Briggles, ain't it?” he asked listlessly. “Mine's Peter Lane. This here's Buddy. I guess we got to the end of our string.”

Peter shifted the sleeping boy to his shoulder and touched the child's freckled face softly.

“I wisht you would do what's possible to put him into a nice home,” said Peter; “a home where he won't be treated harsh. I've got so used to Buddy I feel almost like he was my own son, and I wouldn't like him to be treated harsh. He's such a nice little feller—”

He stopped, for he could say no more just then. He lowered his arms until Buddy's head slid softly from his shoulder to the crook of his arm.

“Well,” he said, holding out the sleeping boy, “I guess you might as well take him now as any time.”

Mr. Briggles reached forward to take the boy just as Mrs. Potter came rushing up the stable incline, waving her hand wildly.

“Oh, Smith!” she called. “Peter Smith! You 're just the man I been looking for, Smith!”

Peter stared at her uncomprehendingly for one instant, and as he understood her useless little strategy, his eyes softened.

“I'm just as much obliged to you, Mrs. Potter,” he said, “but I've already told this

man who I am. I guess I'll go now."

He looked from one to the other helplessly and Mrs. Potter put out her arms and took the sleeping boy.

"Peter, you're a perfect fool!" she said angrily.

"I guess I am," said Peter. "Yes, I guess I am!"

He bent and kissed Buddy's warm cheek.

"I'd like to be somewheres else when he wakes up," he explained and turned away. He had started down the driveway when Mr. Briggles stepped after him and laid a detaining hand on his arm.

"Wait!" said Mr. Briggles. "The sheriffs deputy is in the office here; he has been looking for you."

"Oh, that's all right!" said Peter. "You can tell Joe I've gone on up to the jail," and he drew his arm away and went on down to the street. Mrs. Potter called after him.

"Peter Lane! Peter!" she called, but Peter had hurried away. Buddy raised his head suddenly and looked up into Mrs. Potter's face.

"I know who you are," he said fearlessly. "You 're Aunt Jane."

"No, child," said Mrs. Potter, "I ain't anybody's aunt. I'm just a worthless old creature."

"Where's Uncle Peter?" asked Buddy in his sudden way.

"Now, don't you worry," said Mrs. Potter. "Uncle Peter has gone away."

"I know," said Buddy, now wide awake. "Uncle Peter told me. I want to get down." Mrs. Potter put him down and he stood leaning against her knee, holding tightly to her skirt and eyeing Mr. Briggles distrustfully, for his quick eyes recognized the "old kazoozer" Uncle Booge had thrown off the boat, but before he could give utterance to what was running through his small head, the office door opened and George Rapp and the deputy came out. Rapp walked up to Mr. Briggles.

“All right,” he said roughly. “You've got the kid, I see, and I guess that's all you want in my stable, so you pick him up and get out of here, and don't you ever come here again. Do you understand that? If you do, I'm going to show you how I treat skunks. Y' understand?”

Involuntarily Mr. Briggles put up his elbow as if to ward off a blow, and Buddy clung the tighter to Mrs. Potter's skirt. The ex-minister reached out his hand for the child, and Buddy turned and ran.

Mr. Briggles did not run after him. He stood staring at the child. “I don't want that boy,” he said. “I don't want him. I couldn't do anything with that boy. He's a cripple!”

Buddy, stopping at the head of the incline, gazed, wide-eyed from one to the other.

Didn't anybody want a boy that was lame? “I got one good foot,” he said boastingly. And suddenly Mrs. Potter's strong, work-muscled arms gathered Buddy up and held him close to her breast, so that one of the sharp buttons of her coat made him shake his head and forget the angry tears he had been ready to shed.

“I want him!” she cried, her eyes blazing. “I'll take him, you—you—”

No one knew what she would have called Mr. Briggles, for with an unexpectedness that made Mr. Briggles's teeth snap together George Rapp shut an iron hand on the back of his neck, and bumped a knee into Mr. Briggles from behind so vigorously as to lift him off his feet. With the terrible knee bumping him at every step, Mr. Briggles was rushed down the incline with a haste that carried him entirely across the street and left him gasping and trembling against a tool box alongside the railway tracks. George Rapp returned wiping his hands in his coat skirts as if he had just been handling a snake, or some other slimy creature.

“Now we got done with pleasure,” he said with a laugh, “we'll talk business. Do you want that colt, or don't you, Mrs. Potter?”

XVI. JAIL UNCLES

THE county jail stood back of the courthouse, on Maple Street, and was a three-story brick building, flush with the sidewalk, with barred windows. To the right was the stone-yard where, when the sheriff was having good trade, you could hear the slow tapping of hammers on limestone as the victims of the law pounded rock, breaking the large stones into road metal. As a factory the prisoners did not seem to care whether they reached a normal output of cracked rock or not.

Seated on a folded gunny-sack laid upon a smooth stone in this yard, Booge was receiving justice at the hands of the law. He pulled a rough piece of limestone toward him, turned it over eight or ten times to find the point of least resistance, settled the stone snugly into the limestone chips, and—yawned. Eight or ten minutes later, feeling chilly and cramped in the arms, he raised his hammer and let it fall on the rock, and—yawned! The other prisoners—there were five in all—worked at the same breathless pace.

The stone-yard was protected from the vulgar gaze of the outer slaves of business and labor by a tall board fence, notable as the only fence of any size in Riverbank that never bore circus posters on its outer surface. Several times within the memory of man there had been “jail deliveries” from the stone-yard. In each case the delivery had been effected in the same manner. The escaping prisoner climbed over the fence and went away. One such renegade, recaptured, told why he had fled. “I won't stay in no hotel,” he said, “where they've got cockroaches in the soup. If this here sheriff don't brace up, there won't none of us patronize his durn hotel next winter.”

Peter, enveloped in his blanket serape, pulled the knob of the door-bell of the jail and waited. He heard the bell gradually cease jangling, and presently he heard feet in the corridor, and the door opened.

“Well, what do you want?” asked the sheriff's wife. “If you want Ed, he ain't here. You'll have to come back.”

“I've come to give myself up,” said Peter. “My name's Peter Lane.”

“Well, it don't make any difference what your name is,” said Mrs. Stevens flatly. “You can't give yourself up to me, and that's all there is to it. Every time the weather turns cold a lot of you fellows come around and give yourselves up, and I'm sick and tired of it. I won't take another one of you unless you 're arrested in a proper manner. Half the time Ed can't collect the board money. If you want to get in here you go down to the calaboose and get arrested in the right way.”

“But I'm sort of looked for here,” said Peter. “Joe Venby knows I'm coming here, and if Ed was here—”

“Oh, if Ed was here, he'd feed you for nothing, I dare say!” said Mrs. Stevens. “He's the easiest creature I ever see. If it wasn't for me he'd lose money on this jail right along.”

“Can't I come in and wait for Ed?” asked Peter. “I ought to stay here when I'm wanted. I don't want Ed or Joe to think I'd play a trick on them.”

“You can't come in!” said Mrs. Stevens. “The last man that come and gave himself up to me stole a shell box off my what-not, and I won't have that happen again. You can come back after a while.”

“Can't you let me wait in the stone-yard?” asked Peter.

“See here!” said the sheriff's wife. “I'm busy getting a meal, and I've no time to stand talking. Ed locked them boarders in the yard when he went away, and he took the key. If you want to get into that stone-yard, you'll have to climb over the fence, and that's all there is to it. I have no time to fritter away talking.”

She slammed the door in Peter's face, and Peter turned away. The fence was high but Peter was agile, and he scrambled up and managed to throw one leg over, and thus reached the top.

“Come on in,” Booge's gruff voice greeted him, and Peter looked down to see the

tramp immediately below him.

“They got Buddy,” said Peter, as he dropped to the ground inside the fence.

“Did, hey?” said Booge, stretching his arms. “I was sort of in hopes you'd kill that old kazoozer, if you had to. I don't like him. He's the feller that married me and Lize, and I ain't ever forgive him. One Merdin was enough in a town. I was all of that name the world ought to have had in it—”

“Merdin?” said Peter. “Is that your name?”

“Why, sure, it is. Didn't I ever tell you?” asked Booge. “No, I guess I didn't. Come to think of it, it wasn't important what you called me, and Buddy sort of clung to 'Booge.' Where is the little feller?”

“Your name's Merdin? And your wife was Lize Merdin?” repeated Peter, staring at the tramp. “Is that so?”

“Cross my heart. If you want me to, I'll sing it for you.”

“Booge,” said Peter soberly, “she's dead. Your wife is dead.”

The tramp was serious now. “Lize is dead?” he asked. “Honest, Peter?”

“She's dead,” Peter repeated. “She died in my boat. She come there one awful stormy night, and she died there. She was run out of Derlingport, and she died, and I buried her.”

Booge put down his stone-hammer and for a full minute stared at the chapped and soiled hands on his knees. Then he shook his head.

“Ain't that peculiar? Ain't that odd?” he said. “Lize dead, and she died in your boat, and—why!” he cried suddenly, “Buddy 's my boy, ain't he?”

“Yes,” said Peter, “he's your boy.”

“Ain't that queer! Ain't that strange!” Booge repeated, shaking his bushy head. “Ain't that odd? And Buddy was my boy all the time! And he's a nice little feller, too, ain't he? He's a real nice little feller. Ain't that odd!”

He still shook his head as he picked up the hammer. He struck the rock before him several listless blows.

“I wonder if Lize told you what become of Susie?” he asked.

“I know what become of her,” said Peter. “Briggles got her, too. She's with a—with a lady in town here.” He could not bring himself to tell the imprisoned man what the lady was in reality.

“That's fine,” said Booge, laughing mirthlessly. “I knowed all along I'd bring up my family first-class. All we needed to make our home a regular 'God-bless-er' was for me to get far enough away, and for some one to get the kids away from Lize. Do you know, Peter, I feel sort of sorry for Lize, too. That's funny, ain't it?”

“Not if she was your wife, it ain't,” said Peter.

“Yes, it is,” Booge insisted. “A man don't feel sorry for a wife like that. Generally he's glad when she's gone, but I sort of feel like Lize didn't have a fair show.. She was real bright. If I hadn't married her, she'd probably have worked her way over to Chicago and got in a chorus, or blackmailed some rich feller, but I was a handicap to her right along. She couldn't be out-and-out whole-souled bad when she was a married lady. She'd just get started, and begin whooping things, when she'd remember she was a wife and a mother and all that, and she'd lose her nerve. She never got real bad, and she never got real good. I guess I stood in her way too much.”

“You mean you wasn't one thing or the other?” asked Peter.

“Yep! That's why I went away, when I did go,” said Booge. “I seen Lize wasn't happy, and I wasn't happy, so I went. The sight of me just made her miserable. She'd come in after being away a week or so, and she'd moan out how wicked she was, and how good I was, and that she was going to reform for my sake, and she'd be unhappy for a month—all regrets and sorrow and punishing herself—and then I'd take my turn and get on a spree, and when I come back, she'd be gone. Then she'd

come back and go through the whole thing once more. It was real torture for her. She never fig-gered that my kind of bad was as bad as her kind of bad. I never gave her no help to stay straight, either. I guess what I'd ought to have done was to whack her over the head with an ax handle when she come back, or give her a black eye, but I didn't have no real stamina. I was a fool that way."

"I don't see why you married her," said simple Peter.

"Well, I was a fool that way, too," said Booge. "She seemed so young and all, to be throwed out by her mother and father, so I just married her because nobody else offered to, as you might say, to give her baby some sort of a dad when it come. It didn't get much of a sort of a dad, either, when it got me.

"Then you ain't Susie's pa?" asked Peter.

"Lord, no!"

"And Buddy?"

"Oh, yes! And ain't he a nice little feller? Seems like he's got all Lize's and my good in him, don't it, and none of our bad? And to think I was there with him all the time, and you didn't even like me to be uncle to him! I wonder—Peter, if you ever see him again, just tell him his dad's dead, will you, Peter?".

"If you want I should, Booge," said Peter reluctantly.

"Yes! And tell him some sort of story about his poor but honest parents. Tell him I was a traveling man and got killed in a wreck. Tell him I had a fine voice to sing with, or some little thing like that, so he can remember it. A little kid likes to remember things like that when he grows up and misses the folks he ought to have."

"I'll tell him you were always kind to him, for so you was—in my boat," said Peter.

"I'll tell him that when he was a little fellow you used to sing him to sleep."

"Yes, something like that," said Booge, and went on breaking rock. Suddenly he looked up. "I wonder if it would do any good for me to give you a paper saying you

are to have all my rights in him? I don't know that I've got any, but I'd sort of like to have you have Buddy."

They talked of this for some time, and it was agreed that when Booge had served his term and was released he was to sign such a paper before a notary and leave it with George Rapp, and they were still discussing the possibility of such a paper being of any value when the door of the jail opened and the sheriff came into the stone-yard.

"Hello, Peter!" he said. "My wife tells me you want to see me. What's the trouble?"

Peter explained.

"Well, I'm sorry I've got to turn you out," said the sheriff regretfully. "I've got the jail so full you mightn't be comfortable anyway, and I've taken in about all I can afford to take on speculation. I'd like to keep you, but I don't see how I can do it, Peter. I don't make enough feeding you fellows to take any risk on not getting paid. I guess you'll have to get out."

"But I'm guilty, Ed," said Peter. "I guess I am, anyway."

"Can't help it!" said the sheriff firmly. "I don't know nothing about that. If you want to come to jail, you've got to be served with papers in the regular way. The city don't O. K. my bills hit-or-miss no more. I guess you'll have to get out. I can't run the risk of keeping you on your own say-so."

"If you say so, Ed," said Peter. "If anything comes up, you'll know I've tried to get into jail, anyway. What should you say I ought to do?"

"What you ought to do," said the sheriff, "is to go home and wait until somebody comes and arrests you in proper shape."

"I'll do so, if you say so, Ed," said Peter. "I'm living in George Rapp's house-boat, down at Big Tree Lake, and if you want me, I'll be there. I'll wait 'til you come."

He shook Booge's hand and the sheriff unlocked the gate of the stone-yard, and Peter passed out into the cold world.

XVII. FUNNY CATS

PETER avoided the main street, for he was aware he was a curious sight in his blanket serape, and it was too comfortable to throw away, and, in addition, would be his only bed clothing when he reached his boat. He hurried along Oak Street as less frequented than the main street, for he had almost the entire length of the town to pass through. As it was growing late he was anxious to strike the bluff road in time to catch a ride with some homeward-bound farmer. His bag of provisions was still at the farmer's on the hillside; the shanty-boat awaited him, and he must take up his life where it had been interrupted. For the present he was powerless to aid either Susie or Buddy.

Peter had a long walk before him if he did not catch a ride, and he started briskly, but in front of the Baptist Church he paused. A bulletin board stood before the door calling attention to a sale to be held in the Sunday-school room, and the heading of the announcement caught his eye. “All For The Children,” it said. It seemed that there were poor children in the town—children with insufficient clothes, children with no shoes, children without underwear, and a sale was to be held for them; candy, cakes, fancy work, toys and all the usual Christmas-time church sale articles were enumerated. Peter read the bulletin, and passed on.

He was successful in catching a ride, and found his sack of provisions at the farmer's and carried it to the boat on his back. The boat was as he had left it, and little damage had been done during his absence. The river had fallen and his temporary mooring rope—too taut to permit the strain—had snapped, but the shanty-boat had grounded and was safe locked in the ice until spring. Inside the cabin not a thing had been touched. The shavings still lay on the floor where they had fallen while he was making Buddy's last toy, and the toys themselves were under the bunk just as he had left them. Peter felt a pang of loneliness as he gathered them up and placed them on his table with the new stockings and the A. B. C. blocks. He put the new “Bibel” on

the clock-shelf.

The toys made quite an array, and Peter looked at them one by one, thinking of the child. There were more than a dozen of them—all sorts of animals—and they still bore the marks of Buddy's fingers. It was quite dark by the time Peter had stowed away his provisions, and he lighted the lamp, with a newly formed resolution in his mind. He dropped the A. B. C. blocks into the depths of his gunny-sack and, looking at each for the last time, let the crudely carved animals follow, one by one. He held the funny cat in his hand quite a while, hesitatingly, and then set it on the clock-shelf beside the Bible, but almost immediately he took it down again and dropped it among its fellows in the sack. The Bible, too, he took from the shelf and put in the sack, and, last of all, he added the few bits of clothing Buddy had left in his flight. He tied the neck of the sack firmly with seine twine and set it under the table. All his mementos of Buddy were in that sack, and Peter, with a sigh, chose a clean piece of maple wood, seated himself on the edge of the bunk, and began whittling a kitchen spoon. Once more he was alone; once more he was a hermit; once more he was a mere jack-knife man, and Buddy was but a memory.

Peter tried to put even the memory out of his mind, but that was not as easy as putting toys in a gunny-sack. If he tried to think of painting the boat, he had to think of George Rapp, and then he could think of nothing but the hasty parting in Rapp's barn and how the soft kinks of Buddy's hair snuggled under the rough blanket hood. If he tried to think of wooden spoons he thought of funny cats. And if he tried to think of nothing he caught Booge's nonsense rhymes running through his head and saw Buddy clinging eagerly to Booge's knee and begging, “Sing it again, Booge, sing it again.”

“Thunder!” he exclaimed at last, “I wisht I had that clock to take apart.”

He put the unfinished spoon aside and, choosing another piece of maple wood, began whittling a funny cat, singing, “Go tell the little baby, the baby, the baby,” as

he worked. It was late when his eyelids drooped and he wrapped himself in his blanket. Three more cats had been added to the animals in the gunny-sack.

“Some little kid like Buddy'll like them,” he thought with satisfaction, and dropped asleep.

Early the next morning he tramped across the “bottom” to the farmer's.

“You said you was going to town to-day,” Peter said, “and I thought maybe you'd leave this sack at the Baptist Church for me, if it ain't too much out of your way. It's some old truck I won't have any use for, and I took notice they were having a sale there today. You don't need to say anything. Just hand it in.”

Before the farmer could ask him in to have breakfast Peter had disappeared toward the wood-yard, and when, later, he started for town he could hear Peter's saw.

At the Baptist Church the farmer left the sack. A dozen or more women were busily arranging for the sale, and one of them took the sack, holding it well out from her skirt.

“For our sale? How nice!” she cried in the excited tone women acquire when a number of them are working together in a church. “Who are we to thank for it?”

“Oh, I guess there ain't no thanks necessary,” said the farmer. “I guess you won't find it much. I just brought it along because I promised I would. It's from a shanty-boatman down my way—Lane 's his name—Peter Lane.”

“Oh,” said the woman, her voice losing much of its enthusiasm. “Yes, I know who he is. He's the jack-knife man. Tell him Mrs. Vandyne thanks him; it is very kind of him to think of us.”

“All right! Gedap!”

Mrs. Vandyne carried the sack into the Sunday school room and snipped the twine with her scissors, which hung from her belt on a pink ribbon. She was a charming little woman, with bright eyes and rosy cheeks, and she was the more excited this

afternoon because she had been able to bring her friend and visitor, Mrs. Montgomery, and Mrs. Montgomery was making a real impression. Mrs. Montgomery was from New York, and just how wealthy and socially important she was at home every one knew, and yet she mingled with the ladies quite as if she was one of them. And not only that, but she had ideas. Her manner of arranging the apron table, as she had once arranged one for the Actors' Fair, was enough to show she was no common person. Already her ideas had quite changed the old cut and dried arrangements. At her request ladies were constantly running out to buy rolls of crêpe paper and other inexpensive decorative accessories, and the dull gray room was blossoming into a fairy garden.

"And when you come to-night, I want each of you to wear a huge bow of crêpe paper on your hair, and—what have you there, Jane?"

Mrs. Montgomery, although beyond her fortieth year, had the fresh and youthfully bright face of a girl of eighteen. She was one of those splendidly large women who retain a vivid interest in life and all its details, and Mrs. Vandyne, who was smaller and lesser in every way, was her Riverbank counterpart.

"Nothing much," Mrs. Vandyne answered, dipping her hand into the sack. "But it was kind of the man to send what he could. Wooden spoons, I suppose. Well, will you look at this, Anna?"

It was one of the "funny cats." Mrs. Vandyne held it up, that all the ladies might see.

"How perfectly ridiculous!" exclaimed Mrs. Wilcox. "What do you suppose it was meant to be? Do you suppose it is a bear?"

"Or an otter, or something?" asked Mrs. Ferguson. "Oh, I know! It's a squirrel. Did you ever see anything so—so ridiculous!"

The ladies, all except Mrs. Montgomery, laughed gleefully at the funny cat Buddy had hugged and loved.

"We might get a dime for it, anyway, Alice," said one. "Are there any more? They

will help fill the toy table. Do you think they would spoil the toy table, Mrs. Montgomery?"

The New Yorker had taken the cat in her hand, and Mrs. Vandyne was standing one after another of Peter's toys on the table.

"Spoil it!" exclaimed Mrs. Montgomery enthusiastically. "I have not seen anything so naïve since I was in Russia. It is like the Russian peasant toys, but different, too. It has a character of its own. Oh, how charming!"

She had seized another of the funny animals.

"But what is it?" asked Mrs. Wilcox.

"Mercy! I don't know what it is," laughed Mrs. Montgomery. "What does that matter? You can call it a cat—it looks something like a cat—yes! I'm sure it is a cat. Or a squirrel. That doesn't matter. Can't you see that no one but a master impressionist could have done them? Just see how he has done it all with a dozen quick turns of his—his—"

"Jack-knife," Mrs. Vandyne supplied. "Do you think they are worth anything, Alice?"

"Worth anything?" exclaimed Mrs. Montgomery. "My dear, they are worth anything you want to ask for them. Really, they are little masterpieces. Can't you see how refreshing they are, after all the painted and prim toys we see in the shops? Just look at this funny frog, or whatever it is."

The ladies all laughed.

"You see," said Mrs. Montgomery, "you can't help laughing at it. The man that made it has humor, and he has art and—and untrammeled vision, and really the most wonderful technique."

Peter Lane and the technique of a jack-knife!

The ladies of the Baptist Aid Society were too surprised to gasp. The enthusiasm of

Mrs. Montgomery took their breath away, and Mrs. Montgomery was not loth to speak still more, with a discoverer's natural pride in her discovery. She examined one toy after another, and her enthusiasm grew, and infected the other women. They, too, began to see the charm of Peter's handiwork and to glimpse what Mrs. Montgomery had seen clearly: that the toys were the result of a frank, humorous, boyish imagination combined with a man's masterly sureness of touch. Here was no jig-saw, paper-patterned, conventional German or French slopshop toy, daubed over with ill-smelling paint. She tried to tell the ladies this, and being in New York the president of several important art and literary and musical societies, she succeeded.

“We must ask twenty-five cents apiece for them,” said Mrs. Ferguson.

“Oh! twenty-five cents! A dollar at least,” said Mrs. Montgomery. “The work of an artist. Don't you see it is not the intrinsic value but the art the people will pay for?”

“But do you think Riverbank will pay a dollar for art?” asked Mrs. Vandyne.

Mrs. Montgomery glanced over the toys. “I will pay a dollar apiece for all of them, and be glad to get them,” she said. “I feel—I feel as if this alone made my trip to Riverbank worth while. You have no idea what it will mean to go home and take with me anything so new and unconventional. I shall be famous, I assure you, as the discoverer of—”

“His name is Peter Lane,” said Mrs. Vandyne. “He is one of the shanty-boatmen that live on the river. A little, mildly-blue-eyed man; a sort of hermit. They call him the Jack-knife Man, because he whittles wooden spoons and peddles them.”

“Oh, he will be a success!” cried Mrs. Montgomery. “Even his name is delicious. Peter Lane! Isn't it old-fashioned and charming? Peter Lane, the Jack-knife Man! How many of these toys may I have, Anna?”

“I want one!” said Mrs. Wilcox promptly, and before the ladies were through, Mrs. Montgomery had to insist that she be permitted to claim two of the toys by her right as discoverer.

Later, as they went homeward for supper, Mrs. Vandyne gave a happy little laugh.

“That was splendid, Alice,” she said. “To think you were able to make them pay a dollar apiece for those awful toys!”

“Awful!” exclaimed Mrs. Montgomery. “My dear, I meant every word I said. You will see! Your Peter Lane is going to make me famous yet!”

That evening, while Peter sat in his shanty-boat, lonely and thinking of Buddy as he whittled a spoon, Mrs. Montgomery stood, tall and imposing and sweet-faced, behind the toy table on which all of Buddy's toys stood with “Sold” tags strung on them, and told about Peter Lane, the Jack-knife Man.

“I'm very sorry,” she said time after time, “but they are all sold. We do not know yet whether we can persuade the Jack-knife Man to make duplicates, but we will take your order subject to his whim, if you wish. We cannot promise anything definite. Artists are so notably irresponsible.”

But there was one voice which, had Peter been able to hear it, would have set him making jack-knife toys on the instant. While the ladies of the Baptist Church were exclaiming over the toys in the Sunday school room a small boy with freckles and white, kinky hair, was leaning on the knee of a harsh-faced woman in a white farm house three miles up the river-road.

“Auntie Potter,” he said longingly, “I wish Uncle Peter would come and make me a funny cat.”

“If he don't,” said Mrs. Potter with great vigor, “he's a wuthless scamp.”

XVIII. MORE FUNNY CATS

NEW YORK, being a great mill that grinds off rough corners and operates, as it seems, for no other purpose than to make each New York inhabitant and each New York creation a facsimile of every other New York inhabitant and creation, loves

those who introduce the quaint, the strange and the outlandish—which is to say, anything not after the conventional New York model. Women have become rich with the discovery of a rag rug or a corn-husk door-mat.

To Mrs. Montgomery the trip to Peter Lane's shanty-boat was a path to fame. Her quick perception grasped every detail and saw its value or, to put it most crudely, its advertising potency. As she, with Mr. and Mrs. Vandyne, whirled down the smooth bluff road in the Vandyne barouche, she said: “Anna, I do wish we could have come in an ox-cart, or a-straddle little donkeys, or in a hay-wagon, at least.”

“My dear! Isn't this comfortable enough?”

“Oh, I was thinking of my talk before the Arts and Crafts Club. It makes such a difference. It is so conventional to be taken in a carriage. And probably I'll find your Peter Lane just an ordinary man, and his shanty-boat nothing but a common houseboat.”

But when the carriage ran into the farmer's yard—it was Sunday—and the farmer volunteered to show the route to Peter's shanty-boat, and warned Mrs. Montgomery, after a glance at her handsome furs, that it would be a rough tramp, her spirits rose again. Perhaps there would be some local color after all. The event fully satisfied her.

In single file they tramped the long path to the boat, stooping under low boughs, climbing over fallen tree trunks, dipping into hollows. Rabbits turned and stared at them and scurried away. Great grapevine swings hung from the water elms, and when the broad expanse of Big Tree Lake came into view Mrs. Montgomery stood still and absorbed the scene. It represented absolute loneliness—acres of waving rice straw, acres of snow-covered ice and, close under the bank, the low, squat shanty-boat overshadowed by the leafless willows. It was a romantic setting for her hermit.

The farmer had brought them by the shorter route, so that they had to cross the lake,

and Peter, gathering driftwood, was amazed to see the procession issue from the rice and come toward him across the lake.

“That's Peter,” said the farmer. “He acts like he didn't expect comp'ny.”

Peter was standing at the edge of the willows, his arms full of driftwood, the gray blanket serape with its brilliant red stripes hanging to his ankles, and a home-made blanket cap pulled down over his ears. He stood like a statue until they reached him, then doffed his cap politely, and Mrs. Montgomery saw his eyes and knew this was the artist.

“I guess you'd better step inside my boat, if it's big enough,” said Peter, “but it's sort of mussy. Maybe you'd like to wait out here 'til I sweep out. I been whittlin' all morning.”

“We will go in just as it is,” said Mrs. Montgomery promptly. “I want to see where you work, just as it is when you work.”

Peter looked at her with surprise.

“You ain't mistook in the man you're lookin' for, are you, ma'am?” He asked. “I'm Peter Lane. I don't work in this boat. Lately I've been workin' up at the farmer's, sawin' wood.”

Mrs. Montgomery laughed delightedly, and Peter, looking into her eyes, grinned. He liked this large, wholesome woman.

“You are the man!” said Mrs. Montgomery gaily. “And since Mrs. Vandyne won't introduce me, I'll introduce myself.”

Peter was justified in his doubts regarding the capacity of his boat, and the farmer, after trying to feel comfortable inside, went out and sat on the edge of the deck. The shavings on the floor, the wooden-spoons (there were but three or four), the boat itself—when she learned Peter had built it himself—all delighted her. She asked innumerable questions that would have been impertinent but for her kindly smile,

and she was delighted when she learned that Peter had but one blanket, which was his coat by day and his bed-clothing by night. But more than all else she liked Peter's kindly eyes. She explained, in detail, the object of their visit, and Peter listened politely.

“It's right kind of you to come down so far,” he said when he had heard, “but I guess I'll have to refuse you, Mrs. Montgomery. I don't seem to have no desire to make no more funny toys. I guess I won't.”

“I can understand the feeling perfectly,” said Mrs. Montgomery, too wise to try coaxing. “You have an artist's reluctance to undertake for pay what you have done for pleasure only.”

“It ain't that,” said Peter. “I just whittled out them toys for a little feller I had here, because he used to laugh at them. That's all I done it for, and since he ain't here to laugh, it don't seem as if I could get the grin into them. I don't know as I can explain; I don't know as you could understand if I did—”

“But I do, I do,” said Mrs. Montgomery eagerly. “You mean you lack the sympathetic audience.”

“Maybe so,” said Peter doubtfully. “What I do mean is, that I'd miss the look in his eyes and how he quirked up his mouth whilst I was cutting out a toy. Maybe it looks to you like this hand and this old whetted-down jack-knife was what made them toys, but that ain't so! No, ma'am! All I done was to take a piece of maple wood and start things going. 'This is going to be a cat, Buddy,' I'd say, maybe, and he'd sparkle up at me and say, 'A funny old cat, Uncle Peter!' and then it had got to be a funny old cat, like he said. And his eyes and his mouth would tell me just how funny to make that cat, and just how funny not to make it. He sort of seen each whittle before I seen it myself, and told me how to make it by the look of his eyes and the way his mouth sort of felt for it until I got it just right. And then he would laugh. So you see, now that Buddy's gone, I couldn't—no, I guess I couldn't!”

“And you made no more after Buddy—after he left?”

“He didn't die,” said Peter, “if that's what you mean. He was took away. Yes'm. I did make a couple. I made a couple more cats to put in the gunny-sack. But that was because I sort of saw Buddy a sittin' there on the floor, even when he was gone.”

“But don't you see,” cried Mrs. Montgomery eagerly, “that you can always see Buddy? Don't you know there are hundreds of other Buddys—boys and girls—all over the country, and that, as you work, a man of your imagination can feel their eyes and smiling mouths guiding your hand and your knife? They want your 'funny cats,' too, Mr. Lane. Don't you see that you could sit here in your lonely boat, and have all the children of America clustered about your knee?”

“Yes, I do sort of see it,” said Peter, “but it's a thing I'm liable to forget any time.”

“But you must not forget it!” exclaimed Mrs. Montgomery. “Your work is too rare, too valuable to permit you to forget How many artists, do you suppose, are, like the musicians, able to draw their inspiration face to face from their audiences? Very few, Mr. Lane. Do you suppose a Dickens was able to have those for whom he wrote crowded in his workroom? And yet those he worked to please guided his pen. He heard the laughs and saw the tears and was guided by them as he chose the words that were to cause the laughs and tears. You, too, can see the children's faces.”

She paused, for she saw in Peter's eyes that he understood and agreed.

“But then there's another reason I can't whittle more toys,” he said. “I've got about thirty more cords of wood to saw this winter.”

“But that is not like you!” said Mrs. Montgomery reproachfully. “You see I know you, Mr. Lane! You are not the man to saw wood when all the Buddys are eager for your toys.”

“It ain't like me usually,” admitted Peter. “I don't know who's been telling you about me, but usually I don't do any work I don't have to, and that's a fact, but certain

circumstances—” he hesitated. “You didn't know why they took Buddy away from me, did you? I wasn't fit to keep him. I was like a certain woman was always tellin' me, I guess—shiftless and no-'count—so they took Buddy. And I guess they were right. But I've changed. It's going to take some time, but I'm going to make money, and I'm going to be like other folks, and I'm going to get Buddy back. So you see,” he said, after this outburst, “I've got to saw wood. If it wasn't for that I'd be right eager to make toys for all the kids you speak of. It would be a pleasure. But I've got to make some money.”

Mrs. Montgomery stared at him. “You don't mean to tell me—” she began. “You don't mean to say you thought I wanted you to give up everything and make toys for nothing?”

“Why, yes,” said Peter.

“But, my dear Mr. Lane!” exclaimed Mrs. Montgomery. “I do believe I almost persuaded you to do it!” She laughed joyously. “Oh, you are a true artist! Why, you can make many, many times as much money whittling jack-knife toys as you could make sawing wood! You can hire your own wood sawed.”

She descended to details and told him what he could sell the toys for; how she would tell of them in New York and interest a few dealers.

“You'll be working for Buddy all the while you are working for the other Buddys,” she ended, “making the home you want while you make the toys that will make little children happy.”

“That's so,” agreed Peter eagerly, and her battle was won. The rest was mere detail—her address in New York, prices, samples, Peter's address, and other similar matters. The farmer was willing enough to hunt another man to saw his wood. Mrs. Vandyne placed the orders with which she had been commissioned by the Baptist ladies; Mr. Vandyne—the cashier of the First National Bank—actually shook Peter's hand in farewell, and Peter was alone again.

When the voices of his visitors had died in the distance he lifted the mattress of his bunk and felt under it with his hand until he found a round, soft ball. He unrolled it and smoothed it out—Buddy's old, worn stockings, out at knees and toes.

“There, now,” he said, hanging them on a nail under his clock-shelf, “I guess I ain't afraid to have you look me in the face now.”

“What happened to the child he mentioned?” Mrs. Montgomery asked when she was snugly rug-enwrapped in the barouche once more.

“I think some society took it,” Mrs. Van-dyne answered. “I'll have Jim look it up. No doubt Jim can have the boy returned to Peter Lane.”

“I'll do what I can,” said Mr. Vandyne, but Mrs. Montgomery was silent while the carriage traveled a full mile.

“I wouldn't!” she said at last “No, I wouldn't! You might see that the boy is where he is properly cared for, but I think it will be best to let the Jack-knife Man earn the boy himself. I know what he has been, and I can see what he hopes to be. If he could step outside himself and see as we see, he would say what I say. The best thing for him is to have something to work for.”

“He could work for money, like the rest of us,” suggested Mr. Vandyne.

“Oh, you utter Philistine!” cried Mrs. Montgomery. “You must wait until he gets the habit, and then—!”

“Then what?”

“Then he will have a bank-book,” laughed Mrs. Montgomery.

The winter passed rapidly enough for Peter. Between the stockings, and the vision of the children Mrs. Montgomery had conjured up, and his eagerness to win a home for Buddy, Peter worked as faithfully as an artist should, and he made many raids on the farmer's wood-pile to secure dry, well-seasoned, maple wood.

When the vision of Buddy's eyes grew dim Peter was always able to bring it back by

humming Booge's song, and before the winter was over Peter had crowded his clock shelf with toys and had constructed another shelf, which was filling rapidly, for while he made many duplicates he kept one of each for Buddy—"Buddy's menagerie," he called them. Thus he kept his own interest alive, too, for when it flagged he made a new animal, making it as he thought Buddy would like it made and so that it would bring that happy "Ho! ho! That's a funny old squ'arl, Uncle Peter."

One letter Peter wrote, soon after the visit to his boat, which was to Mrs. Vandyne. It brought this answer: "My husband called at the place you mentioned, but the little girl is there no longer. I can find no trace of her. Mr. Briggles, I understand, has had to leave this state and no one knows where he is."

Peter had no time to go to town. Mrs. Montgomery had been as good as her word, and had, on her return to New York in midseason, introduced the "Peter Lane Jack-Knife Toys" to her Arts and Crafts Club, and to two of those small shops on the Avenue that seem so inconspicuous and yet are known to every one. The toys, after their first few weeks as a fashionable fad, settled into a vogue and James Vandyne, whom Mrs. Montgomery had wisely asked to act as Peter's agent, received letters from other shops, and from wholesalers, asking for them. The toys were, of course, almost immediately counterfeited by other dealers, and it was Vandyne who wisely secured copyrights on Peter's models, and who, later in the winter, sent Peter a small branding-iron with which he could burn his autograph on each toy.

Peter's farmer friend stopped at the bank on each trip to town, delivering the toys, which Vandyne tagged and turned over to the express company. The farmer brought back such supplies as Peter had commissioned him to buy. The entire business was crude and unsystematic, even to Peter's method of packing the toys in hay and sewing the parcels in gunny-sacking, but it all served. It was naïve.

When the ice in the river went out, and that in Big Tree Lake softened and

honeycombed, Peter put aside his jack-knife for a few days and repaired the old duck-blind that had been Booge's damp and temporary home, and built two more, knowing George Rapp and his friends would be down before long. He built two more bunks in the narrow shanty-boat and cleared a tent space on the highest ground near the boat, constructing a platform four feet above the ground, in case the high water should come with the ducks. All this put a temporary close to his toy-making, but Peter was ready for Rapp when the first flock of ducks dropped into the lake, and that night he sent the farmer's hired man to town with a message to Rapp. Late the next evening Rapp and his two friends found Peter waiting for them at the road, and the best part of the night was spent getting the provisions and duck-boats to the slough. The four men dropped asleep the instant they touched their beds, and it was not until the next morning, when Peter was cooking breakfast that he had an opportunity to ask a question that had been in his mind.

“George,” he said, “you didn't ever hear where they took Buddy to, did you?”

Rapp looked up, and stared at Peter until the match with which he had been lighting his pipe burned his fingers, and he snapped them with pain.

“Do you mean to tell me you don't know where that boy is?” he asked. “Well—I'll—be—Petered! Why, Mrs. Potter's got him!”

Peter was holding a plate, but he was quick, and he caught it before it struck the floor.

“I—I caught that one,” he said in silly fashion.

“You're going to catch something else when Widow Potter sees you,” said George Rapp.

XIX. PETER GOES TO TOWN

ONE DAY, if we saw a woman gowned as Mrs. Montgomery was gowned when she

visited Riverbank, we would laugh her to ridicule, but the toys Peter Lane whittled that winter are still admired for their design and execution. There is a collection of them in the rooms of the Riverbank Historical Society. We laugh, too, when we see photographs of Main Street as it was when Peter came to town after his winter on Big Tree Lake, with the mud almost hub deep. That was before the new banks were built or the brick-paving laid, and Main Street was a ragged, ill-kept thoroughfare, with none of the city airs it has since donned. But as Peter stepped out of the First National Bank, and stood for a minute on the steps in the warm spring sunshine, the street looked like an old friend, and this was the more odd because it had never looked like a friend before.

Jim Vandyne had just cashed the checks and money orders Peter had accumulated during the winter. They were for small amounts—a few dollars each—and not until the cashier had pushed the pile of crisp bills under the wicket, mentioning the amount, did happy-go-lucky Peter realize how much his winter earnings had amounted to.

“Quite a lot of money,” Jim had said. “How would you like to open an account?” and Peter had opened his first bank account. The warm, leather-bound bank-book now reposed in his pocket. Peter could feel it pressing against him, and he could feel the extra bulge the check-book made in his hip pocket. He felt like a serf raised to knighthood, with armor protecting him against harm. As he stood there, Mr. Howard, the bank's president, came briskly down the street. He was a short, chubby man, and he had always nodded cheerfully to Peter, but now he stopped and extended his hand.

“How do you do!” he said cheerfully. “Jim Vandyne has been telling me what you have been doing this winter. Glad to know you are making a go of it.”

It was not much. The bank president was not a great bank president, and the bank was not much of a bank—as great banks go—and he had not, after all, said much,

but it made Peter's brown cheeks glow. Bank presidents do not often stop to shake hands with shanty-boatmen, nor do they pause to congratulate them, although the bank president may be an infernal rascal and the shanty-boatman a moral king. But Peter did not philosophize. He knew that if enough bank presidents shake the hand of an ex-shanty-boatman the world will consider the shanty-boatman respectable enough to raise one freckle-faced, kinky-headed little waif of a boy.

Peter raised his head higher than ever, and he had always held it high. He was a man, like other men, now. He could, if he wished, build another shanty-boat. He could hire it built. He could rent a house and put a carpet on the parlor floor. He could say he was going to Florida and people would believe him. He could—buy a suit of clothes! A whole, complete, entire suit, vest and all! It had been years and years since he could do that, and when he had been able to do it he had always spent the money otherwise. Now he crossed the street and entered the Riverbank Clothing Emporium. It gave him a warming feeling of respectability to be buying clothes, but he did not plunge recklessly. He bought everything he needed, from socks and shoes to tie and hat, but the shoes were stout and cheap, and the shirt a woolen one, and the hat a soft felt that would stand wind and weather.

Mr. Rosenheim himself came and stood by Peter when he was trying on the shoes.

“My wife was showing me the piece about you in the magazine,” he said. “I guess you are the first man in Riverbank to get into magazines. We should be proud of you, Lane.”

“Who, me in a magazine? I guess not.”

“Oh, sure! I read some of it. Some such Art and Crafts magazine, with photo cuts from them toys you make. Ain't you seen it?”

“Nope! Let me try on a seven and a half B,” he said calmly, but his pulse quickened.

“Well, I suppose you are used to being puffed up already,” said Mr. Rosenheim. “I wish I could get such free advertising.”

When Peter looked at himself in the store mirror he was well satisfied. Mr. Rosenheim nodded his approval.

“That suit looks like it was made for you, Mr. Lane,” he said, and he did not know what a great truth he was uttering, for Peter, so long in rags, and the simple, quiet suit seemed well fitted for each other's company. Peter went out upon the street, and at the first corner he met—Booge!

He was the same old, frowsy, hairy Booge, and he greeted Peter in the same deep bass.

“Did you get the papers, to rescue the cheeild?” he asked melodramatically. “I hid them under the stone at the corner of the lane. Meet me at midnight! Hush! A stranger approaches!”

There were several strangers approaching, for they were standing on the corner of the two principal streets. Peter grinned.

“George Rapp brought it down to me,” he said. “I thought you were in for six months.”

“Sheriff discharged me,” said Booge. “I ate too much. He couldn't figure a profit, so he kicked me out.”

“You don't mean it!”

“No, teacher excused me at noon so I could go to dancing class,” said Booge.

“How did you get out?” Peter insisted. “There wasn't room for me and Briggles in the same jail,” said Booge. “We was always singin' out of harmony.”

“Was Briggles in jail?”

“They caught the old kazoozer, kazoozer, kazoozer, They caught the old kazoozer and took him to the jail,”

hummed Booge, “and I got excused so I could go and hunt up Susie: I was her responsible guardian. Ain't that a joke?”

“What are you going to do now?” asked Peter.

“I dunno!” said Booge thoughtfully. “I ain't made up my mind whether to run for mayor or buy the op'ry house, but if anybody was to give me a nickel I'd give up whisky and buy beer. If not, I'll stand around here 'til I do get arrested. The town cop has promised and promised to do it, but he ain't reliable. I've got so I don't depend on his word no more.”

Peter took a silver dollar from his pocket and handed it to the tramp, and Booge started across the street to the nearest saloon without farewell. Peter took a step after him and then turned back.

“I guess it's what he likes,” he said, “and I couldn't stop him if I wanted to.”

Peter turned into the Star Restaurant and took a seat at one of the red-covered tables.

“Bob,” he said, “can you get me up one of them oyster stews of yours? One of them milk stews, with plenty of oysters and a hunk of butter thawing out on top. Fix me one. And then I want a chicken—a nice, fresh, young chicken, killed about day before yesterday—split open and br'iled right on top of the coals, so the burned smell will come sifting in before the chicken is ready, and I want it on a hot plate—a plate so hot I'll holler when I grab it. And I want some of your fried potatoes in a side dish—hashed browned potatoes, browned almost crisp in the dish, with bacon chopped up in them. And I want a big cup of coffee with real cream, even if you have to send out for it. And then, Bob, I want a whole lemon meringue pie. A whole one, three inches thick and fourteen inches across. I've been wanting to eat a whole lemon meringue pie ever since I was fourteen years old, and now I'm going to. I'm going to have one full, fine, first-class meal and then—”

“Then what?” asked Bob.

“Then I'm going to go and get an alarm-clock that belongs to me.”

XX. PETER GETS HIS CLOCK

For a man who means to walk it, considering the usual state of the river-road in spring, the railway is the best path between Riverbank and Widow Potter's farm, and Peter, leaving the town, took to the railway track. He had, he assured himself, a definite purpose in visiting Mrs. Potter. She had expressed her views of a man who fell so low as to pawn his goods and chattels, and the wound still rankled, and Peter meant to have back his alarm-clock. That, he repeated to himself, was why he was going to Mrs. Potter's, but in his heart he knew this was not so—he wanted to see Buddy. He wanted, before the boy forgot him, to reestablish for a moment the old ties. In short, he was jealous of Mrs. Potter.

As he walked up the track he planned the interview in advance. “Mrs. Potter,” he would say, “I have come to get my clock. Here is the money, and I'm sorry I had to trouble you to keep it so long.” Then he would lay the money on the kitchen table, and Mrs. Potter, slightly awed by his new clothes, would hand him the clock. “And if possible,” he would say then, “I'd like to speak with Buddy a few minutes.” Mrs. Potter would then call Buddy.

That was as he planned it, but the nearer he approached Mrs. Potter's cove the less likely it seemed to Peter that Mrs. Potter would be much awed by the clothes. By the time he was within half a mile of the cove he was not only sure that Mrs. Potter was not the woman to be awed by anything, but he began to wish he had not bought the clothes. He could imagine her tone as she put her hands on her hips and looked him over and said, “Well, of all the shiftlessness I ever heard tell of! Goin' and dressin' yourself up like a dude, and you not a roof in the world to hide your head under!” He wished he could see himself just once more in a large mirror, so that he might renew the feeling of confidence he had felt at Rosenheim's. Instead, he felt much as a young fellow feels when he dons his first dress-suit and steps upon the dancing-floor. He felt stiff and awkward, and that every garment he wore was a showy misfit. He did not seem to be Peter Lane at all, but some flashy, overdressed, uncomfortable stranger. He suddenly realized that he had hands and feet, and that

the new hat was stiff and uncomfortable, and that the tie—so placidly blue in the dusk of the clothing store—was rampantly and screamingly blue in the full light of day. He felt that he had done an inexcusable and reckless thing in buying the new clothes, and he knew Mrs. Potter would tell him so.

Peter decided that, since he was sure to be in for a horrible half hour, he would assert his manhood. If Mrs. Potter scolded he would sass back. He had money in the bank, hadn't he? He had heard enough of her hard words, hadn't he? All right! The minute she said “shiftless” he would speak right up. He would look her firmly in the eye and say something like—“Now, stop! You've talked to me that way before, Mrs. Potter, when I was a poor shanty-boatman, but I've had just about enough of it! I'm tired of that.” He would hide the misery of his clothes in a flood of high words.

That is to say, if Mrs. Potter gave him a chance! For, as Peter turned from the track to the road, and neared the gate, he saw it all depended on Mrs. Potter. If she did not wish him to talk, that would end it, and it was a meek, uneasy, uncomfortable, undecided, miserable Peter that turned in at the gate.

And then, before he could tuck the sleeves of his flannel shirt—which seemed to have grown until they were ridiculously long—into his coat cuffs—which seemed to have become ridiculously short—a young girl jumped from behind one of the old apple trees and stood staring at him. Peter took off his hat as if she had been a princess. He was in the state of mind when he would have taken off his hat to a wax figure.

But the girl stood but for a moment. Then she ran toward him.

“I know who you are!” she cried. “You 're Uncle Peter, ain't you? I'm Susie!”

“Susie?” said Peter. “Are you Susie?” He tried to greet her as a man should greet a strange child, but she would have none of it. She threw her arm around his right arm and hugged it, jumping up and down.

“O Uncle Peter! Uncle Peter!” she cried joyously, and turning, she screamed at the

top of her voice: “Bud-dy! B-u-u-u-dy! Bud-dy! Here's Uncle Peter!”

Around the corner of the house popped a hatless, kinky head.

“Uncle Peter! Uncle Peter!” screamed Buddy, running with a strange little hippety-hop. “O Uncle Peter! My Uncle Peter! My Uncle Peter!” and he threw himself into Peter's arms, laughing and crying and trembling with joy, repeating over and over, through the laughter and the tears: “My Uncle Peter! My Uncle Peter!”

“My Buddy! My old Buddy-boy!” Peter murmured, hugging him close. “My old Buddy-boy!”

So it happened that he was not thinking of his new clothes when Mrs. Potter came to the kitchen door.

“Well, for the land's sake, Peter Lane,” she cried, while Buddy clung to his neck and Susie clung around one leg, “it's about time! I thought you never was cornin'. I been waitin' here for you, with these two fatherless children—”

From the kitchen came the rackety-banging of the alarm-clock, proving that, as the clock was set to ring at six, Peter had found a mother for the fatherless children at just seventeen minutes past three.

“If it wouldn't annoy you too much to get married, Mrs. Potter,” said Peter, gasping at his own temerity, and wiping his forehead on the sleeve of his new coat, “I can—I could—we'd have quite a nice little family to start off with right away.”

“Annoy me? Is that what you call a proposal to marry me, Peter Lane?” asked Mrs. Potter scornfully. “Ain't you ever goin' to be able to talk up like a man!”

“Yes, I am,” snapped Peter. “Will you marry me?”

“Yes, I will!” snapped the Widow Potter.

THE END

*** END OF THE PROJECT GUTENBERG EBOOK THE JACK-KNIFE MAN

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