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The Chums of Scranton High at Ice Hockey by Donald Ferguson

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The Chums of Scranton High at Ice Hockey

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THE CHUMS OF SCRANTON HIGH AT ICE HOCKEY

CHAPTER I

GOOD TIMES COMING

Hugh looked at the big thermometer alongside the Juggins' front door as he came out, and the mercury was still falling steadily.

"It's certainly a whole lot sharper than it was early this morning, Thad. Feels to me as if the first cold wave of the winter had struck Scranton."

"The ice on our flooded baseball field, and that out at Hobson's mill-pond ought to be in great shape after a hard freeze to-night, Hugh."

"We're in luck this time, chum Thad. Look at that sky, will you? Never a cloud in sight, and the sun going down yellow. Deacon Winslow, our reliable old weather prophet blacksmith, who always keeps a goose-bone hanging up in his smithy, to tell what sort of a winter we're going to get, says such a sign stands for cold and clear to-morrow after that kind of a sunset. Red means warmer, you know."

"I only hope it keeps on for forty-eight hours more, that's all I can say, Hugh. This being Thursday, it would fetch us to Saturday. I understand they're not meaning to let a single pair of steel runners on the baseball park, to mark the smooth

surface of the new ice, until Saturday morning."

"Which will be a fine thing for our hockey try-out with the scratch Seven, eh, Thad?"

"We want to test our team play before going up against the boys of Keyport High, that's a fact; and Scranton can put up a hard fighting bunch of irregulars. There are some mighty clever hockey players in and out of the high school, who are not on our Seven. I guess there ought to be a pretty lively game on Saturday; and there will be if several fellows I could mention line up against us."

The two boys who had just left the home of a schoolmate named Horatio Juggins were great friends. Although Hugh Morgan had seemed to jump into popular leadership among the boys of Scranton, soon after his folks came to reside in the town, he and Thad Stevens had become almost inseparables.

Indeed, some of the fellows often regarded them as "Damon and Pythias," or on occasions it might be "David and Jonathan." Both were of an athletic turn, and took prominent parts in all baseball games, and other strenuous outdoor sports indulged in by the boys of Scranton High; a record of which will be found in the several preceding books of this series, to which the new reader is referred, if he feels any curiosity concerning the earlier doings of this lively bunch.

Hugh was cool and calm in times when his chum would show visible signs of great excitement. He had drilled himself to control his temper under provocation, until he felt master of himself.

It was the 10th of January, and thus far the opportunities for skating that had come to the young people of that section of country where Scranton was located, had been almost nil; which would account for the enthusiasm of the lads when Thad announced how rapidly the thermometer was giving promise of a severe cold spell.

Scranton had two keen rivals for athletic honors. Allendale and Belleville High fellows had given them a hard run of it before they carried off the championship pennant of the county in baseball the preceding summer.

Then, in the late fall, there had been a wonderfully successful athletic tournament, inaugurated to celebrate the enclosing of the grounds outside Scranton with a high board-fence, and the building of a splendid grandstand, as well as rooms where the athletic participants in sports might dress in comfort.

With the coming of winter the big field thus enclosed had been properly flooded, so that it might afford a vast amount of healthy recreation to all Scranton boys and girls who loved to skate.

Hitherto they had been compelled to trudge all the way out to Hobson's mill-pond, and back, which was a long enough journey to keep many from ever thinking of indulging in what is, perhaps, the most cherished winter sport among youthful Americans.

The two friends had been asked around by the Juggins boy to inspect a wonderful assortment of treasure trove that an old and peculiar uncle, with a fad for collecting curios of every description, and who was at present out in India, had sent to his young nephew and namesake.

These consisted of scores of most interesting objects, besides several thousand rare postage stamps. Taken in all it was the greatest collection of stamps any of them had ever heard of. And the other things proved of such absorbing interest that Hugh and Thad had lingered until the afternoon was done, with supper not so far away but that they must hurry home.

Thad, apparently, had something on his mind which he wished to get rid of, judging from the way in which he several times looked queerly at his chum. Finally, as if determined to speak up, he started, half apologetically:

"Hugh, excuse me if I'm butting in where I have no business," he said; "but when I saw you talking so long with that town bully, Nick Lang, this afternoon, after we got out of school, I didn't know what to think. Was he threatening you about anything, Hugh? After that fine dressing-down you gave Nick last summer, when he forced you to fight him while we were out at that barn dance, I notice he keeps fairly mum when you're around."

Hugh chuckled, as though the recollection might not be wholly displeasing; though, truth to tell, that was the only fight he had been in since coming to Scranton. Even it would not have taken place only that he could not stand by and see the big bully thrash most cruelly a weaker boy than himself.

"Oh! no, you're away off in your guess, Thad," he replied immediately. "Fact is, instead of threats, Nick was asking a favor of me, for once in his life."

"You don't say!" ejaculated Thad. "Well, now you've got me excited there's nothing left but to tell me what sort of a favor Nick would want of you, Hugh."

"It seems that for a long time he's been admiring those old hockey skates of mine," continued the other. "In fact, they've grown on Nick so that he even condescended to ask me to *sell* them to him for a dollar, which he said he'd earned by doing odd jobs, just in order to buy my old skates. He chanced to hear me say once that my mother had promised to get me the best silver-plated hockey skates on the market, for my next birthday, which is now only a few days off. That's all there was to it, Thad."

"Well," commented Thad, "we all know that Nick is a boss skater, even on the old runners he sports, and which mebbe his dad used before him, they're that ancient. He can hold his own with the next one whenever there's any ice worth using. And as to hockey, why, if Nick would only play fair, which he never will, it seems because his nature must be warped and crooked, he could have a leading place on our Seven. As it is, the boys refused to stand for him in any game, and so he had to herd with the scratch players. Even then Mr. Leonard, our efficient coach and trainer, has to call him down good and hard for cheating, or playing off-side purposely. It's anything to win, with Nick."

"You're painting Nick pretty true to life, Thad," agreed Hugh; "though I'm sorry it's so, I've got a hunch that chap, if he only could be reconstructed in some way or other, might be a shining mark in many of our athletic games."

"Oh! that's hopeless, Hugh, I tell you. The leopard can't change its spots; and Nick Lang was born to be just the tricky bully he's always shown himself."

Hugh shook his head, as though not quite agreeing with his chum.

"Time alone will tell, Thad. There might come a sudden revolution in Nick's way of seeing things. I've heard of boys who were said to be the worst in the town taking a turn, and forging up to the head. It's improbable, I admit, but not impossible."

"Oh! he's bad all the way through, believe me, Hugh. But did you sell the skates, as he wanted you to do?"

"No, I told him I didn't care to," Hugh replied. "I was tempted to agree when he looked so bitterly disappointed; then an ugly scowl came over his face, and he broke away and left me; so that opportunity was lost. Besides, it's best not to be too sure I'm going to get those silver-plated skates after all, though Mom is looking pretty mysterious these days; and

some sort of package came to her by express from New York the other day. She hurried it away before I could even see the name printed on the wrapper."

"Perhaps," said Thad a bit wistfully, "you might bequeath me your old skates in case you do get new ones. Mine are not half as good for hockey. I don't blame Nick for envying you their possession; but then it hasn't been so much what you had on your feet that has made you the swift hockey player you are, but coolness of judgment, ability to anticipate the moves of the enemy, and a clever stroke that can send the puck skimming over the ice like fury."

"Here, that'll do for you, Thad. No bouquets needed, thank you, all the same. According to my notion there are several fellows in Scranton my equals at hockey, and perhaps my superiors. Nick Lang, for instance, if only he had skates he could depend on, and which wouldn't threaten to trip him up in the midst of an exciting scrimmage."

"But, see here, Hugh, you were speaking just now about a chap built like Nick turning over a new leaf, and making himself respected in the community in spite of the bad name he's always had. Honestly now, do you really believe that's possible? Is there such a thing as the regeneration of a boy who's been born bad, and always taken delight in doing every sort of mean thing on the calendar? I can't believe it."

Hugh Morgan turned and gave his chum a serious look.

"I've got a good mind to tell you something that's been on my mind lately," he said.

CHAPTER II

A BULL IN THE CHINA SHOP

On hearing his chum say that, Thad gripped Hugh's arm.

"Then get busy, Hugh," he hastened to remark. "When you start cogitating over things there's always something interesting on foot. What is it this time?"

"Oh! just a little speculation I've been indulging in, Thad, and on the very subject we were talking about--whether a really bad man, or boy, for that matter, can ever turn right-about-face, and redeem himself. You say it's impossible; I think otherwise."

"Tell me a single instance, then, Hugh."

"Just what I'm meaning to do," came the ready response, "but it's in romance, not history; though there are just as strong instances that can be proven. I've heard my father mention some of them long ago. But it happens, Thad, that I've been reading over, for the third time, a book we once enjoyed together immensely. We got a splendid set of Victor Hugo's works lately at our house, you remember."

"Oh!" exclaimed Thad, "you're referring to his *Les Miserables*, I guess. And now I remember how you said at the time we read it together that the scene where that good priest forgave the rascally Jean Valjean for stealing his silver candlesticks and spoons, after he had been so kind to him made a great impression on your mind. But, see here, Hugh, are you comparing that sneak Nick Lang to Jean Valjean, the ex-convict?"

"Yes, in a way," the other replied. "The man who had been released from the galleys, after he had served his term for stealing a loaf of bread was despised by society, which shut the door in his face. He was like a wild beast, you

remember, and hated everyone. Well, by degrees, Nick is finding himself in just about the same position. Everybody looks on him as being thoroughly bad; and so he tells himself that since he's got the name he might as well have the game."

"I suppose that's about the way it goes," Thad admitted.

"There's no doubt of it," Hugh told him. "Several times I remember we had an idea Nick meant to reform; but he went back to his old ways suddenly. I think people must have nagged him, and made him feel ugly. But I've been wondering, Thad, what if Nick could have a revelation about like the one that came to Jean Valjean at the time that splendid old priest, looking straight at the thief when the officers dragged him back with those silver candlesticks and spoons hidden under his dirty blouse, told them the men had committed no wrong, because he, the priest, had given the silver to him; which we know he *had* done in his mind, after discovering how he had been robbed."

Thad shook his head in a dogged fashion, as though by no means convinced.

"I reckon you'd be just the one to try that crazy scheme, Hugh, if ever the chance came to you; but mark me when I say it'd all be wasted on Nick."

"But why should you be so sure of that?" asked the other. "The ex-convict was pictured as the lowest of human animals. Hugo painted him as hating every living being, because of his own wrongs; and believing that there was no such thing as honor and justice among mankind. It was done to make his change of heart seem all the more remarkable; to prove that a fellow can never sink so low but that there *may* be a chance for him to climb up again, if only he makes up his mind."

Thad laughed then, a little skeptically still, it must be confessed.

"Oh! that sounds all very fine, in a story, Hugh, but it'd never work out in real life. According to my mind that Nick Lang will go along to the end of the book as a bad egg. He'll fetch up in the penitentiary, or reform school, some of these fine days. I've heard Chief Wambold has declared that the next time he has anything connected with breaking the law on Nick he expects to take him before the Squire, and have him railroaded to the Reformatory; and he means it, too."

"Well, you can hardly blame the Chief," agreed Hugh, "because Nick and his pals, Leon Disney and Tip Slavin, have certainly made life hard for the police force of Scranton for years back. Brush fires have been started maliciously, just to see the fire-laddies run with the machine and create a little excitement; orchards have been robbed time and again; and, in fact, dozens of pranks more or less serious been played night after night, all of which mischief is laid at the door of Nick Lang, even if much of it can't be actually traced there."

"Of course, what you say is the exact truth, Hugh."

"Give dog Tray a bad name, and he gets it right and left," chuckled Hugh. "I've had an idea that once in a while some of the more respected fellows in town may have broken loose, and gone on night expeditions. They felt pretty safe in doing it, because every citizen would believe Nick was the guilty one. But, in spite of your thinking my idea impossible, I'd be tempted to try it out, if ever I ran across the chance. It'd settle a thing I've worried over more than a little."

No more was said on that subject, though afterwards Thad had it brought to his attention again, and in a peculiar way at that.

The two boys separated a little further on, each heading homeward.

On the following morning it was found that their predictions concerning the weather had been amply verified. The mercury had dropped away down in the tube of the thermometer, and every youngster had a happy look on his or her face at school, as though the prospect for skating brought almost universal satisfaction.

Thad, with several others, had gone out to Hobson's mill-pond to try the new ice after high school had dismissed for the week-end. Hugh wanted to accompany them very much, but he had promised his mother to spend a couple of hours that afternoon in mending something, which had gone for a long time. And once his word was given Hugh never broke it, no matter how alluring the prospect of sport might be abroad.

It was about half-past three in the afternoon.

Hugh sat in his den amidst his prized possessions. He was working on his lessons so as to get them out of the way, as there was some sort of affair scheduled for that evening, which he meant to attend; and he would be too tired after skating all day on Saturday to study any that night, as he well knew.

Several times he glanced over to where his carefully polished and well-sharpened skates, strapped together, lay on a side table. Each look caused him to shrug his shoulders a bit. He could easily imagine he heard the delightful clang of steel runners cutting into that smooth sheet of new ice out at the mill pond; and the figures of the happy skaters would pass before his eyes. Yes, probably Sue Barnes would be there, too, with her chums, Ivy Middleton and Peggy Noland, wondering, it might be, how he, Hugh, could deny himself such a glorious opportunity for the first real good skate of the season.

Then Hugh would heave a little sigh, and apply himself harder than ever to his task. When he had an unpleasant thing to do he never allowed temptation to swerve him. And, after all, it was pretty snug and comfortable there in his den, Hugh told himself; besides, that was a long walk home for a tired fellow to take, even in good company.

Then he heard his mother speaking to someone who must have rung the doorbell.

"Go up to the top of the stairs, and turn to the right. You will find Hugh in his den, I believe. Hugh, are you there? Well, here's a visitor to see you."

Supposing, of course, that it must be one of his close friends, who for some reason had not gone off skating, and wished to see him about some matter of importance, Hugh, after answering his mother, had gone on skimming the subject on which his mind just then happened to be set.

He heard the door open, and close softly. Then someone gave a gruff cough. Hugh looked around and received quite a surprise.

Instead of Thad Stevens, Owen Dugdale, Horatio Juggins, "Just" Smith, or Julius Hobson he saw---Nick Lang!

"Oh, hello, Nick!" he commenced to say, a little restrained in his welcome; for, of course, he could give a guess that the other had come again to try and buy his skates, which Hugh was not much in favor of selling.

He shoved a chair forward, determined not to be uncivil at any rate. After that talk with Thad about this fellow it can be understood that Hugh was still bent on studying Nick, with the idea of deciding whether he did actually have a grain of decency in his make-up, such as could be used as a foundation on which to build a new structure.

The outlook was far from promising. Indeed, he could not remember ever seeing Nick look more antagonistic than just then, even though he tried to appear friendly.

"But then," Hugh was telling himself, "I reckon now Jean Valjean was about as fierce looking a human wild beast as that good old priest had ever seen at the time he invited the ex-convict into his snug house, and horrified his sister by asking him to sit at table with them, and spend the night there under his hospitable roof."

"You wanted to see me about something, did you, Nick?" he asked the other.

Nick had dropped down on the chair. His furtive gaze went around the room as if it aroused his curiosity, for this was really the first occasion when he had ever graced Hugh's den with his company.

When his eyes alighted on the coveted skates Nick's face took on an expressive grin. Then he turned toward Hugh, to say, almost whiningly:

"Sure thing, Hugh. I thought mebbe I'd coax you to let me have the skates, if I told you I'd managed to get another half dollar by selling a pair of my pigeons. Here's a dollar and a half; take it, and gimme the runners, won't you?"

His manner was intended to be ingratiating, but evidently Nick was so accustomed to bullying everyone with whom he came in contact that it was next to impossible for him to change his abusive ways. Hugh felt less inclined than ever to accommodate him. Under other and more favorable conditions he might have been tempted to promise Nick to hand him over the skates, *for nothing*, after he had actually received the expected new ones.

"I'm sorry to refuse you again, Nick," Hugh said coldly; "but at present I have no other skates, and, as I expect to take part in a hockey match with the scratch Seven to-morrow, I'll need my runners."

"But there's nothing to hinder you selling me the same, say next week, that I can see; unless mebbe you're just holdin' out on account of an old grudge against me. How about that, Hugh?"

Hugh was still unconvinced.

"Just now I'm not in a humor to sell the skates, Nick," he said. "If I change my mind, I'll let you know about it. That's final. And when I dispose of my skates it's my intention to *give* them away, not sell them."

He turned to do something at the desk where he was sitting. Meanwhile, Nick had shuffled away, as though meaning to leave the room. When Hugh looked up he was half-way through the door, and turning to say with a sneer:

"I ain't going to forget this on you, Hugh Morgan, believe me. I thought I'd give you a chanct to smooth over the rough places between us; but I see you don't want anything to do with a feller who's got the reputation they give me. All right, keep your old skates then!"

With that he hurried down the stairs. And a minute afterwards Hugh, happening to glance over to the table at the side of the room, made a startling discovery. The skates had disappeared!

CHAPTER III

GIVING NICK A CHANCE

"Why, he cribbed them after all!" Hugh exclaimed, as he jumped to his feet, and hurried over to the table, hardly able to believe his own eyes.

Something caught his attention. A dirty dollar bill and a fifty cent silver piece lay in place of the skates. Then Nick had not exactly *stolen* Hugh's property, but imagined that this forced sale might keep him within the law.

Hugh at first flush felt indignant. He gave the money an angry look, as though scorning it, despite the hard work Nick may have done and sacrifices also made in order to build up that small amount.

"Why, the contemptible scamp, I'll have to set Chief Wambold after him, and recover my skates!" he said, warmly for him. "Serve him right, too, if this is the last straw on the camel's back, to send him to the House of Refuge for a spell. He is a born thief, I do believe, and ought to be treated just like one."

Hugh, aroused by the sense of injustice, and a desire to turn the tables on the slippery Nick, even stepped forward to snatch up his cap, with the full intention of hurrying out to see if he could overtake the thief; and, if not, continuing on until he came to the office of the police force. Then he stopped short with a gasp.

He had suddenly remembered something. Into his mind rushed the details of a certain recent conversation in which he had indulged with his closest chum, Thad Stevens. Again he saw the picture of that good priest of the story, looking so benignly upon the wretched Jean Valjean, brought into his presence with the valuable silver candlesticks and spoons found in his possession, which he kept insisting his late host had presented him with, however preposterous the claim seemed.

"Why, this is very nearly like that case, I declare!" ejaculated Hugh, almost overcome by the wonderful similarity, which seemed the more amazing because of the resolution he told Thad he had taken.

He dropped back into his seat, with the money still gripped in his hand. He stared hard at it. In imagination he could see Nick, who never liked hard work any too well, they said, busying himself like a beaver, putting in coal for some neighbor, perhaps; or cleaning a walk off for a dime. He must have done considerable work to earn that first dollar.

"Then after that," Hugh was saying to himself, "he sold a pair of his pet pigeons, and I reckon he thinks a heap of them, from all I've heard said. Yes, Nick must have wanted my old skates worse than he ever did anything in all his life. And when I refused to sell them to him he just thought he'd do the trading by himself. It's a queer way of doing business, and one the law wouldn't recognize; but, after all, it was an upward step for Nick Lang, when he could have taken the skates, and kept the cash as well. This certainly beats the Dutch! What ought I to do about it, I wonder? Of course, if I told the whole thing to mother, I suppose she'd let me have the new skates ahead of time; or I could borrow Kenneth Kinkaid's, because, after breaking his leg that way in the running race he says he isn't to be allowed to skate a bit this winter. But ought I let the scamp keep my skates?"

He mused over it for several minutes, as if undecided. Then the sound of voices outside caught his attention. One seemed to be gruff and official, another whining.

Hugh jumped up and stepped to a window. He could see down the street on which the Morgan home stood. Three persons were in sight, and hurrying along toward the house. One of these he recognized as his chum, Thad, who must have returned from Hobson's mill-pond earlier than he had expected. Another was the tall, attenuated Chief Wambold; and the party whom he was gripping by the arm---yes, it was none other than Hugh's late visitor, Nick Lang!

"Oh, they've caught him, it seems, just like those awful police did poor, wicked Jean Valjean," Hugh muttered, thrilled by the sight; "and right now they're fetching Nick back here, to ask me if he wasn't lying when he said I'd sold or given him my skates!"

He realized that, undoubtedly, by some strange freak of fortune Thad must have seen the other gloating over his prize; and recognizing the skates, for they were well-known to him, he had beckoned to the policeman who happened to be near by, with the result that Nick was nabbed before he realized his peril.

Hugh had to decide quickly as to what he should do, for they were coming in through the gate even now. Once again did the wonderful story he had been reading flash before his mind.

"I *must* try it out!" he exclaimed suddenly, gripped by the amazing coincidence between this case and that so aptly described by Hugo. "I said I would if ever I had a chance. It worked miracles in the story; perhaps it may in real life, Anyway, it's going to be worth while, and give me a heap of enjoyment watching the result. So here and now I say that I've sold my skates to Nick, and that they really belong to him at this minute. But I reckon he'll be scared pretty badly when he faces me again, expecting the worst."

Thad knew how to get in by the side door that opened on the back stairs; so he did not waste any time in ringing the bell. Now Hugh could hear heavy footsteps. They were coming, and the great test was about to be made.

The door opened to admit, first of all, Thad, his face filled with burning indignation, and his eyes sparkling with excitement. Close on his heels the others also pushed into the room on the second floor, transformed into a genuine boy's den by pictures of healthy sport on the walls, besides college burgees, fishing tackle, a bass of three pounds that had been beautifully stuffed by Hugh himself to commemorate a glorious day's sport; and dozens of other things dear to the heart of a youth who loved the Great Outdoors as much as he did.

Chief Wambold looked triumphant and grim. Nick fairly writhed in that iron clutch, and his face had assumed a sickly sallow color; while his eyes reminded Hugh of those of a hunted wild animal at bay, fear and defiance struggling for the mastery.

"Stand there, you cub!" snarled the police officer, as he gave Nick a whirl into the room, closing the door at the same time, and planting his six-foot-five figure against it, to prevent such a thing as escape.

It was quite a tableau. Hugh believed he would never forget it as long as he lived. But Thad, it appeared, was the first to speak.

"Hugh, this skunk has gone and beat you after all!" he cried, pointing a scornful finger at the glowering Nick, who was eyeing Hugh hungrily, as if trying to decide whether or not the other would tell Chief Wambold to lock him up as a thief. "I chanced to see him pull something out that he had been hiding under his coat, and recognized your nickel-mounted skates. So I beckoned to Chief Wambold, and told him about it; he made Nick come back here to face you, and confess to the theft."

Nick growled something half under his breath, that sounded like:

"Didn't steal 'em, I tell you; I bought the skates fair and square from Hugh here. You're all down on me, and won't listen to a thing I say; that's the worst of it."

The tall head of the Scranton police force held up something he had been carrying all the while.

"Here's the skates he had, Hugh," he went on to say. "Thad tells me they are your property. He even showed me your initials scratched on each skate. Take a good look at the same, and let me know about it, will you, before I lug this sneak off to the lock-up. I reckon he's headed for the Reform School this time, sure!"

At that Nick grew even more sallow than before, if such a thing were possible; and the fear in his eyes became almost pitiable.

Hugh, meaning to make a straight job of his idea, calmly looked the skates over. He knew full well how Nick was watching his every action, trying to hug just a glimmer of hope to his heart that, perhaps, Hugh might be merciful, and let him off, as the skates were now once again in his possession. The shadow of the Reformatory loomed up dreadfully close to Nick Lang just then, darker than he had ever before imagined it could look. It terrified him, too, and caused him to shiver as though someone had dashed a bucket of ice-cold water over him unexpectedly.

"Yes, I recognize these skates very well, Chief," Hugh told the waiting officer.

"And do they belong to you, Hugh?" continued the officer, with a stern look at the cringing culprit near by, who weakly leaned against the table for support after his recent rough handling.

"They *were* my property until just ten minutes, more or less, ago, Chief," said Hugh, deliberately fixing Nick with his eye, so as to impress things on him in a way he could never forget. "Then I had an offer from Nick here to buy them. At first I was averse to letting him have them, but I changed my mind. These skates belong to Nick, Chief. You must set him free, and not hold this against him. He's going to wipe the slate clean this time and astonish folks here in Scranton by showing them what a fellow of his varied talents can do, once he sets out to go straight. And, for one, I wish him the best of success from the bottom of my heart. I hope you enjoy your skates, Nick."

He held out his hand, and the astounded Nick mechanically allowed Hugh to squeeze his digits. But not one word could he say, simply stared at Hugh as though he had difficulty in understanding such nobility of soul; then, taking the skates, he went from the room. They could hear the clatter of his heels as he hurried down the stairs, as though afraid Hugh might yet repent and send the officer after him.

Of course, Chief Wambold departed, shrugging his shoulders as though still more than half convinced there had been something crooked about Nick's suspicious actions.

Of course Thad had to be told the whole amazing story. He shook his head at the conclusion, and went on record as being a doubter by saying:

"I wish you success in your wonderful experiment, Hugh, I sure do; but all the same I don't believe for a minute the leopard is going to change its spots, or that Nick Lang, the worst boy in Scranton, can ever reform."

Hugh would say nothing further about it, only, of course, he made Thad promise to keep everything secret until he gave permission to speak. If Nick made good this would never happen.

That night Hugh had a jolly time, and it was fairly late when he crept into bed. As he lay there, instead of going to sleep immediately, he looked out of the window toward the west, where a bright star hung above the horizon. It seemed like a magnet to Hugh, who lay there and watched for its setting, all the while allowing his thoughts to roam back to the remarkable happening of that afternoon.

"It's a toss-up, just as Thad says, whether anything worth while will come of my experiment," he told himself; "but, anyhow, I've given Nick something to think over. And if he makes the first advances toward me I'm bound to meet him half-way. I only hope it turns out like the story of Jean Valjean did. But there goes my Star of Hope down behind the horizon; and now I'd better be getting some sleep myself. All the same I'm glad I did it!"

And doubtless he slept all the more soundly because of the noble impulse that had impelled him to save Nick Lang from the Reform School.

CHAPTER IV

THE HOCKEY MATCH WITH A SCRATCH SEVEN

There was a large crowd present to watch the local hockey match that morning. Not only were Scranton High pupils interested, but many of the town folks seemed to find it convenient to stroll around to the field that, during the recent summer, had been the scene of bitterly contested baseball games.

Even a number of gentlemen were on hand to criticize, and also applaud, according to what their judgment of the work of the young athletes proved to be. Some of these men had been college players, or, at least, interested in athletic sports. They hailed the awakening of Scranton along these lines most heartily. And most of them had only too gladly invested various sums in the up-building of the athletic grounds.

Now that the high board-fence surrounded the large field, and the carefully planned clubhouse stood at the near end, the grounds had a business-like air. Those who knew just how to go about it had seen that the water was just the right depth, and this was now frozen almost solid. As the enclosure was limited in dimensions, it became apparent that half of the ice should be given over to the hockey players. When the game was finished the entire pond could be used by the general public.

The "rink" had been scientifically measured off, and such lines as were necessary marked, after the rules of the game. The two goals in the center of the extreme ends were stationary, the posts having been rooted to the ice in some ingenious fashion, with the nets between.

Hugh Morgan had been unanimously chosen to serve as leader of the Scranton Seven. He was admirably fitted for the position, since his playing was gilt-edged, his judgment sound, and he never allowed himself to become excited, or "rattled," no matter what the crisis.

The other members of the team consisted of fellows who had done nobly in the stirring baseball encounters of the previous summer, and were, moreover, well up in the various angles of skating.

By name they were as follows, and those who have read previous stories in this High School Series will recognize old friends in the list:

Julius Hobson, Thad Stevens, Joe Danvers, Owen Dugdale, Horatio Juggins and Justin Smith, commonly known as "J. J."

The scratch team consisted of some fine players in addition, boys who were swift on the wing and able with their hockey sticks. When the two teams were lined up to hear the last instructions from Mr. Leonard, who, being the physical instructor at Scranton High, had taken upon himself the duties of umpire and coach and referee all in one for this occasion, they stood as follows:

<i>Scranton High</i>	<i>Position</i>	<i>Scratch Team</i>
Stevens	Goal	Anthony McGrew
Hobson	Point	Frank Marshall
Danvers	Cover Point	Dick Travers
Smith	Right End	Nick Lang
Dugdale	Center	Tom Rawlings
Juggins	Left End	Phil Hasty
Morgan	Rover	Tug Lawrence

Just before the game began there was a hasty consultation among the players opposed to the regular team. One of their members had sent word he could not come up to time, as his mother had refused to let him play. This necessitated a change of program. A substitute must be found, and as they knew that Hugh's Seven already greatly outclassed them it was of considerable moment that they pick up a player who would strengthen their team, regardless of his identity.

So Nick Lang had been approached and offered the position of Right End, a very important place for swift action and furious fighting. Nick had been skating quietly by himself and evidently greatly enjoying his new skates, which many boys recognized as the pair Hugh Morgan had once owned.

He had hesitated just a trifle, and then agreed to fill the vacancy. There were those who shook their heads dismally when they saw Nick the trouble-maker in the line-up. Previous experiences warned them that the game was very likely to break up in a big row, for such had been the fate of many a rivalry when rough-and-ready Nick Lang entered the lists.

But Hugh, who had secretly been the first to suggest to the captain of the other Seven that Nick be chosen, somehow believed the one-time bully of Scranton might surprise his critics for once by playing a straight, honest game.

Hugh, of course, was mounted on his new silver skates. He had found little difficulty in persuading his mother to advance his birthday gift a few days, after telling her the whole circumstances; and it must be said that Mrs. Morgan approved of his plan from the bottom of her heart.

Mr. Leonard had often had trouble with Nick in times gone by. When he sternly told the boys before the game was started that he meant to be severe in inflicting punishment and penalties for foul or off-side work he had Nick mostly in mind. Indeed, everyone who heard what he said concluded that it was meant almost entirely for the Lang chap.

Nick only grinned. Those who knew him best did not find any encouragement about his apparent good nature. Nick could "smile, and smile again, and still be a villain," as some of them were fond of repeating.

The game began, and was soon in full progress, with the players surging from one end of the rink to the other, according to which side had gained possession of the puck, and were endeavoring by every legitimate means possible to shoot the little rubber disc between the goal posts, and into the net of their opponents.

It was soon seen that as a whole the Scratch Team was woefully weak. Hugh's players had things pretty much their own way. Before more than half of the first twenty-minute period had been exhausted the score stood five goals for Scranton High, and none to the credit of their opponents.

Then the tactics of the Scratch Team underwent a change. The captain put Nick Lang forward to oppose Hugh Morgan when the puck was again faced for a fresh start. In a fashion truly miraculous Nick managed to gain possession of the rubber, and the way in which he sent it flying before him along the ice was well worth seeing. Many started to cheer, forgetting their former antipathy toward the bully. Despite the clever work of Hugh, and others, as well as the able

defense of the goal-keeper, Thad Stevens, Nick succeeded in shooting the puck between the goal posts for a score.

Hugh was ready to shake hands with himself, he felt so pleased. And not once so far had Mr. Leonard found occasion to reprimand Nick on account of foul work so flagrant that it could be no accident.

Many rubbed their eyes and asked their neighbors if that could really be Nick Lang, the terror of Scranton, who played like a fiend, and yet kept well within his rights?

"But just wait till something happens to upset Nick," they went on to say, with wise shakes of the head. "We know how he's just bound to carry on. It's a nice game so far, but the chances are three to one it'll break up in a row yet; they always do when that fellow has a hand in the going. He wouldn't be happy without a fuss, and an attempt to win by some dirty work."

When the first half had passed, and there was a recess of fifteen minutes called for the warm players to secure a little rest, the score was five to three. That looked better for a well-contested game. And so far there had not been any flagrant breaking of rules to call for condemnation on the part of the referee.

Mr. Leonard himself looked a little surprised. He could not understand it, but continued to keep an extra sharp eye on the usual trouble-maker, as though expecting Nick to break loose with more than ordinary violence because he had kept "bottled up" so long.

Hugh noticed another thing that interested him. During this intermission Nick skated by himself. His old cronies, Tip Slavin and Leon Disney, were on the ice, and, of course, indulging in their customary derogatory remarks concerning the playing of the Regulars, but Nick did not seem to want to join them, as had always been his habit hitherto.

Twice Hugh saw the crafty Leon skate up alongside and speak insinuatingly to the other, as though trying to persuade him to agree to something; but on each occasion Nick shook his head in the negative, and broke away. Leon looked after him rather disconsolately, as though at a loss to understand what could have happened to take all the fight and "bumptiousness" out of the former bully.

Then play was resumed.

Hugh had taken his comrades to task during the intermission. He told them several weaknesses had developed in their team play, which should be corrected if they hoped to down the strong Keyport Seven. Nor did Hugh spare himself in making these criticisms, for he knew his own faults. It is a wise boy who does.

Having tested Nick's superb playing and found it good, the captain of the Scratch Seven was willing to put him forward as their star player, even if it went against the grain to realize that they had to depend on a fellow so much in disrepute.

There were several hot scrimmages, as always occur during a strenuous game of ice hockey. Even the most careful of players will sometimes err in judgment at such times, and either be reprimanded by the referee or having their side penalized on account of their too energetic work. Strange to say, Nick Lang never once caused a penalty to be inflicted on his side, though Rawlings, Hasty and Lawrence were unwitting offenders, as were also Dugdale and Hobson on the part of Scranton High.

Everybody was satisfied when the game finally came to an end with the score nine to six. It was a pretty good contest, all things considered. Perhaps the Regulars did not try quite as hard as they might, since after all this was to be considered only in the light of practice, and they were more taken up with correcting certain glaring errors than in

making goals.

The talk of the whole game, however, was the playing of Nick Lang, who had left the ice after it was all over; but not before Hugh had congratulated him on his fine work.

"How did he ever go through with it all, and never make a nasty break once?"

"This must be one of Nick's special good days, I reckon!"

"He's sure a hummer, all right, when he chooses to play straight. What a pity he has that crooked streak in his make-up. Only for that Nick would be a jim-dandy hand at any old athletic sport. I wonder if it will last, or is he due to break loose, to-night perhaps, just because he's held himself in so long."

These and many similar remarks passed between the astonished boys of Scranton High, but they did not seem able to understand it at all. Hugh, however, only smiled when they appealed to him, and would say nothing; but deep down in his heart he was satisfied that the seed he had sown had fallen on fallow soil and taken root.

CHAPTER V

THAD BRINGS SOME STARTLING NEWS

"Hugh, have you heard the news this Sunday morning?"

With these abrupt words Thad Stevens burst upon his chum who was feeding some long-eared, handsome Belgian hares, which of late he had taken to keeping, as it had become quite a fad among the Scranton boys.

Hugh turned to look at his friend. It was plain to be seen that Thad was laboring under considerable excitement. His face was flushed as if with running, while his eyes glowed much more than was their wont under ordinary conditions.

"Why, no, I haven't heard a thing except the church bells ringing, and people going past our house early this morning for mass. You know we live on a street that is largely used by those who have to get out shortly after daybreak Sunday mornings in winter. What's happened during the night? There couldn't have been a fire, because I'd have heard the bell, and been out with the rest of the boys."

"Oh! you couldn't guess it in a dozen trials, Hugh. It was a regular down-right burglary that was pulled off, even if the stuff taken consisted of candy, cigarettes, and the like, as well as some sporting goods and several revolvers."

Hugh looked interested.

"From the way you talk, Thad, I should say it might have been Paul Kramer's Emporium that had suffered; because he's really the only man in Scranton who keeps sporting goods."

"A good guess, Hugh, because Paul is the chap. They got in through a back door, and everybody says it was a pretty slick job, too," Thad went on to say.

"Let's see what you're telling me," Hugh remarked thoughtfully. "If they took candy and cigarettes and sporting goods it would look to me pretty much as if the robbery was the work of unprincipled boys, rather than men."

Thad stared hard at his companion.

"Well, you are a wonder, Hugh, at seeing through things!" he hastily declared. "Why, that was what Chief Wambold said right away. And, Hugh, he followed it with the declaration that he guessed he could put his finger on the guilty fellows without much trouble. You know who he had in mind, of course, Hugh?"

"It goes without saying that one of them would be Nick Lang," came the quick reply, while a small cloud crept over Hugh's face.

"Sure thing," continued Thad, shrugging his shoulders. "When a fellow has built up a nice reputation for himself along those lines he can't blame folks for suspecting him of every single tricky piece of work that is pulled off in town. In the past Nick has been ring-leader in lots of lawless doings, and the Chief was dead certain he'd get him with the goods on this time, as he called it."

"Perhaps he may, but I hope that for once Chief Wambold will find himself mistaken," said Hugh soberly, and then adding: "How did you happen to hear about it, Thad?"

"Oh! I chanced to be out early this morning on an errand for mother, taking some things over to that sick colored wash-lady we have do our weekly work, and passing through the public square on my way back I saw a crowd around Kramer's place. Of course I stayed on the job, and heard all sorts of things said. But, Hugh, they've got one of the thieves, all right."

"Who was he, Leon Disney?" asked the other, quickly, as he suddenly remembered the actions of the boy in question when he twice approached Nick Lang on the ice during that intermission for rest in the hockey match; and when he, Hugh, fancied Leon was entreating his former pal to do something which Nick refused to entertain.

"Just who it is," said the wondering Thad. "The Chief went to his house and insisted on making a thorough search. He's a shrewd old duck, is Chief Wambold, for all his faults. He seemed to guess just where a boy like Leon would hide the spoils of a raid like this. Under the floor of the old barn on the Disney place he found about half the stuff that was taken, candy by the wholesale, cigarettes, two revolvers, and even a pair of choice hockey skates."

"About *half* you are saying, Thad; then it looks to me as if there must have been just two of the thieves, for they had divided things equally between them."

"What a lawyer you would make, Hugh, or a detective either, for that matter," the other boy exclaimed.

"What did Leon say when they found the stolen stuff hidden under his barn?" further questioned Hugh, deigning to smile at his chum's compliment, however.

"Nary a thing would he say, except to declare himself innocent, and that he himself had heard a noise out there last night, and guessed that some enemy of his must have set up a mean game on him, wanting to get him nabbed. But say, Hugh, the Chief pulled seven packets of cigarettes out of his coat-pocket, every one stamped with the same maker's name; and nobody in Scranton handles that brand but Paul Kramer."

"It looks pretty bad for Leon, I should say," remarked Hugh.

"Oh! he'll get a free pass to the Reform School this time, as sure as anything!" asserted Thad; "and a good riddance of bad rubbish, most people in Scranton will be saying. Of course they'll be sorry for his mother, who is a respectable

woman, and has had heaps of trouble with that good-for-nothing son of hers."

"But about the other thief, Thad?"

"Well, Chief Wambold said there wasn't any doubt in the wide world but that it must be Nick Lang, and I guess everybody around agreed with him, Hugh."

"Did he go up and arrest Nick?" asked Hugh, deeply interested.

"Just what he did, and I was along with the crowd," Thad told him. "Well, sir, you never saw such a cool customer. Nick smiled as brazenly in the face of the Chief as anything you ever saw. They searched, and searched, but never a scrap of the stolen goods could they run across."

"Well, what then, Thad?"

"Why, of course the Chief declared that Nick had only been some smarter than his pal in hiding the spoils where no one could find the stuff. He told Nick he would have to arrest him on general suspicion because Leon and he were such great pals, and Leon was already as good as convicted."

"Yes, and what did Nick say to that?" asked Hugh.

"Would you believe it, Hugh, he up and told the Chief that he could prove an alibi. You see, the robbery was done before eleven o'clock last night, because the clock that was knocked down when the thieves were rummaging around in the store had been broken, and it stopped at just a quarter to eleven. Even Chief Wambold agreed on that point."

"Yes, and it was cleverly settled, I must say, Thad. But how about Nick's alibi; would the Chief accept his mother's word, knowing that the chances were Nick had slipped out of the house by a window when she supposed him to be sound asleep in his bed?"

"Oh! Nick had much better proof than that, Hugh. He demanded that Chief Wambold call up old Deacon Joel Winslow, who, you know, is a man much respected around Scranton, and keeps the blacksmith shop out on the road to Allandale where it crosses the one leading to Keyport. Yes, sir, and when the officer did so from Headquarters the blacksmith weather prophet plainly told him Nick had been working alongside himself from seven until a quarter-after-eleven the night before!"

Hugh laughed. It really seemed as though a load had been suddenly taken off his chest. He had begun to fear lest his experiment might have already met with its Waterloo.

"I'm pleased to hear you say that, Thad, I certainly am," he remarked, "And did our wonderful Chief conclude to hold Nick after that?"

"He wanted to, Hugh,---I could see that plain enough; but Nick demanded that he be set at liberty. Say, you know I'm not much of an admirer of Nick Lang, but he did bluff the tall Chief of Police good and hard. He actually told him he'd sue him for damage to his reputation if he dared to hold him when there wasn't a particle of evidence connecting him with the robbery, except that once upon a time he used to go with Leon Disney, as lots of other fellows did, too."

"Then he was let go free, I take it, from what you say, Thad?"

"Oh! well, the police head said he knew very well Nick was in the racket, even if he had covered his footsteps so cunningly; and even fooled Deacon Winslow. He told Nick he'd parole him temporarily, but that he might still consider himself as under arrest."

"That must be a joke," chuckled Hugh. "It was silly on the part of Chief Wambold. But then, of course, Nick has made him a whole lot of trouble in the past. So only one fellow has been taken, and he refuses to tell on his pal, does he?"

"Absolutely, though the Chief says he means to put Leon through the third degree, and force a confession from him. What does he mean by that, Hugh? I've seen it mentioned in the papers lots of times."

"I believe in cities like New York some of the detectives act roughly with a suspected prisoner, and scare them into saying things. But a clever head of police once on a time had a smarter way of getting a confession than by rough-house tactics."

"Yes? Tell me about it then," pleaded Thad.

"When he had reason to believe several members of a gang were implicated in a robbery, or other crime, he would have the weakest arrested, and brought into his presence. Then, while the man sat there nervously waiting for the dreaded ordeal of an interview and looking out of a window, he would see one of his fellow gangsters taken past in charge of several plain clothes men. Of course that would give him a shock, and when the Chief turned and told him the other fellow had already promised to make a confession in order to save himself, the prisoner nearly always broke down, and told everything to get in ahead."

"Well, the last I saw of Chief Wambold," continued Thad, "he was starting out to interview Deacon Winslow. You see, he believes the old blacksmith must have meant ten-fifteen instead of eleven. That would give Nick plenty of time to get back to town, so as to take part in the robbery of the Emporium."

Hugh rubbed his hands together after the manner of one whose mind was completely satisfied.

"I fancy he'll have all his trouble for his pains," he went on to say calmly.

"Meaning that the deacon will stick to his statement, and so clear Nick of complicity in the crime---is that it, Hugh?"

"We all know Deacon Winslow to be a reliable man," Hugh told him. "He is accustomed to dealing in figures, and not inclined to make a mistake about the time. I'd wager now he has something positive to settle the matter of Nick's staying there, working at the forge, and learning how to be a blacksmith, until exactly fifteen minutes after eleven."

"Well," said Thad, scratching his head as though still confused, "things look pretty queer to me, and I hardly know what to believe about that Nick Lang."

CHAPTER VI

NOT GUILTY

At that Hugh, having finished his work in connection with the care of his tame pets, turned around and faced his chum.

"On my part, Thad," he was saying, quietly but sincerely, "I'm getting to be hopeful of Nick. I honestly believe that fellow has seen a great light. I think he's made up his mind to turn over a new leaf and redeem his rotten past. And I

want to say here and now it's up to every boy in Scranton High to treat him decently while he's still fighting his old impulses of evil. I know I shall let him feel I believe in him, until he does something to forfeit my esteem."

"That's just like you, Hugh; and I guess the rest of us ought to be ashamed to throw any stumbling block in the way of a chap who is trying to get out of his old rut. But it passes my comprehension how he can change, and play fair and square, when all his life he's been so tricky and low-down mean."

"As for that, lots of men who were once down in the gutter have reformed, and proved giants in helping others to get up to respectability again. Take that Jean Valjean we were talking about the other day, who changed right-about-face, and became just as fine a man as he was bad before. You don't suppose it all came in a flash, do you?"

"Why, no, of course not, Hugh. He was the lowest sort of a beast, as pictured by Hugo, with the vilest ideas concerning human nature. After he had that revelation, and saw the good priest actually tell a lie in order to save him, he woke up, and, as you said, began thinking for himself. Then the change came gradually, and he determined to work to help those who were down and out like himself."

"All right," said Hugh. "This case of Nick Lang is like this, in a small way. But, Thad, do you feel like taking a walk this fine crisp winter morning?"

"Just for the exercise, or have you any scheme in your mind, Hugh?"

"Both, I might say. The mile walk will do us good, and then we may be able to satisfy ourselves about a few things. It is just half a mile out to the cross-roads, and Deacon Winslow's house and smithy, you know."

Thad looked interested at once.

"So, that's the way the wind blows, is it?" he remarked. "You want to interview the deacon, too, as well as Chief Wambold?"

"But not from the same motive, Thad. On the contrary, while he went out to try and find a reason for believing Nick guilty, in spite of his alibi, I mean only to ask a few questions that will clear up a little point that is a bit muddled."

"Perhaps I could guess what that is," said Thad quickly. "You're puzzled to understand why Nick should have been out there on just last night of all times, when any other would have done just as well. How about that, Hugh?"

"That's one of the things I'd like to have cleared up," Hugh admitted. "Between us, Thad, I've got a pretty good notion Nick knew about this contemplated raid on Kramer's store. Perhaps in times past they may even have plotted such a thing, so as to get all the cigarettes and candy they wanted for once. I even believe he was refusing Leon and Tip Slavin, who were urging him to join in with them, when I saw him shake his head and skate away yesterday."

"Go on, Hugh, you've got me interested again; sure you have."

"While Nick wouldn't think of betraying his former associates, from whose company he had broken away, at the same time he was smart enough to see he would be placed under suspicion. And he must have arranged this alibi so as to prove his positive innocence. If that turns out so, it shows Nick to be a wise one."

Shortly afterwards the pair were trudging along the road outside the corporation limits of the town of Scranton. It was some time before the customary church hour, and they were almost certain to find the old deacon at home, Hugh

believed.

On the way they met a car coming along the road. In it was Chief Wambold. Scranton had advanced far enough toward the dignity of cityhood to have an auto for the police force, since the Chief often had to go to neighboring towns on matters of business, taking a prisoner, or getting one to fetch back.

He nodded to the boys as he shot past.

"Doesn't look very amiable, does he?" muttered Thad. "So I rather guess he didn't get much satisfaction from the old deacon. But he's awful stubborn, is our efficient head of police; and if he can find any way to put that business on Nick's shoulders he will, take my word for it."

Hugh only smiled as though he was not worrying about anything Chief Wambold could accomplish. He had known the other to make several "bone-plays" since coming to Scranton, and hence Hugh did not have a very high opinion of the official's merits, though not doubting his honesty of purpose at all.

After a short time they arrived at the smithy. Deacon Winslow lived close to his shop. He was a big man, with the proverbial muscles of the blacksmith; and for many years he had been looked upon as a pillar in the church he attended.

Besides this he was reckoned a good man, who could always be counted on to go out of his way to do a favor for anybody. The poor of Scranton loved him better than they did anyone they knew. His acts were often "hidden under a bushel," since he did not go around, as Thad once said, "blowing his own horn, and advertising his goodness as one would soft soap."

Strange as it might seem, Deacon Winslow had taken quite a fancy to Nick Lang, and possibly he was the only respectable man in all Scranton who did. Perhaps he admired Nick's muscular build, and believed he would make a fine smith, if the husky boy only took a liking to the vocation of hammer and forge and anvil.

Then again it was likely that the deacon, who was a shrewd old fellow as well as good-natured and honest, saw deeper into that bad boy's soul than ordinary people, judging from surface indications. Hugh himself was inclined to believe this might be the case.

Be that as it may, Nick had been known to go out there to the Winslow shop occasionally after supper, and work alongside the old man for hours at a time. Folks considered it only another odd fad on the part of the deacon. They prophesied that he would sooner or later be sorry for having anything to do with such a good-for-nothing scapegrace as Nick Lang, who would not hesitate to play some nasty practical joke on his benefactor when the notion seized him and he had grown tired of bothering with blacksmithing.

The deacon himself came to the door. He knew both lads, and asked them to step in and sit with him before his cheery fire, as he had half an hour on his hands before starting to church.

Hugh plunged into the matter without waste of time. He told Deacon Winslow how he had been reading that wonderful story of Jean Valjean; and then what a strange freak of fate allowed him to play the same part that the good priest had done.

Step by step he carried it along, and Deacon Winslow appeared to be deeply interested, if one could judge from the way he rubbed his hands together, and nodded his head approvingly when he learned of the motives that had influenced Hugh to act as he did.

Even what had occurred on the ice on the preceding afternoon was narrated, for, as Hugh explained, he believed it had a great deal to do with the startling event that had stunned Scranton that same Sunday morning.

When he had finally ended with a profession of his belief in Nick's innocence the old man once more nodded his head. His wise eyes shone with a rare delight as he gazed at Hugh. The boy could not help thinking that the good priest in the story must have been a whole lot like old Deacon Winslow; who could believe wrong of no one, boy or man, but was always finding some excuse for forgiving, even those who deceived him in business transactions.

"You have done well, my lad," said the old man warmly, patting Hugh on the arm affectionately. "And rest assured Nick is entirely innocent of this crime. I have become deeply interested in that boy. He has had a bad name, it is true; but somehow I seemed to feel that there were elements of great good in him, if only he could be brought to book, and made to change his ways of life. He must have a new viewpoint of human nature, to start with. I thought I might arouse him through talking, and fatherly advice, but so far I could not see success following my labors. But you have hit upon an ingenious device, my boy, that promises wonderful results. We may yet make a second Jean Valjean of the despised Nick Lang; and that would be an achievement worthy of anyone."

Hugh felt more than repaid for all he had done when he heard the old deacon say this with such warmth.

"There was one thing I wanted to learn, sir, if you don't mind telling me," he went on to say. "It concerns his engagement to come out here and help you last night. Were you expecting him? Was Saturday night the one he generally took to come and help you get rid of some of your extra work that couldn't be done in the daytime, for all the horse-shoeing you have on your hands?"

The deacon smiled, and Hugh really had his answer before the old man even opened his lips. All the same he was pleased to hear him say:

"Up to now it has always been on Monday night Nick came out. That was more convenient for me, as a rule, and he accommodated himself to my wishes. But yesterday afternoon he dropped in to see me here, with his skates dangling across his shoulder, as if he had been skating. He said he would like very much to come for that once on Saturday night, instead of Monday; and that he had a good reason for making the change, which meant a whole lot to him."

"I see," remarked Hugh; "and it was clever of Nick. You agreed, of course, sir, seeing that he was here?"

"It made no particular difference to me," added the blacksmith, "and I was glad to know the lad cared enough about the work to want to make the change. So I told him to be along as usual about seven, as I had a raft of work on hand that would keep us until well on after eleven. As a fact, it was fifteen minutes after that hour when Nick started for home."

"You remember that positively then, sir,---the hour, I mean?" asked Hugh.

"Oh! I could swear to it," came the reply. "In the first place I heard the town clock strike eleven, and counted the strokes myself, remarking that we must shut up shop soon as it was getting close to Sunday morning. Then as he was quitting Nick asked me again just what time it was, and I consulted my reliable watch. I can see now that possibly Nick had an object in impressing the time on my mind, so I could say positively he was there at eleven, and after. I don't like the idea of his having known about the intended robbery, and keeping silent, but suppose he considered himself in honor bound to his former chums."

So their interview with Deacon Winslow proved a very enjoyable one after all. Hugh felt he should like to know the big amiable blacksmith better, for he had been drawn to him very much indeed.

"And," he told Thad, as they trudged back along the road to town, "the way things seem to be working, I'm more than ever encouraged to keep on with my experiment."

CHAPTER VII

TURNING A PAGE OF THE PAST

"Do you know," mused Thad, as they continued on their way to town, "the more I see of that blacksmith the better I like him. In my opinion, he's a grand old man."

"I was just going to say that myself," Hugh told him. "He makes me think of the priest in the story. And they say he loves boys---all boys."

"You can't make him believe there's a boy living but who has *something* worth while in him," Thad advanced. "Sometimes it's hid under a whole lot of trash, as Deacon Winslow calls it, and you've got to search a heap before you strike gold; but if you only persist you'll be rewarded."

"His actions with regard to Nick prove that he practices what he preaches, too," said Hugh.

"Well, the old man went through a bitter experience many years ago," Thad went on to say; "and he learned his lesson for life, he often says."

"Why, how's that, Thad? I've heard a great many things about different people since we came to Scranton; but I don't remember listening to what happened to the old deacon long ago."

"Is that a fact, Hugh? Well, I'll have to tell you about it, then. Once upon a time they had a boy, an only child; and, as happens in some families where the parents are the finest kind of Christian people, young Joel had a bad streak in his make-up. Oh! they say he gave his father no end of trouble from time to time. And it wound up in a row, with the boy doing something disgraceful, and running away from home, nearly breaking his mother's heart."

"Didn't he ever come bad again?" asked the interested listener.

Thad shook his head in the negative.

"They never looked on his face again, either living or dead," he said. "Worse than that, they never even heard from him. It was as if Joel had dropped out of sight that night when he left a line to his mother saying he was going west to where they raised men, not sissies. And so the years rolled around, and, they say, the old lady even now sits looking into the sunset skies, dreaming that her Joel, just as she remembered him, had sent word he was coming back to visit them in their old age, and to ask forgiveness for his wrong-doing."

Hugh was greatly moved by the sad tale, which, however, he knew could be easily matched in every town of any size in the country; for it is of common occurrence, with a multitude of sore hearts turning toward that Great West.

"That must have been how long ago, Thad?" he asked presently.

"Let me see, I should think all of forty years; perhaps forty-five would be closer to the mark, Hugh."

"How sad," mused the other lad, with a shake of his head; "and to think of that poor old lady, an invalid, you said, and confined to a wheelchair, watching the sinking sun faithfully each evening as it sets, still yearning for her boy to come back. It is a dream that has become a part of her very existence. Why, even if young Joel had lived he would now be over sixty years of age, but she never thinks of him that way. The deacon, they say, is eighty-five, though you'd never believe it to see his brawny muscles and healthy complexion."

"You see," continued Thad, anxious that his chum should know everything connected with the subject, now he was upon it, "the old man often takes himself to task because he didn't understand boys as he might have done, when younger. He believes he could have spared his wife her great sorrow if he had only been more judicious, and won the boy's confidence as well as his affection."

"And that accounts for the deep interest he has felt in all boys ever since," Hugh was saying reflectively; "especially those who seem to have a streak of badness in them."

"I suppose," Thad remarked, "it is his way of doing penance for what he considers a fault of his earlier years. Sometimes I think I'd just like to be able to follow up that chap when he ran away from home, and learn what really did become of him."

"He may have met with a sad fate out West, Thad; plenty of fellows have gone out and been swallowed up in the whirlpool."

"If, on the other end, he didn't, and lived for many years," continued the other, "he must have been pretty tough not to write to his poor old mother at least once in a while. I could never forgive Joel for that. But they say he had an ugly nature, and was very stubborn. Well, I'm glad the deacon has taken an interest in the reformation of Nick Lang, even if I have my doubts about his meeting with any sort of success."

"Well, you may be a whole lot surprised one of these fine days, my boy," Hugh smilingly told him.

"The age of miracles has passed, Hugh," remarked Thad skeptically.

"Not the miracles that are brought about by a complete change of heart on the part of someone the world looks down on as a scamp," Hugh persisted. "But you're one of those who want to be shown; I reckon, Thad, your folks must have come from Missouri, didn't they?"

"Wrong again, Hugh, because none of them ever saw the Mississippi, though my grandfather fought through the Civil War, and was with Grant when Lee surrendered at Appomattox Court House. But I admit I am a little stubborn, and prejudiced. It runs in the blood, I suppose. The Stevens were always sort of pig-headed."

"I've also heard considerable about the deacon as a weather seer, Thad; how about that? Does he manage to hit it off occasionally, so as to equal our forecaster at Washington, whose predictions come true every now and then?"

"Oh! the deacon has made that quite a fad," he was told by the obliging Thad. "He doesn't confine himself to figuring out just what sort of day we'll have to-morrow, or even for the coming week. He looks ahead, and finds out from the signs of Nature what sort of winter or summer we're going to have next,---cold, mild, hot, cool, dry or rainy. And say, I've heard he hits it nearly every time."

"Well, what did he say about this particular winter?" Hugh asked, with renewed interest; for such subjects always gripped his attention, because he believed some of these shrewd countrymen, who watched the weather and observed what was

going on all around them, could tell better than any scientific gentleman what was liable to come along during the succeeding seasons.

"He predicted a severe winter," replied Thad promptly. "Some people laughed at what he said, especially when Christmas came and went, and so far we'd had precious little of cold. But it's come along at last, and from all reports some of the most dreadful weather ever known is happening away out in the Northwest right now."

"And how does the old blacksmith get his ideas--from Nature, you said, I believe, Thad?"

"He studies the bark on the trees; the way the squirrels store the nuts away; and how the caterpillars weave their cocoons. Oh! he has a hundred different signs that he depends on before making up his mind. I used to laugh when I heard him talking about it, but since I've grown older I've decided that there may be a whole lot in that sort of weather prediction."

"I incline that same way," agreed Hugh. "Many of the little animals of the woods are given a wonderful instinct that enables them to know what to expect. Even bees that always lay by a certain amount of honey for winter use, are said to stock up extra heavy on years when a severe winter comes along. It must be a mighty interesting study, I should think. Some time I mean to know the old deacon better, so as to get posted on his vast store of knowledge along those lines."

"His wife is rather feeble now," continued Thad. "She's a fine old lady though, and as cheery as can be, considering all things."

"But if, as you said, she has to move around in one of those self-propelling wheel-chairs, how does she ever get her house-work done, Thad?"

"Oh! they have a girl in during the daytime," came the explanation; "though Mrs. Winslow still mixes all the cakes and bread. And, say, she does make the greatest crullers you ever tasted in your born days. I know, because that couple are always sending things out to houses where there are growing boys. Their world lies in boys only; you never hear either of them say a thing about girls."

Hugh could easily understand that. He had been in numerous homes where there were only boys in the family; and the parents knew next to nothing about the delight and constant anxiety of girls.

"As I like crullers about the best of any sort of cakes," he chuckled, "I think I'll have to cultivate the acquaintance of Mrs. Winslow. Some time I may have the pleasure of tasting her famous cooking that you rate so highly. But to turn to another subject, Thad, have you heard any more reports about those Keyport High fellows we expect to go up against next Saturday?"

"Yes, I have, Hugh. Podge Huggins was over there two days back. He saw them practicing on some thin ice over a pond, and he told me they were an exceptionally husky proposition. He also saw us work yesterday afternoon in the scratch game, and when I asked him how we compared with Keyport, why Podge wouldn't give me a straight answer; but only grinned and turned the subject."

"Evidently then Podge doesn't have the confidence in his school team that he ought to feel," said Hugh, apparently not at all disturbed. "Well, we have a whole week still for practice, and ought to keep on improving. I'm hoping that Keyport may overdo it, which is always possible."

"You mean too much work will cause them to go stale; is that it, Hugh?"

"Physical directors and coaches are always on their guard against that, Thad. The boat team is always strongest at a certain point. If the race comes off when they attain that top-notch pinnacle, they're apt to do their very best; but should it be delayed, by weather or something else, the coach becomes alarmed, because he knows there's a great chance of their losing speed from too much nervous tension and overwork."

From which talk it was evident that Hugh must have imbibed considerable valuable knowledge from Mr. Leonard, who, as a college man, ought to understand a thing or two concerning sporting matters.

So the two chums continued to talk all the way back to town. Hugh had picked up a whole lot of information by making the journey out to the cross-roads. Somehow he seemed to feel drawn toward the old blacksmith, who seemed to be such a sterling character.

Hugh had met him in church circles and at sociables, but, not knowing the tragedy that lay back in the deacon's younger life, he had so far failed to cultivate his acquaintance. But he was now determined to see more of Deacon Winslow, for he believed the weather prophet would be able to tell him a host of interesting things about Nature's storehouse, from which he had gleaned astonishing facts during many years' study.

CHAPTER VIII

OWEN DUGDALE'S ANNOUNCEMENT

Another week of school had commenced, with winter now in full swing.

The weather seemed to have settled down to show what it could do, after such a long delay. It was making up for lost time, some of the boys declared. But then it could hardly be too cold for fellows warmly dressed, and who had their three hearty meals a day. The poor might complain, because they suffered, especially when such spells were prolonged.

Deacon Winslow was seen in town more frequently than usual, he leaving the work to the charge of his assistant for an hour or so at a time. He always carried a big basket in his wagon or sleigh; and those who knew his warm heart could easily understand that his visits were wholly at homes where there was none too much in the way of comforts and food.

During the earlier days of the week the talk was pretty much of winter sports. Ice hockey occupied a prominent place in the conversations that were carried on wherever three or more Scranton High fellows clustered, to kick their heels on the pavement, or sun themselves while perched on the top of the campus fence that would go down in history as the peer of the famous one at Yale.

During afternoons the hockey players gathered at the park, and each day saw them engaging in some sort of practice game,---their opponents being such fellows as could be gathered together to constitute a fair Seven.

Hugh seemed satisfied with the progress made, and Mr. Leonard, too, looked as if he felt well repaid for the trouble he was taking showing them certain clever moves that might reward them in a fiercely contested match.

Meanwhile the mystery concerning that robbery at Paul Kramer's Emporium had not yet been wholly solved. Leon Disney still languished in the lock-up at Police Headquarters, his folks having been unable to secure bail for him. They could not raise the amount themselves, and somehow there seemed to be no person in the whole community philanthropical enough to take chances with Leon, who was reckoned an exceedingly slippery individual, who would most likely run away before his trial came off, leaving his bondsman to "hold the bag," as the boys called it.

He was just as stubborn as ever in his denial of complicity in the robbery. Leon doubtless believed that a lie well stuck to was bound to raise up friends. There are always well disposed people whose sympathies are apt to be aroused when they hear of a case like this.

But Leon was not being held on circumstantial evidence. He had been caught "with the goods on him." All that loot hidden under the old barn on his place was positive proof of his guilt. Still he held out, and declared himself the victim of some base plot calculated to ruin his reputation; which was rather a queer thing for Leon to say, since the only reputation he had in Scranton was for badness.

Another thing was that he still declined to betray his pal, for everyone felt positive he had had company when foraging through the cases in Paul Kramer's establishment, taking such things as naturally appeal to a boy's heart---candy, cigarettes, revolvers and sporting goods.

Chief Wambold suspected one boy from the start, after finding that the former chief offender in these lines could prove a positive alibi. This was the third of the bad lot, Tip Slavin.

He had even gone to Tip's humble home and made a thorough search, high and low, but without the least success. If Tip were guilty he must have been smarter than his confederate, who had hidden his share of the plunder under the loose boards of the floor of his folks' barn.

Not having any evidence beyond suspicion the officer did not dare arrest Tip, who continued to loaf about his customary corners and look impudently at every fellow who stared meaningly at him when passing. Hugh himself never once doubted the guilt of Tip Slavin; though he fancied the authorities might have a hard time catching him, unless the stubborn Leon at the last, finding himself on the way to the Reform School, confessed, and implicated his companion.

He and Thad were talking about that very same thing on Thursday afternoon while on the way home from the park a little earlier than usual.

"Where do you think that sly Tip could have hidden the stuff, Hugh?" Thad asked, continuing their conversation.

"Oh! there would be plenty of places, and no one likely to ever run across it, on one condition," replied the other.

"What might that be?" demanded Thad.

"If only Tip could himself keep away from his cache," he was told. "That may be his undoing, after all. You know, when an ordinary thief has done something big, and is being looked for, the smart police always ask whether he has a wife or a sweetheart; because they know that sooner or later he is bound to communicate with such a person, and so a clue may be found to his hiding-place. Well, Tip's heart will be located where his treasure is. He'll soon get a *yearning* to indulge in some of the candy and cigarettes he's got hidden away."

"Then if Chief Wambold knew his duty," snapped Thad vigorously, "he'd keep tabs of Tip day and night, and shadow him wherever he went."

"That would be his best move," agreed Hugh.

"You ought to post the Chief on that same sort of clever job, Hugh."

"Well, I did think of that," admitted the other boy, "but somehow I hated to have a hand in railroading Tip to the Reformatory. It's true he ought to be there, for he's a terror to the whole community; but he's got a mother, Thad, and I'd hate to see her swollen eyes, and remember that I'd had a hand in parting her from her boy. It isn't as if I were paid for doing such things, as Chief Wambold is; this is hardly any business of mine, you know, and I've concluded to keep my hands off."

"Well, now, somehow I don't just look at it the way you do, Hugh. Perhaps I'm not quite so tender-hearted as you are. It may be the best thing that ever happened to Tip if he is sent to the Reform School before he plunges any deeper into the mire of crime. Plenty of boys have become fine men after being sent there, to be taught what it should have been the duty of their careless or incompetent parents to put into their heads."

"Do you mean that you might take a notion to drop a hint to the Chief, Thad?"

"I'll think it over, and decide later," the other told him. "Perhaps I'll ask advice of Dominie Pettigrew, who's a good friend of mine, and would tell me what my duty was, not only to Tip, but to the community at large, which he had so flagrantly abused time and again."

"Suit yourself about that, Thad. Perhaps, after all, you may be right, and that it would be a good thing all around if Tip could be sent away with Leon. But it's likely Leon will weaken when his trial comes off, and betray his pal; though he may give Tip a hint beforehand so he can clear out in time."

"And about Nick Lang?" continued Thad.

"I haven't changed my mind about him, as yet," Hugh replied sturdily enough. "So far Nick seems to be minding his own business, and having as little to do with other boys as possible. I heard Dr. Carmack say he was astonished at the difference in Nick's work in classes. He seemed particularly pleased, too, because, with all the other teachers, he's had a hard time with Nick in the past."

"But in all the days we've practiced our hockey work Nick hasn't once joined the scrub team we've fought against. That's why we've been able to lick them so easily, I guess, Hugh. That fellow certainly is a wizard on runners, and would make a good addition to our Seven, if by some chance he could be squeezed in. But one of the Regulars would have to be dropped, and I think there would be some bad blood shown if anyone had to give way to a fellow who's had such a bad reputation in the past. Even now lots of people think he's only shamming reform for some deep purpose."

"Lots of people are due for a surprise, then, let me tell you," said Hugh. "But, of course, just as you say, I wouldn't dare take any fellow out as long as he was working his best, and substituting Nick. It would raise a howl, to be sure. But, Thad, if the time should ever come when we're up against a hard proposition, with defeat staring us in the face, and one of our team was injured, I'd grab at Nick like a drowning man does at a plank floating near."

"One lucky thing happened for us, Hugh, anyhow."

"You're referring to the toss of the coin that gave us the choice of grounds for the game, and will force Keyport to journey over here on Saturday, eh, Thad?"

"Yes, that's what I had in mind. Captain Mossman seemed to be a pretty fine sort of chap, too, I thought, when he dropped in on us yesterday afternoon to look the place over; because it seems he's never played before in Scranton."

"Well, Scranton was hardly on the map until this year," Hugh laughed. "However, some of our neighboring towns have already learned that Scranton is alive and wide-awake."

"Just what they have, Hugh, and there are other surprises coming for them, too. I noticed that you cut out all play while the Keyport chap was with us. Didn't want him to get a line on our methods, I suppose?"

"It might give them a little advantage, you see, and weaken our play. Some of the Scranton boys have gone over to Keyport to see what's doing there. They bring back great reports of the confidence shown in the team; but Coach Leonard has positively forbidden any member of our Seven to make the trip. He says it smacks too much of spying to please him."

"Oh! that's drawing the line pretty tight, Hugh. Lots of players in the baseball world try their level best to get a line on a pitcher who is going to oppose them, and consider it legitimate enough."

"Well, they are professionals, to begin with," said the other; "and business is business with them. But, right or wrong, there's going to be no spying on our part, so long as Mr. Leonard has charge of the athletic end of the game at Scranton. You can depend on that every time."

"There's Owen now; he wasn't at practice this afternoon, I wonder why?" exclaimed Thad, as they sighted another boy coming toward them. "He looks as if he might be bursting with some sort of news, Hugh. Now I wonder what he's run up against."

Owen quickly arrived. His face did have an eager look, and his eyes were fairly dancing with some sort of emotion.

"Hugh, I've got something to tell you!" he burst out with, at which Thad shot a knowing glance toward his chum, which said as plain as could be: "There, what did I say to you?"

"All right, Owen, relieve yourself of the load right away, before you burst," Hugh went on to advise, in his pleasant fashion.

"It's about a certain chap who's under suspicion right now of having been implicated in that breaking into the Kramer store and robbing it."

"Tip Slavin, you mean, Owen?" asked Hugh, looking interested at once.

"Yes, no other, Hugh. Well, I've discovered beyond a shadow of a doubt that he is the guilty partner of Leon Disney, just as everybody suspected!"

CHAPTER IX

AN ADVENTURE ON THE ROAD

Thad gave utterance to an ejaculation, and then followed it up by saying:

"Well, now, I like that! After all, Hugh, I may not have to bother giving the Chief that tip you mentioned, if Owen here has discovered something big. Tell us about it, Owen, please; since you've got us excited by your news."

"I couldn't get over to practice this afternoon, Hugh, as of course you noticed," the other commenced to say. "But it wasn't any fault of mine, I give you my word. I had to do several things around the house for mother. One of the pipes had frozen and had to be thawed out. Then there were other jobs that kept me busy for an hour. Finally, when I began to hope I might get down a short time before you closed shop, she remembered an errand that would take me out on the road leading to Hobson's Mill-Pond. I had to go to Farmer Brown's for some butter and eggs."

All this was said with such a lugubrious expression that Hugh had to laugh.

"It's plain to be seen you started on that walk feeling anything but pleased, Owen," he went on to remark. "Of course you'd much rather have been skating with the balance of the crowd over at our new rink. Well, what happened?"

"Just this, Hugh. I was well out of town, and walking briskly along, thinking of the game we expect to win on Saturday, when someone suddenly turned a bend ahead. I saw that it was a boy who was smoking a cigarette like everything,---yes, Tip Slavin, if you please. He discovered me at about the same second, and, say, you ought to have seen how he flipped that coffin-nail thing from his lips, and came on as bold as anything."

Thad chuckled.

"Huh! guess you got him dead to rights that time, Owen. Did you accuse him of being a thief?" he asked hurriedly.

"Well, hardly, because, you see, I wasn't begging for a fight; and there's no doubt in the world that's what would have followed. But I made out as if I hadn't noticed anything out of the way, and just nodded careless like to Tip as we passed by."

"I admire your way of grasping the situation," said Hugh impressively, "because already I can guess you had some sort of scheme in your mind to make use of your discovery."

"Just what I did," chortled Owen. "I walked on, and turned the bend he had come around. Then I crept back, and peeked, taking care he didn't glimpse me. When I saw him stop as if deciding on something I was disappointed, because I expected he meant to come back after it; but then he seemed to think it not worth while, and later on passed out of sight in the distance."

"And then you hunted for the cigarette he had thrown away, I suppose?" ventured Thad.

"Oh! I'd noted the exact spot where he was at the time, and also on which side of the road he'd tossed the stub; so I didn't have much trouble about picking it up; after which I continued on my way. Hugh, here it is."

"With that Owen took something from his pocket, carefully wrapped in the folds of his handkerchief. It turned out to be a half-smoked cigarette. Hugh fastened his eyes instantly on some small printing in blue ink, giving the name of the manufacturers down in Virginia.

"It's the same make as those found under the Disney barn-floor," he said impressively; "and that alone would be proof that Tip has a cache somewhere back along the road to the mill-pond, perhaps in a hollow tree in the woods. A clever police officer could easily find it by following back Tip's trail, and learning just where he came out of the woods. I myself happen to know his left shoe has a triangular patch across the toe,---that would serve to identify the tracks anywhere."

"Listen to that, will you, Owen?" gasped the wondering Thad. "If my chum here doesn't take up the line of an investigator of crime for a livelihood believe me there'll be a great loss to the world. I wonder now, Hugh, if you've got tabs on all the fellows, so that you could tell who made any footprint in the mud?"

Hugh only laughed as he went on to say:

"It was just a mere accident that I knew that about Tip's mended sole, and it might never happen again. But when Owen here told us about a hidden cache I only gave you my opinion as to what would be the easiest way to discover its location. But what will you do about it, Owen,---let the Chief know of your discovery, or keep mum?"

"Why, I look at it this way," said the other, with a line of perplexity marked upon his usually smooth forehead; "if it was only a *suspicion* I might keep quiet, not wanting to injure Tip, though I've got little cause to love the brute. But since I actually *know* something that would prove a valuable clue to the officers, I'm afraid it would be what I've heard a lawyer call 'compounding a felony' if I refused to inform on Tip. How about that, Hugh? I want to do the right thing, even if I hate to be an informer."

"It's up to you, Owen, and your duty is plain enough," said Hugh.

"Then I ought to see the Chief, you mean?" asked the other.

"I'd advise you to do so, for your future peace of mind, if nothing else," Hugh told the hesitating boy, who thereupon drew a long breath, and remarked:

"I'm more than half sorry now I went back to look for this cigarette; because only for my picking up such positive evidence I needn't get into this nasty game. But I'm in now, and I'll have to shoulder my share of the responsibility, I guess. So, while the thing is still fresh in my mind, I'll trot around to Headquarters to wake up our sleeping Chief. Things have come to a pretty pass here in Scranton when boys have to lend a helping hand to the police force so as to nab a petty thief."

With that Owen left them. When he had a duty to perform, however unpleasant it might be, Owen was accustomed to grappling with it, and not compromising.

Thad looked after the other and remarked:

"How queer things do come about, Hugh. Just to think of Owen discovering Tip sauntering along the road and smoking one of those stolen cigarettes. Pretty cute of him, too, sneaking back and hunting for the evidence. I suppose it'll wind up in Tip being locked up with Leon, and eventually going to the Reform School."

"Few people will be sorry," observed Hugh, although he felt a twinge when his mind reverted to the mothers of the two boys.

"I wonder what Nick thinks of it all," mused Thad. "He must realize that he had a narrow squeak of it; because, only for that sudden change of heart on his part, brought around by what you did about those nicked skates, he might have been in the cooler right now, along with crafty Leon."

As they had arrived at the point where their paths diverged, the two chums separated. Hugh had returned home somewhat earlier than customary, as he had something to do for his mother, just as Owen had admitted was the cause of his absence from the ice that same afternoon.

Usually boys like to linger on the ice until long after the shades of night have settled down and time for supper is perilously near. With a jolly bonfire blazing on the bank, and the skaters going and coming all the while, the prospect is so alluring that it is indeed difficult for any lad to break away. And the father who has not forgotten his own shortcomings of long ago is apt to wisely overlook some such transgression of parental authority, when the ice beckons, and, in spite of good intentions, all outdoors seems to grip a fellow in fetters of steel.

Some little time later Hugh might have been seen in a neighbor's family sleigh heading out of town. There was plenty of snow for this sort of thing, though the ice had been kept well cleared through the use of brooms handled by many willing hands. The skating had not been injured in the least, for they flooded the pond each night afresh, giving it a glittering new surface by morning.

Hugh had to go a couple of miles out. He, too, was bound for a farm, to fetch back a sack of potatoes that his mother had purchased, and which should have been delivered before then, only that the one horse on the place had taken a notion to fall sick, and that rendered the farmer helpless.

It was already well on toward sunset when Hugh started out. He expected to be overtaken by twilight before getting back home; but that was a small matter, since he knew the road very well, and with the snow on the ground it would not be really dark at any time.

It was certainly bitter cold. Hugh wore warm gloves especially suited for driving, or any purpose when the zero mark was approached by the mercury in the tube of the thermometer. He also kept his ears well muffled up by means of a toque of dark blue worsted, which he wore under his ordinary cap.

As he had on a heavy wool-lined pea-jacket that buttoned close up under his chin the boy found nothing to complain about in that cold atmosphere, for his blood coursed through his veins with all the richness of healthy youth.

"But all the same," he was telling himself, as he passed an humble cottage where, through a dingy window, a lone lamp could be seen; and some children gathered about the kitchen stove, "I'm thinking this bracing weather that we boys have wanted to see so much, is pretty hard on poor folks. The world is unevenly divided, as mother often says; some have too much for their own good; and others far too little for comfort."

He presently arrived at his destination. The neighbor's horse, while not at all fleet, was a steady goer, and Hugh had not allowed him to "loaf on the job" so long as he could touch the whip to the animal's broad back.

The sack of potatoes was soon tucked away in the back part of the big sleigh. He also bundled some extra coverings about it, which he had brought along with him, to prevent any chance of the precious tubers freezing. A basket, with some other things, was also stowed away in the back of the vehicle; after which the boy said good-night to the farmer, and started on his return trip.

Hugh was about half-way home when something occurred to excite him not a little, though at the time he did not even suspect what an intimate relation it might have in connection with certain facts that he and his chum had only recently been discussing at length.

His horse suddenly gave a series of snorts, and at the same time shied to one side as if startled. Hugh gripped the lines tighter, and strained his eyes to see what was wrong, while, perhaps, his heart did start to beating faster than ordinary, although he could not be said to be alarmed in the least, only excited.

A wavering figure started out toward him. Then Hugh discovered, greatly to his surprise, that it was a woman, and that she held by the hand a child of about five, a boy at that.

She tried to speak to him, but seemed overcome with weakness, as though she might have been trudging along until exhausted by want of food and the severe cold. Hugh guessed that possibly the couple must have come out of a side road he had passed a few hundred feet back, for they were certainly not there when he went by on the way to the farmer's place.

He saw her stretch out her hand toward him, caught the feeble words, "Help---my poor little boy!" and then, to Hugh's utter dismay, she sank to the ground in a heap!

CHAPTER X

THE MYSTERY DEEPENS

Fortunately, Hugh was a lad equal to any occasion. Of course, he had never had an experience like this before; but somehow he seemed to understand that the first, indeed, only thing to be done, was to get the woman and child in the sleigh some way or other, and then make for home at breakneck speed.

So out he jumped, and, after considerable difficulty, managed to lift the now unconscious woman into the sleigh. He had never realized until then how like lead an inert person might seem, although not heavy in reality, when possessed of life and animation.

He tore the coverings off the sack of potatoes, and tucked them eagerly about his charges; for he had also placed the little fellow, now sobbing bitterly, under the possible impression that "mommy" was dead, in the sleigh. As for the potatoes they could "go hang," as he told himself under his breath; though, perhaps, they might not freeze in the brief time he meant to be on the road now.

In again Hugh jumped. Old Bill felt the whip come down this time in deadly earnest, and actually jumped in his amazement. Hugh kept him going at a mad pace. He was thrilled with the importance of getting home as speedily as possible. The woman had looked so deathly white that the boy was alarmed. And how he pitied the little chap who cuddled against his side, still surging over now and then with his grief, while Hugh drove along.

They struck town, and people turned to stare upon seeing Hugh whipping his horse so unmercifully. They could not understand it, and rubbed their eyes. Surely that was Hugh Morgan in the sleigh, but why should *he* be pounding his horse, and half standing erect? If it had been a fire chief going to a blaze he could hardly have excited more comment.

A boy who was walking briskly along the street with a package under his arm came to a full stop, and stared as though he thought he had taken leave of his seven senses. It was Thad Stevens, and no wonder he was amazed, having recognised his chum in the frantic driver.

Thad gave vent to a whistle to relieve his pent-up feelings. Then he started on a gallop after Hugh. He could not rest easy until he had learned just what might have happened to cause his usually collected chum to act in this strange fashion.

When he arrived at the Morgan home it was to find Hugh had landed the child on the little porch in front of the door. This latter was open, and his mother, together with the hired girl, stood there, trying to comprehend what Hugh was saying.

Thad came panting up, and was immediately seized upon by Hugh.

"Great luck! Just in time to give me a helping hand, Thad!" cried the other.

"What with---the Murphies?" asked the astonished Thad; for he had known Hugh expected to go out to the farm after a sack of potatoes.

"Not this time," snapped the other; "it's a poor woman who fainted from cold and exhaustion while she was trying to ask me the way somewhere. That child is hers. Come, give me a hand, Thad, and we'll carry her into the house. Mother says she must be put to bed right away, and won't hear of my taking her over to the hospital."

That aroused Thad, and between them the two stout lads had little difficulty in carrying the still unconscious young woman into the warm house. Up the stairs Mrs. Morgan and the girl led them, and into the neat spare-room, reserved for favored company.

Once she had been laid on the bed, after the blankets and coverings had been turned down, and the little boy was being soothed by Hugh's mother, she told the boys they could now go downstairs again, and she would report later as to what next should be done.

"First carry in the potatoes, Hugh, for they are too expensive this season to let the frost get them," she went on to say, patting the little fellow, whose tears had by now ceased to run down his chubby cheeks; "then call up Doctor Cadmus, and tell him to come around immediately. I'm sorry your father is away from home just now, but I can depend on my son."

The boys went out again and lugged the heavy sack of potatoes around to the cellar door, by means of which they were taken in where they would be safe from the bitter air of the winter. Then Thad was sent around to the neighbor's with the horse and sleigh, while Hugh meant to get the good physician on the wire, and hasten his coming on an urgent call.

"If Mr. Jones notices that old Bill is wheezing a bit, as if he'd had a warm run of it, please explain how it happened, Thad. I wouldn't like him, after all his kindness, to think I'd whip up his horse for nothing, or just in a spirit of sport."

As it was an hour when Doctor Cadmus was through with his day's calls, Hugh had the good luck to hear the physician's voice on the wire.

"Mother wants you to come right over, Doctor!" Hugh told him.

"Who's sick?" demanded the other, being very fond of all the Morgan family; "not your good mother, I hope, Hugh?"

"No, neither of us, Doctor," the boy continued. "I ran upon a young woman and a small child when on the road after potatoes in Mr. Jones' sleigh. She fainted dead away before she could tell me who she was, or where she was going. I managed to get them both aboard, and fetched them here. Mother has put her to bed; but she is afraid a fever is coming on, and it worries her. You'll be here right away, Doctor, won't you, please?"

"As fast as I can get there, my son!" came the prompt reply.

If there was a touch of pride in the voice one could not wonder at it; for like a good many other people of Scranton Doctor Cadmus had conceived a great liking for Hugh; and thought there had never been another boy fashioned after his model, which, of course, was all nonsense, as Hugh often protested indignantly when he heard any such talk.

Only a short time elapsed before the doctor and Thad reached the front door at the same minute.

"Wait for me in the library, Thad, if you don't mind being late for your supper. Doctor, I'll show you the way upstairs," and with this remark Hugh preceded the stout little physician up to the second floor.

As for Thad, he never once dreamed of "breaking away" at that most interesting stage. Suppers occurred three hundred and sixty-five times a year, with an extra one thrown in for good measure when leap-year came around; but exciting events like the one happening to Hugh were of rare occurrence. Catch him thinking of eating when there was a chance right at his door to have a hand in a thrilling drama that beat the "movies" all hollow!

So Thad sat down.

Hugh soon joined him. He was immediately pounced upon by his curious chum, and plied with all manner of questions. By degrees Thad "pumped him dry," and there was nothing more to tell.

"We'll have to wait until she comes back to her senses," Hugh finally remarked sagely, "before we'll be able to learn anything definite about them, mother and the doctor both say."

"And she's actually out of her head, is she, right now?" Thad demanded.

"Yes, and keeps on saying the same thing over and over, just as if it might have been in her mind so much lately. She keeps on pleading with someone she calls grandfather, and begging him not to put them out of his heart and home, for little Joey's sake---it's always little Joey she's worrying about and not herself. The doctor says she was utterly exhausted by want of sustaining food, added to anxiety and the exposure she had suffered."

"But where could she have come from, Hugh? She has never been in Scranton, you said that, and I never saw her before either. You told me the little boy can only say his name is Joey Walters; and honest to goodness, Hugh, there isn't a single family of that name in or around this town that I ever heard of."

"They've been trying to get some clues out of the little chap," continued Hugh, "but without much success. All he's said so far is that they've come ever so far, and that he liked riding on the cars first-rate, only mommy cried so much and wouldn't eat every time he did. From the way he talked they suspect that the young woman may have come from the West somewhere."

"She *is* young then, Hugh?"

"Yes, not over twenty-five or so, the doctor says, but frail-looking. He thinks there is nothing serious the matter with her, only that she's been underfed for a long time, and has suffered. Perhaps she's denied herself proper food so as to save up enough money to make this trip."

Thad shook his head as if feeling sad over the happening; for the boy had a tender heart.

"Well, I certainly hope she'll be better tomorrow, and able to tell something about herself," he went on to say, as he prepared to leave. "And, Hugh, it was fine of your mother to refuse to let her be taken over to the Scranton Hospital, when the doctor proposed such a thing."

"My mother wouldn't hear of it," Hugh told him proudly. "Why, already she's in love with that little chap, and he's enough of a darling to make any woman with a heart want to mother him. Both of us seem to think we may have seen

him before somewhere; or else he resembles someone we've known once on a time; but, so far, we can't imagine who or where it was. But once she comes to her senses, whether to-morrow, or some days afterwards, of course the truth will be known."

"And Hugh," said the other, with one of his smiles, "if you feel that you can't wait for her to tell, suppose you start out to-morrow afternoon and try to strike a clue on your own account. That wonderful faculty you possess for investigating things ought to put you on the track."

"Perhaps I may, that is, if I have time to-morrow," chuckled Hugh; "because, you know, we have our last practice at hockey before meeting those Keyport experts."

"You said you felt sure she must have come out of that side road near where you met them," continued the persistent Thad.

"Yes, but only because I hadn't seen them when going out to the farm," his chum explained. "They may have come out of that road; and then again it's barely possible they were trying to make a fire somewhere among the trees to keep them from freezing."

"By going along that same road, and inquiring at every house you came to," Thad continued, "like as not you'd get word of them, if so be they stopped to ask directions, or a warm cup of coffee. People around here never refuse anyone who comes to their doors. Well, see you in the morning then, Hugh. Good-night!"

CHAPTER XI

A MOTHER'S SACRIFICE

Friday afternoon had come, and the game at the park was over. Although the scratch team organized by Mr. Leonard to oppose the Regulars put up a strong fight, they were virtually "snowed under" by the splendid playing of Hugh and his six comrades.

The experienced coach seemed very well satisfied. He openly complimented the lads after the contest had been carried to its finish.

"You are doing splendid work, fellows," he told them, with a look of pride on his face; "and the way you played this afternoon was worthy of any Montreal Seven that ever toured the East to show how they do things up there in Canada at their favorite winter sport. And the boys who fought tooth and nail to hold you back, I congratulate them also; for they did excellent work. It was no disgrace to be beaten in that game; few hockey teams could have held their own against such fine play. Keep it up to-morrow, and there need be no doubt as to who the winners will be."

It can be easily understood that Hugh and Thad were feeling in a particularly good humor then, as they started to walk to town after the game, having an errand there before going home.

"I haven't had a fair chance to say a word with you to-day, Hugh," the latter broke out with, once they were alone; "and I'm awfully anxious to hear how that poor young woman at your house is coming along. Has she spoken yet, and told who she is, and where she came from?"

Hugh shook his head in the negative.

"Never a word as yet, Thad. Fact is, Doctor Cadmus says she mustn't be worried by questions for several days, possibly."

"Then she's still wandering in her mind, is she, Hugh?"

"Yes, and saying all sorts of things about her girlhood days, as well as about her husband, who, mother thinks, must have come to his death in some accident. She calls him Joey, too, just like the boy. It must be a family name, we imagine. So mother is content to wait until she is better, when she will tell all she wants us to know."

"Then you didn't bother taking that wise tip I gave you, Hugh?" and Thad's voice had a little ring of disappointment about it.

"Oh! I was up early this morning, and, as the road out there seemed so hard and firm, the snow being packed down solid, I just jumped on my wheel, and took a little run up in that direction. It wasn't so easy, once I struck in on that side road, but I managed to pedal along somehow."

"There are a number of houses on that road, I chance to know, Hugh; the Simms live there, likewise the Thompsons and the Garrabrants."

"I managed to reach those three houses," Hugh continued; "but it didn't pay me, so far as results went, though I enjoyed the run all right."

"From that I imagine nobody had seen the woman and child yesterday afternoon coming along that particular road, eh, Hugh?"

"No one could remember having met or seen such a person," Hugh told him; "and as strangers are uncommon in these parts they would surely have noticed her if she passed their doors. So I came to the conclusion, as I couldn't even find the marks of her shoes in the snow along the road, that she must have come over from Belleville way, and was in the woods at the time I first went by, which would account for my not meeting her."

"To change the subject, Hugh, I notice that Nick still fights shy of the rest of the crowd these days. He was skating on the ice to-day; but absolutely declined to take part in the game; though Mr. Leonard, wanting to make the opposition as strong as possible so as to put us to our best licks, went over and talked with him, trying to coax Nick to join the line-up. What makes him act that way, Hugh? One would think Nick'd be glad of the chance to play."

"He would, Thad, he certainly would, because he enjoys hockey as much as you or myself; but I reckon Nick, for the first time in all his life, finds himself afflicted with shyness. You see, he knows people don't, as a rule, believe in this sudden reformation. They can't have any faith in a fellow who's fooled them so often before. And that makes him want to keep away. Nick is fighting it out all by himself. If we knew all the wonderful things that he's grappling with these days I imagine we'd sympathize with the poor fellow, Thad."

"Hugh, you may be right. Already I'm beginning to feel sorry for saying some of the mean things I did when first we guessed Nick was trying to turn over a new leaf. It must be terrible hard for a boy who's always been bad to change around and face the other way."

"Stop and think, Thad. Take the case of that Jean Valjean, for instance. Now, he underwent a complete change of heart, and from being a beast, hating humanity, he grew to love other people, and be ready to sacrifice himself to save another. You remember how he voluntarily gave himself up to the law in that courtroom scene, just to save a miserable wretch

who was about to be punished under the belief that he was the genuine Jean Valjean."

"Yes, but Hugh, he was unknown when he fought his battle, and won out. Besides, he had the money he received for the silver the priest gave him, with which to get a start in the world. But Nick here is known, and people point their fingers at him with scorn, and talk openly about his playing another of his pranks."

"That was just what I had in mind when I spoke, Thad. Nick has the harder row of the two to hoe. And if he wins out he'll deserve a lot of praise, I tell you. But see who's coming along here in a rig, will you?"

"Why, it's good old Deacon Winslow, the blacksmith weather prophet; and, Hugh, isn't he beckoning to us right now?"

"Just what he is; let's cross over and see what he wants with us," Hugh immediately went on to say; for, as has been intimated before in these pages, he had come to feel a great interest in the brawny smith, and wanted to cultivate a closer acquaintance with him; there was something so genial, so wholesome about the owner of the crossroads smithy.

"Jump in and go along with me, lads," sang out Mr. Winslow, as they came up. "I'm bound around to the home of Mrs. Disney on a little errand; and, since you two are interested, I thought you might like to help me explain to the poor woman that I want to go on her boy's bail. It's a shame he has to stay in the lockup all this time, waiting for his trial to come off."

The chums exchanged quick looks.

"How about it, do we go along, Hugh?" asked Thad.

For answer the other hopped up alongside the deacon, and, of course, Thad did likewise. Since the Disney home was not far away they were quickly at the door, and knocking for admittance.

Leon's mother answered the summons. She looked frightened at seeing the huge bulk of the blacksmith there, and the two boys with him. But no sooner had he spoken in his kindly fashion than the anxious expression fled from her pale face.

"Please excuse me for dropping in on you, Mrs. Disney," said the deacon, after they had been ushered into the humble sitting-room, where a wood-fire burned on the hearth; "but I just couldn't stand it any longer. I want to stand bail for your boy, so you can have him home again with you till his trial comes off."

Leon's mother looked embarrassed. She twisted her apron in her nervous fingers, and seemed very near the point of tears.

"Oh! it's kind of you, Deacon Winslow, indeed it is!" she finally exclaimed, as she looked up at the smiling, sympathetic big man; "but, after all I think it is better that Leon remained where he is though it almost breaks my heart to say it."

Thad looked astonished, but Hugh nodded his head, as though he could understand what was back of those words so strange for a mother to speak. Deacon Winslow was also considerably surprised, it seemed.

"But the bail bond is only for a thousand dollars, madam," he said; "and I can afford to put that up for his appearance in court later."

"Thank you again and again for your kindness to a poor woman, and a mother, sir!" she exclaimed with a half-suppressed sob in her voice; "but there does not seem to be any doubt about my boy's guilt, much as I hate to acknowledge it. His association with that Lang boy has been his ruin. And he would be likely to run away, to try and escape his just punishment, so that the bail bond would be forfeited."

"But even so it wouldn't ruin me, Mrs. Disney," continued the deacon; "and I hate to think of you sitting here, and crying your eyes out because he is locked up."

She looked straight at him then, as she went on to say bravely:

"But, sir, I am thinking of what will eventually become of my boy. If he runs away now he will sink lower and lower, until he commits some terrible crime, it may be. But Dominie Pettigrew tells me that if he goes to the Reform School there is a chance that he may come out later on completely changed in heart, and ready to play his honest part in the world. No, I have thought it all over, and prayed to be led to do what is best for my Leon. I cannot accept your offer, though you mean it in all kindness. For his sake I will wait until his time has expired, and continue to hope it may be the making of my poor boy."

Deacon Winslow did not attempt to urge her. Indeed, he could hardly say anything, for he was half choking with emotion. But he squeezed her hand, and gave her a look that must have carried some comfort to her poor distracted heart.

Once outside, the boys shook hands with the big man. Hugh was feeling more drawn towards him than ever.

"I'm coming out to visit you soon, Deacon," he told the other; "I want to know you better. There are a lot of things I mean to ask you about the habits of those little animals from which you get your hints about the weather; and you told me to drop in any time I felt like it, you remember."

"You'll be doubly welcome, both of you, lads!" the big blacksmith assured Hugh, as he drove away, more or less disappointed because his little plan to assist a sorrow-stricken mother had fallen through.

"Say, his heart must be as big as a bushel-basket, Hugh," admitted Thad, as they walked along, heading for the open square in the center of the town.

Two minutes later and Thad gave vent to an ejaculation.

"It's all up now, Hugh!" he said, in a half-disappointed tone.

"What is?" demanded his comrade wonderingly.

"The Chief has arrested Tip Slavin, I mean. He must have heard what Owen Dugdale had to say about meeting Tip Slavin smoking a cigarette on the road to the mill-pond, and set a trap for him. He's just stopped his big car in front of Headquarters, and one of his men is lifting out a load of stuff, doubtless the plunder Tip cached in the woods up there. And the Chief has his hand on Tip's shoulder as they get out. I notice that Tip has lost his arrogant look, and seems badly scared, too!"

CHAPTER XII

TIP SATISFIES HIS CRAVING---AND LOSES

"Let's step over and see how it happened, Hugh!"

As Hugh himself was not averse to picking up some information along that same line, the two chums entered the station-house just after the Chief and his man. The latter officer had placed the large package done up in a burlap bag on the floor. He was grinning, as though considerably pleased with the final results of the raid. Chief Wambold, too, was indulging in a smile as the boys entered; he even winked one eye at Thad, as though in a particularly good humor.

But there was one person present who did not seem to be in a happy frame of mind. That was Tip. He looked "in the dumps," as Thad expressed it; and on seeing the boys enter dropped his chin upon his breast in shame. All the bravado was gone from his demeanor now; he knew that with that evidence against him he was headed for the House of Refuge on a fast train.

The man took him through a door into another room, the Chief's private office. From this Hugh guessed that Tip was about to be questioned at length, in the hope of his possibly implicating still a third party in the theft.

"So you found his secret cache, did you, Chief?" remarked Thad boldly. "When Owen Dugdale left us he said he was going straight to you, to tell about meeting Tip on the road smoking a cigarette; and he showed us that it bore the same trademark as those stolen from Paul Kramer's place."

Thad went into detail so as to let the tall Chief understand they already knew all about the discovery, and had been told, in fact, even before he was.

"Yes, we took a hunt up there in the woods this morning," explained the other, with a broad smile; "and ran across some tracks that looked like Tip's. When we followed the trail it led us direct to a big tree that was hollow; and inside the cavity lay that bundle, wrapped in a burlap sack. It was almost too easy. An experienced crook would never have committed such a blunder, and left so plain a trail. Why, it looked as if we were being taken by the hand and led there."

"But I guess you didn't carry away the stuff right then, did you, Chief?" Thad went on to say, a wise look on his face.

"Hardly, son, hardly," replied the other, with a gesture of his hands. "That would have been too silly for anything. What we did was to back away, and cover our own footprints as well as we could. Then we hid to await developments. I left my man up there while I came back to town to conduct my business. Later in the day I once more joined him. I expected the boy might be getting hungry for a smoke about the same time Owen met him on the road. Well, he came, and we pounced down on him just when he had opened the pack, and was lighting a weed with his trembling, tobacco-stained fingers; because, just like Leon Disney, and that slick Nick Lang, Tip is a confirmed cigarette fiend, you know."

"Well, for one, Nick has cut the habit out, Chief, I happen to know, for he told me so," Hugh ventured to say.

The big police officer sneered, as though he refused to believe there could any good come out of the boy who bore that detested name of Nick Lang. During the whole of the time he occupied his present exalted position, Chief Wambold had been plagued by the pranks of Nick and his cronies; and, in spite of all his efforts, up to now he had been unable to fasten anything serious upon them, although he gave them credit for every piece of maliciousness practiced in Scranton during that period.

"Well, perhaps some people may believe Nick didn't have a hand in this outrage," he went on to say, "but I'll never think otherwise than that it was his genius for organizing raids that was responsible for the robbery. At the least, he may have changed his mind, seeing things getting too warm in police circles here. But never forget to keep one eye open when

dealing with such a slippery customer, for his repentance is only skin-deep at the best."

Hugh made no reply. He knew it would have been utterly useless, because the Chief was not only a very stubborn man, but inclined to be a narrow-minded one in the bargain. So he and Thad walked out. The last they heard the officer call after them was:

"Make up your minds, boys, Scranton is going to be purged now as never before. We've made a good beginning, and it'll be pretty unhealthy for anybody to start a racket from now on. Tip and Leon will be going to the Reform School inside of a few days, after they've had their trial before the Justice; and the town will be well rid of a pair of scapegraces. And thank you for what assistance you may have given us, boys."

As they walked along Thad vented his feelings in the matter.

"It looks as if that episode might be called closed, eh, Hugh? The evidence is so powerfully strong that neither of the boys can put up anything like a half-way decent defense. They're going to be sent away, and we'll not be bothered with the bunch again. With Nick on the mourners' bench, the old town is going to be pretty orderly for a while, until some fresh spirits break loose."

"Let's hope it may be a long time before Nick has a successor," said Hugh. "This whole thing is going to be a lesson to such fellows as were inclined to run around with the street gangs, and play practical jokes nights."

"I notice one thing," remarked Thad, "which is that some of those fellows who used to loaf on the street corners in summer are now coming to the club-house at the baseball park, now it's opened three nights a week. The only trouble is they haven't got half enough magazines and games there to go around, so many visit the big room to get in out of the cold these nights."

"That is going to be remedied before long," Hugh told him. "Some of the men of the town, and Deacon Winslow heads the list, I understand, have arranged to spend a lot more money on certain improvements; and among other things there will be a pretty fair gymnasium, as well as more reading matter of the right sort for boys."

"Now, that's news to me, Hugh!" exclaimed the delighted Thad; "queer that I hadn't heard a word about it before. But then you get wind of everything that's going on. Folks think they ought to ask your advice on all sorts of subjects. That's what it means to be the most popular boy in a town."

Hugh laughed.

"Thanks for the compliment, Thad," he said; "but just think of the weight of responsibility I have to stagger under, even as the captain of the Scranton Seven. Why, everybody stops me on the street, and asks the most remarkable questions. They seem to think I'm gifted with prophetic vision. They ask me to tell them just how badly we're going to whip Keypoint to-morrow morning, and lots of other things that I know no more about than a baby might."

"Well, have you decided to give up trying to learn where the woman with the little child came from?" asked Thad, again switching the subject in an abrupt fashion he had.

"Oh! I don't know whether it will pay me to go out again, and try to trace her back to Belleville, or some such place," said Hugh. "Doctor Cadmus assured my mother she would certainly be in her rational mind inside of two days at the longest. So I reckon I had better lie on my oars, and wait. I've got plenty to bother about, as it is, with that hot game coming off in the morning."

"Perhaps you're wise about that, Hugh. I know I'm a lot too impatient by half, and can't bear to wait for things to come to me. That's why I always stepped out to meet the ball when at bat; and I often caught it before the break came to make it a sharp drop."

"Mother says she thinks her full name is Judith Walters, though, as far as we know now, that doesn't help any. Still, if she didn't recover, it might assist in finding her family, so they could take the boy. He's a fine little chap, and I've already made great friends with him."

"You say she keeps on speaking to someone she calls grandfather, who seems likely to turn them both out of the house?" Thad persisted, as though he might be trying to figure something out.

"Yes, and so we take it for granted there must be some sort of a pitiful family tragedy about the whole affair," Hugh told him. "Mother suspects she may have married some years ago against her grandfather's will; and, losing her husband suddenly through accident, she is now on her way back, to plead with a hard-hearted old man for a place under his roof. But as you say there's no family named Walters near here, and we certainly don't know of any girl leaving her home that way."

"The chances are," Thad said decisively, "that she was meaning to pass through Scranton, and was heading for some other town, perhaps Allandale. You might find out if any such thing happened there some years ago; or if an old man could be found who would welcome a dear little boy named Joey."

The subject being exhausted for the time being, the boys talked of something else until they finally separated, each heading for his own particular supper table.

Of course, the news of Tip's arrest was soon known all over town. Most people had anticipated such an event, and professed not to be in the least surprised to hear about it. Nevertheless, the clever device of Chief Wambold, which he took care should be passed from lip to lip, so as to add to his popularity, was highly commended.

And there never was a time when Scranton passed a more peaceful night than on that occasion. Already great good was coming of the breaking up of the vicious gang that had held sway much too long. With two of the members locked up, being just as good as on their way to the Reform School, and the leader forsaking his former evil practices, it looked as though the police force of Scranton would soon become fat and lazy through lack of activity.

Hugh did not go out that evening. He was tired, and wished to conserve his energies so as to be in first-class trim for that lively morning brush with Keyport's Big Seven.

So he spent considerable time playing with little Joey; and, being still hopeful of learning something that would afford a clue to the mysterious past of the boy's young mother, Hugh often plied him with questions.

But his success was hardly flattering to his acumen, for the little fellow could not tell him anything that would be of material help. Hugh guessed that they had once been out in some mining country, from certain things the boy chanced to mention. He also had reason to believe the father had come to his death through such a catastrophe as so often happens in the mines; for the boy spoke of many families losing those they loved when "poppy" was buried in the cold ground.

It was slow work, and anyone less tenacious than Hugh might have given up all hope of making a discovery. He believed, however, that if no other way arose by means of which they could find out what they sought, some time or other Joey was apt to let fall a word that might lead to discoveries.

The doctor came before bedtime, and said his patient was getting along nicely.

"Given one more day, and possibly by Sunday she may come into her senses again," he told them before leaving. "And then she can thank you, madam, for all your kind heart has done for her. But that little boy is a sunbeam for any house. I have half a mind to steal him myself."

CHAPTER XIII

THE LIVELY GAME WITH KEYPORT'S SEVEN

Many a fellow in Scranton felt blue early on Saturday morning, when, jumping from his warm bed, and hastening over to a window, he looked out to discover a few flakes of snow lazily drifting earthwards.

The gloomy sky seemed to be in fit condition for a heavy snowfall, that would put the hockey game with Keyport entirely out of the question.

By the time breakfast was ready, however, these fugitive snowflakes had ceased falling entirely, and, shortly afterwards, the bright sun broke out, lifting the load from myriads of enthusiastic young hearts.

After all, it turned out a perfectly glorious winter's day, the air being keen, but with little wind to mar the work of the contenders on the icy rink.

Along about nine in the morning people began to gather at the park, paying for seats in the grandstand. Everybody was as warmly clad as possible, since it is no joke to sit for an hour or two, with the thermometer registering half-way down to zero.

As before, one-half of the enclosed area was shut off from the general public, in order to afford the hockey players the benefit of the new ice. Of course, it had been flooded on the preceding night, after the last skater had left, and this caused a splendid surface to congeal.

Boys and girls came flocking to the place. Many bore skates, but there were others who only wished to witness the contest between the two rival high-school teams, as scheduled for that morning. There were hosts of other people present also; and already cars and conveyances of every description were arriving from Keyport, Allandale, Belleville, and such places, filled with eager enthusiasts, who loved a good hockey game above all sports, and would journey far afield in order to be present when one was to be played.

Shortly afterwards some of the Scranton players appeared on the enclosed area. Their coming was greeted with all sorts of cries, meant, for the most part, as encouragement, and expressing a firm belief in their ability to win out.

"We're pinning our faith on you boys. Dugdale, remember!" cried one fellow.

"Don't let them get too big a start on you, because they're terrible fighters, once they get a lead!" came from another, who, having lived in Keyport, was supposed to know the characteristics of the boys on that team.

"And, Hobson, always remember that it's the longest pole that knocks the persimmons!" whooped a third fellow student.

Thad and Hugh were sitting on a low bench, adjusting their skates leisurely, and listening in an amused way to much of this friendly badinage.

"The boys are certainly wanting to win this game, Hugh," chuckled Thad. "Makes me think of some of the warm sessions we had last summer in baseball contests with Allandale and Belleville. [*The Chums of Scranton High in the Three-Town League.*"]

"It seems as if Scranton boys and girls have developed a voracious appetite for every kind of out-door sport lately," Hugh went on to say. "Did you hear what the committee in charge of the grounds here intends to do next week?"

"Haven't heard a whisper so far, Hugh; so give me the news," pleaded the other.

"Why, you know the fellows have been building bonfires here at night-times when skating. It was all very fine, but there seemed to be considerable worry about the new high fence taking fire and burning during the night. So they've concluded to run wires across from side to side, and string electric lights for use on dark nights, but only when the skating is good."

Thad looked pleased.

"Why, that's a boss idea; who suggested it, Hugh?" he demanded.

"Oh! somebody just happened to think of it, and the committee agreed it was a good scheme," returned Hugh; but something about his manner told Thad the truth.

"Huh! I can give a pretty good guess who that smart chap is; but don't bother trying to deny it, Hugh. The only bad thing about it in my mind is that we'll miss those jolly fires. It's always been so fine to skate up and stand before one, to get warm, and hear the flames crackle, while the girl you're skating with sits on a log, or something like that, to warm her feet."

"Oh! well, when you want the romantic side of night-skating, Thad, you'll have to go out to Hobson's mill-pond, like you say you used to do. There, with plenty of wood handy, you can have the biggest fire you feel like making. Here, so close to town, we have to get our light in a more modern way. Now, I reckon I'm ready for any sort of a scrimmage that comes along."

A shout presently announced that the boys from Keyport had arrived in a big car of the "rubber-neck" variety, with five seats across; and used for sight-seeing purposes, or any excursion where a dozen or twenty wished to go in a crowd.

A little later the fellows came on the ice in a body, with their distinguishing jerseys. They appeared to be an exceedingly lively bunch, and were soon spinning about, displaying a nimbleness that excited apprehensions in many a loyal Scranton heart.

As boys need little introduction, the opposing players quickly intermingled, and seemed on the best of terms. Captain Mossman and Hugh paired off, to talk over matters connected with the game. They were soon joined by Mr. Leonard, and several gentlemen, some from Keyport, others hailing from Allandale and Belleville.

It was soon decided that the officials should be chosen as far as possible from neutral territory. There were to be a referee, an assistant referee, two goal umpires, as many timekeepers, and a pair of penalty timekeepers.

Fortunately, Allandale and its sister town had quite a quota of former college players and gentlemen who had been members of famous hockey clubs in Canada and elsewhere when younger. They had kept in touch with the progress of events, so that they were eminently qualified to act in the various capacities to which they were now assigned by Mr.

Leonard and the coach of the Keyport Seven.

Hugh kept looking around from time to time. He wished to be posted as to what other promising players connected with Scranton High were on the ice, so that in case of necessity he could call on one of them to take the place of an injured Scranton boy.

And when he finally noted that Nick Lang had arrived, and was on his skates, somehow Hugh seemed relieved. Deep down in his heart he believed that should he have occasion to replace a player, as the rules allowed, on account of serious injury, which is about the only excuse for such a thing, Nick would be his first choice.

He wished now he had spoken to Nick about it, so that he could depend on his remaining throughout the game. There was not another fellow who would be of such great benefit to Scranton as the boy now wearing Hugh's old hockey skates. But it was too late to think of seeking him out, for the game was about to be called.

When the rival teams faced each other, and listened to the last instructions of the head referee, they were found to line up as follows:

<i>Scranton High</i>	<i>Position</i>	<i>Keyport</i>
Stevens	Goal	Kellogg
Hobson	Point	Ackerson
Danvers	Cover Point	Bell
Smith	Right End	Elly
Dugdale	Center	Braxton
Juggins	Left End	Mossman
Morgan	Rover	Jackson

Hugh faced Mossman when the puck was dropped on the ice, and play began. There was a furious scramble, but Hugh came out of it first-best, for he bore away the little elusive rubber disc, and managed to carry it some distance down toward Keyport's goal before losing control. Then the fun became fast and furious, indeed. Those agile skaters whirled back and forth across the smooth ice with every imaginable turn and twist.

Clever plays were continually occurring on either side, and these were greeted with outbursts of enthusiastic cheering.

The crowd really seemed very impartial and sportsmanlike, considering that possibly four-fifths of it represented the local team, and might be supposed to feel prejudiced in their favor. They shouted themselves fairly hoarse over a brilliant dash on the part of Captain Mossman, whereby he outwitted his opponents, and, despite all Thad's efforts to block the play, shot the puck home in the cage for the first well-won goal of the game.

Later on Owen Dugdale repeated the performance in almost as masterly a manner. The applause was, if anything, a shade more uproarous. Now the game went on evenly, with a goal apiece; but Keyport was out for scoring and would not be denied; so, in a hurry, they pushed the fighting down on Scranton territory, and put another goal to their credit, though three times did Thad balk the effort before it was accomplished.

When the first twenty minutes had expired the score was six to five. Keyport was ahead, but the margin was so small that no one despaired.

After the intermission they went at it once more, "hammer-and-tongs." Thus far no one had been injured seriously enough to more than delay the game a few minutes, and, before the fatal seven had expired, the fellow who had been hurt

was able to take his place in the line; so no substitutes were called on. Hugh was glad of this, though he frequently shot a quick glance around to see if Nick Lang still hung about; which he certainly did, being deeply interested in the game.

The second half was even more fiercely contested than the previous one had been. Scranton rallied behind Hugh, and put up a savage attack that carried them up a couple of pegs, the score then standing eight to seven; but after a bit Keyport came back and tied it again. So it remained until the limit of the game approached perilously near, and it seemed as though an extension of time would have to be granted, as the rules allowed. But at the last minute, Hugh himself carried out a daring steal of the puck; and, before the opposing players could block him, shot it into their net for the winning score.

Before the players could get in position again, and the puck be faced, the whistle of the referee declared the game over, with Scranton a bare winner.

The Keyport players were plainly greatly chagrined, but they proved game losers, and had not a fault to find, shaking hands cheerfully with their late opponents, and expressing a hope that a return match could be arranged on their rink at some date not far in the future.

CHAPTER XIV

ENCOURAGING NICK

It was well on toward noon when Hugh, tired of skating for one day, started homeward. For a wonder he walked by himself, something Hugh seldom had happen; for if his chum Thad Stevens was not at his side, some other fellow, possibly several, would be sure to hurry so as to catch up with him.

But Thad had been compelled to go home an hour before on some account, his folks having certain plans that forced him to accompany them immediately after lunch.

Hugh was feeling a bit tired, but in good spirits, nevertheless, because of the clever victory his team had won, in which he had borne his part consistently. It always gives a boy a warm sensation around the region of his heart to realize that he has not failed those who put their faith in his ability. How many can look back with a feeling of pride to that "great day" when it was their home-run drive, or whistling three-bagger that pulled the home team out of a slump, and started a batting-bee that, eventually, won the game? Those days are marked with a red letter in the pages of memory.

When part way to town, for the athletic grounds lay outside the limits of Scranton, though not far away, Hugh suddenly discovered a familiar figure just ahead of him, which, somehow, he had not noticed up to then. It was Nick Lang. He had his skates dangling over his shoulder by a strap, and Hugh could actually catch his whistle as he strode along.

Somehow this told him Nick was feeling in higher spirits than had lately been the case. Perhaps he was beginning to feel a new confidence in himself, Hugh suspected. In the beginning Nick must have seriously doubted his ability to, as some of the boys would have called it, "come across, and deliver the goods," when he set out to reform his ways.

He had now been keeping up the pace for more than a week. It was gradually growing easier, too, the further he went along the unfamiliar road. People did not sneer quite so much at him as in the beginning. Some even ventured to give him a half-friendly nod when they chanced to meet.

And so for the first time perhaps since that day when he made up his mind, Nick was unconsciously whistling as he walked along, his thoughts busy with matters connected with his set purpose.

Obeying an impulse Hugh quickened his pace.

"Oh, Nick! Hold on a minute, will you?" he called out.

On turning his head quickly and seeing who it was, Nick stopped short in his tracks. He was looking a little confused, yet not displeased, when Hugh reached him.

Hugh thrust out his hand, and, of course, Nick had to accept it, though he did look a little awkward, because this was a new experience with him. Still, he gave Hugh's digits a fierce squeeze that might be taken as an index to his feelings toward his one-time hated enemy.

"I've been wanting to have a little chat with you for some time, Nick," the other hastened to say; "but somehow every chance I got something would interfere, and the best I could do was to wave my hand, or give you a nod. Now this morning, just as I started to skate through the crowd to say something important to you, the coach called me back and said they were ready to start play. Do you know what it was I meant to ask of you this morning, Nick?"

Nick looked puzzled and curious also.

"I might guess it in a week, Hugh," he said, grinning; "but not right away. You see, I ain't used to having *anybody* ask things of me. It's generally been a scowl, and a suspicious look, as if they thought I mean to play a trick on 'em if they so much as turned their heads on me. But then that's just what I used to do often enough; so I oughtn't to complain. What did you want with me, Hugh?"

"I was going to ask you to stand by during the entire game, because, in case one of my players was hurt so badly that he'd have to be dropped out, rather than cut both sides down to six, I meant to put you in as substitute, no matter what position had to be filled."

Nick caught his breath. His face flushed, and a glow appeared in his eyes. That expression of confidence shown in Hugh's words filled his aching heart with new encouragement. Hugh could see the muscles of his cheeks working, as though he found it difficult to control his emotions. Then Nick spoke.

"That was mighty kind in you, Hugh, to think of me," he said, with just a suspicious quiver to his voice. "I'd sure liked to have played in that game; but do you think it'd have been wise to have picked *me* for a substitute when there were plenty of other fellows on the ice competent to take the place?"

"Not one able to fill your shoes, Nick, and they know it," asserted Hugh stoutly.

"But then if you'd done that there'd sure have been a howl raised later on by lots of folks who still have it in for me because of the past," urged Nick, though it could be easily seen that he felt particularly pleased by what the captain of the Scranton High Seven had just told him.

"Let them howl," Hugh went on to say. "There never yet was a fellow who nobly redeemed his past but what a bunch of wolves set up a howl on his heels. Don't you pay any attention to those fellows, Nick. Stick to your game through thick and thin. Every day you go on as you have been doing you win fresh friends. Even Mr. Leonard, who used to fairly detest you, is now singing your praises; and Dr. Carmack told me he was pinning his faith on you. He's a long-headed man, Nick, a very far-seeing man, who knows boys and is not easily deceived. He believes in you; so do I, and a lot of other fellows. You're going to make good, and I know it."

"Well, I'm going to keep on fighting, that's all I can say, Hugh," replied Nick grimly. "I'll get there, or bust the biler trying. But sometimes I have an awful time with myself, just because I can't wholly believe folks will respect a chap who's done as many mean things as I have in the past."

"You must put that out of your mind, Nick," urged the other. "Why, don't you think I'd have ten times as much respect for the fellow who's been down, and climbs up again through his own will-power, than for the one who's always been shielded from temptation, and never really proved what he had in him? Nine-tenths of the fellows who walk along so straight are kept on that road because they happen to have wise parents to watch over them; and they were never given an overpowering appetite to do wrong things."

Nick drew a long breath. His eyes glistened again, and perhaps with something besides the animation that Hugh's kind and encouraging words kindled within his soul.

"You see," he went on to say, presently, when he could control his voice, "I always did like to run smack up against a hard proposition. It's in my nature to want a good fight, and I reckon I've got it this time. But I'm a whole lot stubborn, too, Hugh, as likely you've learned; and I don't give up easy. Since I started to reform I'm a-going to get there if it takes a leg. Anyhow, it's a heap sight pleasanter doing it *outside* the Reform School than inside, like some fellows I used to train with are a-going to do, it seems."

All this kind of talk pleased Hugh immensely. He felt more than ever satisfied with the magnificent result of that clever little scheme of his. Reading Hugo's masterpiece had brought it about, too, and he would always have occasion to remember this when handling that volume recording the wonderful achievements of the one-time ignorant convict and human beast named Jean Valjean.

Nick just then saw several other boys hurrying to overtake Hugh. He immediately evinced a desire to start off on a tangent, and head elsewhere.

"I've got an errand over in town, Hugh, so I'll break away," he said hurriedly, though Hugh could easily guess the real reason for his departure. "But I want to tell you I appreciate your kindness, and if in the next hockey match there's need of a substitute, and you see fit to put *me* in, why, I'll work my fingers to the bone to make good, sure I will."

And Hugh believed it.

CHAPTER XV

WHERE THE SPARKS FLEW

Along about three o'clock that afternoon Hugh, feeling refreshed, made up his mind he would go for a walk. There had been no positive change in the condition of the mother of little Joey. She was coming along nicely, though, Doctor Cadmus assured Mrs. Morgan, and would very likely awaken in her proper senses on the following morning. He was successfully combating the inclination towards fever, he told the good lady, and this gave Hugh's mother considerable relief.

The boy was a fine little chap. Hugh had already come to feel a deep interest in him, and had played for an hour with Joey.

"Why not take him out with you, Hugh, if, as you say, you're going for a walk?" asked his mother.

"I'd like to," the boy said, "if you thought he could stand going such a distance as out to the Cross-roads; for I meant to drop in on Deacon Winslow. He asked me to come and see him, and perhaps stay to supper in the bargain, for he wants to have a good chat with me. And, Mother, I've been meaning to get to know that fine old man better; there's something about him that draws me. He's got such healthy ideas about everything, and is an entertaining talker when it comes to the habits of animals, and the secrets of all animated nature."

"Well, I'm sure little Joey would enjoy the walk. He seems fond of being outdoors, and has been shut up here since you brought him home. And if Deacon Winslow urges you both to take supper with him, there's no reason why you should decline. He may fetch you home in his sleigh, if the child seems tired, and sleepy."

Hugh decided he would do as his mother suggested.

"Would you like to take a nice long walk out in the country with me, Joey?" he asked the little fellow, who had been hovering near by, and listening to all that was being said.

"I like to walk," the small chap replied quickly; "but not all day, like mom and me did. Mebbe she'll be awake when we come back, Hugh?"

Each time he had been allowed in the room to see his mother was when she happened to be in a deep sleep, and her ravings had ceased; so it was natural for Joey to conclude she was only making up for lack of rest.

So, shortly afterwards, the two started forth, the little fellow with his hand in that of Hugh. He had come to feel the utmost confidence in this big boy who, in the time of their distress, had fetched himself and his poor fainting mother to the nice warm house, where they seemed to have the nicest things to eat he could ever remember of seeing.

Hugh kept an eye about him, half hoping he might run across Thad, although the other had not expected to return before dusk. No such luck befell him, and so Hugh concluded he must carry out his original scheme, and have only the child for company during his stroll.

Of course, they could not walk at a fast pace, and so it took quite a long time for them to draw near the place where the two roads crossed. Here, at a point where there was much traffic in vehicles, the smithy of the old deacon stood. Time was when he attended only to the shoeing of horses, and such other business as a blacksmith would find in his line. The coming of the auto had made him change his work to some extent; so he kept a line of rubber tires and tubes in his shop, and was capable of doing all ordinary repairing, such as might be found necessary after a minor accident to a car on the road.

It was pleasant, indeed, when the wintry air was so keen, to step up to the open doors of the shop, and see that seething fire in the forge beyond the grim anvil. Mr. Winslow stood there, with his leather apron on, and his woollen sleeves rolled up to his elbows, showing his brawny arms with their muscles of steel. He was working the bellows and singing softly to himself, after a habit he had when alone.

Apparently, he had let his helper off earlier than customary that afternoon, for the deacon was not a hard employer, and ready to grant favors when business was not rushing.

Hugh stood there and took in the striking picture, with the glowing fire in the forge, that fine, big figure of the old blacksmith standing there. The rosy light played on his strong features as he crooned his song, his thoughts possibly away back in the past, as is the habit of those who near the end of their life span.

Just then little Joey sneezed. The low song of the deacon came to an abrupt end, as he turned his head and discovered the two figures in the open doorway.

He recognized Hugh immediately, and a look of genuine pleasure flashed across his face.

"Is that you, Hugh?" he called out, stopping work with the bellows; "and have you come out to take a bite with the old lady and myself? I'm certainly glad to see you, lad. And who might this fine little chap be?"

It was only natural that a man who loved all boys, little and big, as Deacon Winslow did, should drop down on one knee and take Joey in his arms. When he looked into the little fellow's winsome face he seemed strangely moved. But then in these later days it was always so with the old man; never a child did he see but that long-hidden memories flowed again, and once more he seemed to be looking on his own boy, gone ages and ages ago.

"He and his mother are stopping at our house," said Hugh, meaning to tell how he had come to find them in their extremity, later on, when possibly the child was not present to hear what he said.

"I've just got a small amount of work to finish, and then I'm done for the week," said the brawny smith, as he arose again, winking very fast, it seemed to Hugh, for some reason or other. "Here's a bench you can both sit on, and watch the sparks fly from the anvil when I get my hammer busy. Likely the lad has never seen the same before, and it is always deeply interesting to children, I've found."

So they made themselves comfortable. Little Joey was a bit tired after his long walk, and leaned confidently up against Hugh, who had thrown an arm about him.

The smiting of the red bar with the hammer caused a shower of sparks to fly in every direction. It was fairly fascinating, and Joey stared with all his might. Even Hugh always enjoyed seeing a blacksmith at work, and hearing the sweet-toned ring of steel smiting steel.

Now and again as he worked, Deacon Winslow would ask some question. He was acquainted with the fact that the boys of Scranton High had expected to play a hockey match that morning with the Keyport team, and as no one had thus far told him how the game came out, he asked Hugh about it.

From this subject the talk drifted to others, always being of a somewhat sporadic nature, caused by the smith's starting work again, after heating his iron bar sufficiently in the fire.

"I'll have the night free, for a wonder," he told Hugh, with a sigh of pleasure. "I try as best I can to avoid working late on Saturday, because I want to be as fresh as possible Sundays, which are always full days for me. So when Nick wanted to come out Saturdays, I induced him to change it to an earlier night instead. By the way, how is the lad coming, on these days with his new resolutions?"

Accordingly, Hugh started in to tell him how Nick was doing finely, and even repeated a part of the little talk he and the other had had that morning, while on the way to town from the park.

Mr. Winslow listened intently, as he worked the bellows.

"I'm very much interested in the outcome of your experiment, Hugh," he said. "It was a clever idea on your part; and now that Nick has made a start I do believe he'll see it through. I always thought he had it in him to work out his own salvation, if ever he got a fair chance. That opportunity has now dawned, and he's on the right road, Hugh; he's on the

right road."

"I agree with you there, sir," said the boy. "The very stubborn spirit that used to get him into so much trouble is now going to be his redemption, since he's got it harnessed up to the right sort of vehicle. The more they try to shove Nick off the track the harder he'll be apt to stick."

"It was the luckiest thing that ever happened for him," continued the deacon, "when you hatched up that wonderful plan on the spur of the moment, and tried it out on him. But for that, Hugh, he'd now be locked up with his former mates, and headed for the Reform School at full speed. As it is, he is free to walk the streets, and already beginning to win the confidence of many good people in the town."

Ten minutes afterwards and the brawny smith threw his hammer aside, and commenced to undo the thongs that fastened his leathern apron about his loins.

"I've finished my stint, lad," he said; "and now we can go into the house, where you'll meet my better-half. I've told her so much about you, she is eager to make your acquaintance. As for this fine, manly little chap here, who seems to spring straight into my heart the more I look at him, as if he belonged there, she'll be half-tickled to death at the chance to cuddle him in her motherly arms. Alas! lad, it's been many a long, weary year since she had the privilege of loving a child of her own. Sometimes when I see her sitting there, so quiet like, and looking into the wonderfully brilliant sunset skies, I seem to know what she is thinking about, and I feel for her. It's harder on a mother, than anyone else, to lose her child as we did our poor, reckless boy."

Hugh felt a queer sensation in the region of his heart when he heard the big man speak so mournfully. He realized then as never before how the heart of a parent can never fully recover from a cruel shock, such as the loss of one who as a little child had come, it was hoped, as a ray of sunlight in the lives of those who loved him.

The home of the smith adjoined his shop. There was, in fact, a door that connected them, and through this Deacon Winslow now led his thrice welcome guests. Presently they found themselves in what seemed to be a cozy little sitting-room, where a wood-fire blazed cheerily on the hearth.

Seated in one of those invalid wheel-chairs, which can be so easily manipulated by the occupant, after becoming expert at the job, was a most benign-looking and motherly old lady, with snow-white hair, and a face that was one of the sweetest and most patient Hugh had ever gazed upon.

He knew instantly that he was going to like Mrs. Winslow just as much as he did her big husband. All the good things he had heard about her benevolence must then be true, he concluded, as he looked on her smiling face.

"Mother, here's my friend, Hugh Morgan, come out to take supper with us, as I told you he'd half-promised to do," said the deacon, in his breezy fashion. "And see, he has fetched a little chap along with him who'll warm your heart as nothing else could do. This is Joey Walters, who, with his mother, is stopping at the Morgan home. Hugh didn't say whether they were any relatives of his or not; but this is a mighty winsome morsel, Mother, for you to hug."

He thereupon lifted the child up in his strong hands and placed him in the lap of the old lady. Hugh noticed that she started, and stared hard at the chubby face of little Joey, just as the deacon had done; and then she turned her wondering eyes toward her husband. There was a look akin to awe in their depths, something that told how the sight of the child took her instantly back years and years to those never-to-be-forgotten days when just such a lovely little cherub had come to bless their home.

Then the old lady gave a long sigh.

"Oh, Joel!" she said, in a trembling voice, "how the sight of him startled me. I can shut my eyes, and think time has taken me back to our first year of wedded life. Yes, I am overjoyed at making the acquaintance of such a robust little fellow. And, Hugh, forgive me for not speaking to you before. I have heard much about you, and am pleased to know you. But, above all things, let me thank you for bringing this child out here to open the hearts of two lonely old people who live only in the past as their sun goes down toward the darkness of the night."

"I'll run along now, and take my regular bath after my work," said Deacon Winslow, trying to speak cheerily, though Hugh knew very well he had been more or less affected by what his wife had just said.

Left alone with the old lady, while the servant bustled in and out, laying the cloth, and setting the table, Hugh commenced an interesting conversation. She asked him a multitude of questions covering all sorts of subjects, even to that of athletic sports.

"You see, the Deacon is fond of boys to an extent that it has become his one hobby," she explained, in order to let Hugh know why she felt an interest in such matters. "He spends all his spare time doing things to make growing lads happier, and more contented in their homes. People will never know one-tenth of what he's done to save boys who were going the pace. His latest protege in that line you happen to know, a hulking fellow named Nick Lang, who, I understand, has been the terror of Scranton for years. I've met him, and must say I have my doubts whether he can ever be tamed, and molded into a respectable member of society; but Joel seems to believe no boy is so bad but what he has a soft streak in him *somewhere*, if only you can find it."

"Well, since he hasn't told you about the inspiration that came to me," Hugh felt constrained to say, though averse to speaking of his own successes, "I want to say that right now Nick Lang is on the road to making good."

"Please tell me all about it then, Hugh?" she urged him.

Accordingly, Hugh started to relate the story from the very beginning; and he had a deeply interested auditor; for Mrs. Winslow sat there in her wheel-chair, with little Joey cuddled in her arms, and one of his soft, chubby hands patting her face.

CHAPTER XVI

AT THE DEACON'S FIRESIDE

"Hugh, I do believe you will succeed in your undertaking, and that Nick Lang is already firmly planted on the right path!" exclaimed the old lady, with considerable warmth, when the story had been brought up to date, bringing in an account of Hugh's most recent talk with the former terror of the town.

"It looks encouraging, anyhow," he merely replied; though, of course; he felt a flush of boyish pride at the warm look she gave him when saying what she did.

"My husband has worked with many an erring lad," she continued reminiscently; "sometimes with fair success, but only too often without, apparently, winning him away from his bad companions. But your idea was most unique. To think it all came of your reading Hugo's masterpiece, and taking it to heart. But here comes Joel; and we can soon be seated at the supper table."

The more Hugh saw of this remarkably genial old couple the closer did he seem to be drawn to Deacon Winslow and his crippled wife. Indeed, Hugh soon came to the conclusion that they were the warmest-hearted pair he had ever known in all his life.

Mrs. Winslow was wheeled cheerily to her appointed place at the table by her husband, who waited on her just as assiduously as though they were lately married; instead of having "trudged along life's highway in double harness," as the deacon, humorously put it, for a matter of sixty years or so.

Of course, as Deacon Winslow was a deeply religious man, Hugh expected he would ask a blessing before partaking of the bountiful spread that was placed on the table; nor was he disappointed. The deacon's deep-toned voice was wonderfully musical, and to Hugh it sounded almost as though he were singing whenever he spoke. He never grew tired of hearing the old blacksmith talk; though they would not allow him to be a mere visitor, but, by asking many questions, kept Hugh in the conversation.

The little fellow had been placed in a high chair. It looked of very ancient vintage, Hugh thought, when first sighting it. Seeing the look on his face the good lady of the house said in a voice that she tried to keep from vibrating:

"It was our Joel's chair; somehow we have managed to keep it intact through all the years. There was a time when I dreamed of some day seeing this boy seated at my table in his father's high chair. But your small friend, Hugh, fills a long vacant spot. I could almost fancy he belonged there, he seems so like-----"

Deacon Winslow must have seen that his wife was getting on forbidden ground, for just at that moment he broke in with a question that demanded an answer from Hugh; and so the subject was dropped. But Hugh understood, and he felt his boyish heart throb with genuine sympathy for this splendid couple, who had yearned to have a house full of children, but somehow found their dearest wish set aside by a mysterious decree of Providence.

They had a merry time at the table. Little Joey was as bright as Hugh had ever known him to be, and fairly captivated the aged pair with his prattle. The old lady in particular hung upon his every word, as though in an ecstasy of delight. She anticipated his childish wants, and, really, little Joey could never have sat down to such a bountiful feast as on that memorable occasion.

Then the meal being ended they repaired again to the cheery fire. The deacon put on fresh wood, and the crackle of the blaze was very delightful on that cold night. Hugh had already spoken of the long walk ahead of him, and how, perhaps, he had better postpone his visit for another occasion, so as to get the child back home before it grew too late.

"Don't think of it, son," said Deacon Winslow instantly, and in a tone that would not be denied. "When the time comes I'll hitch my horse to the big sleigh; we'll wrap the child up as snug as a bug in a rug; and be over to your house in a jiffy. What if he does get a bit drowsy; let him take a nap. I'm sure he'll be safe in the loving arms of grandma."

At his mention of that last word the old lady hugged the child, and bent her wrinkled kindly face close to his cheeks; but Hugh believed it was to hide the rush of sacred emotions that swept over her.

Then they talked.

By degrees Hugh got his host started on the subject that was nearest his heart, and which had to do with the wonderful habits of all the small, wild animals of which the deacon had made a life-long study.

"It's a wonderfully fascinating subject, Hugh," the old blacksmith philanthropist went on to say, as he started in. "I took it up just as a fancy, but as the years went by it became a habit that grew on me more and more. Yes, I have had an amazing lot of pleasure out of my observations. As the good wife here will tell you, I've spent hours on hours at night, hidden in the woods, with a light fixed on some nest of a muskrat or gopher or fox, just to learn what the cunning little varmint did betimes; when of rights I should have been in my bed getting rested for another hard day's labor at my forge."

"His holidays have always been taken up in the same way," interrupted Mrs. Winslow, smiling lovingly at her husband, whose heart she evidently could read as though it were a printed book. "At first I begrudged him the time, but later on I knew it was taking his thoughts away from subjects that we were trying to keep out of our minds, and I never tried to hold him back."

"It was my study of the habits of these small animals and birds that gave me what little faculty I may possess for prophesying the weather ahead," continued the old man. "They seldom, if ever, go wrong. If I've hit it wrong now and then, the fault was mine, not theirs. I had failed to properly interpret their actions, that was all."

So he went on to tell Hugh many deeply interesting experiments he had undertaken along those lines. He also had a fund of wonderful anecdotes, many of them quite humorous, connected with his little friends of fur and feather.

The more Hugh heard him tell the greater grew his interest. He resolved that at some time in the not distant future, when an opportunity came along, he, too, would begin to pay more attention to the multitude of interesting things that could be discovered in almost any woods, if only the observer kept his eyes about him, and did nothing to alarm the timid inmates of various burrows and hollow trees.

So an hour passed, all too quickly.

Once Hugh took out his little nickel watch, as if under the impression that it must be getting near time for him to think of saying good-night; though he hated to leave such a jolly fireside, and the fine couple.

"Please don't think of going home yet, Hugh," said the old man, looking distressed at once. "The night is young, and I don't know when I've enjoyed anyone's company as I have yours. My dreams in the long ago were for just such a son as you. I envy your parents, my lad. Providence, however, saw fit to turn my activities in another direction; and I have done the best I could to be of some little help to other people's sons. I only bitterly regret that I am able to do so little."

"But I'm afraid the child may become too much bother for your good wife, sir," Hugh was saying, although already deciding he would remain longer.

The deacon laughed softly. He put out his big hand, and gently touched Hugh on the sleeve.

"Look yonder, lad!" he went on to say; "does that strike you as if a heavenly little sunbeam like the boy could ever be too much trouble for her? See how her dear face is lighted up as she bends over him. He's gone fast asleep in her arms, as contented as though with his own mother. Ah! lad, it was a kindly act, your fetching that tiny bit of humanity out to visit us. You have made her almost happy again for once."

Hugh, looking, saw that the old lady was paying no further attention to them, or listening to what they were saying. She touched the sweet face of the child, and pressed her withered lips against his soft skin. If a tear fell on the little fellow's head, was it to be wondered at? He saw her open his clothes at the neck, as though the heat of that blazing fire might be a little too much, in her matronly estimation.

The deacon, too, was looking as though his heart might be in his eyes. Such a spectacle as that must have been of rare occurrence at his fireside, deeply as he regretted it.

Then he started talking again, for he had been in the midst of an unusually interesting description at the time he drew the boy's attention to the beautiful picture at the opposite side of the fireplace. And Hugh, becoming wrapped up in the amusing episode for the moment forgot all about little Joey and the loving soul who had him held in her arms.

What the blacksmith was telling related to a thrilling happening he had experienced on one occasion, when lying out in the woods watching for a certain timid little rodent to commence moving around. At the time the deacon had one of those new-fangled hand electric torches with him, which he meant to use when the proper moment arrived.

Hearing voices drawing near he thought it best to warn the darkies who were advancing in time, for, otherwise, they threatened to walk directly over him in the pitch darkness. When, however, he flashed his light suddenly toward them, he must have given them the fright of their lives, for they uttered howls, and fled precipitately, despite his reassuring calls.

"I afterwards learned," said the deacon, smiling broadly at the amusing recollection, "that the three men were those colored players who constitute the band you young people always have at your barn dances, Daddy Whitehead, the leader, and his able assistants, Mose Coffin and Abe Skinner. They really believed they had met something supernatural in the woods, when taking a shortcut home, after attending a dance somewhere out in the country. And, really, I never had the heart to undeceive the poor ignorant chaps. But I warrant you they kept to the highway after that terrible experience with ghosts."

Hugh laughed at the mental picture of those three aged musicians, one with his fiddle, another carrying a 'cello, and the third an oboe, "streaking" it through the dark woods madly, possessed of a deadly fear lest their time had come, and that they were pursued by something from the spirit world.

He was just about to make some remark when the words froze on his lips. Mrs. Winslow had given vent to a cry. It thrilled Hugh strangely, as though he feared some agonizing pain had suddenly gripped the old lady.

Both he and the deacon were instantly on their feet. As they glued their eyes on the figure across on the other side of the broad hearth they saw that she was sitting there with a marvelous look on her wrinkled face---a look that seemed to tell of sheer amazement, exceeding great joy, incredulity, and many other like emotions that Hugh could not stop to analyze.

CHAPTER XVII

A WONDERFUL DISCOVERY

"Joel, come to me quickly!" they heard her gasp, as though she were almost suffocating; and both of them hastened to her side.

"What has happened, wife?" cried the alarmed deacon.

"Oh! tell me, am I awake, or dreaming, husband?" she went on to say thickly. "See what the child is wearing about his dear chubby neck! Surely we ought to know that tiny gold locket. It carries me far back through the long, weary, waiting years to the day I clasped it about his neck---my baby Joel!"

The deacon snatched the object from her quivering hand. He stared hard at it, as though he, too, might suspect he were asleep, and that it was all but a vision of a disordered mind.

Hugh was trembling, he hardly knew why. Something seemed to rush over him, something that thrilled him to the core. He had felt a touch of the same sensation when the good old lady let him look at the pictures in her family album, and pointed to one of her baby boy; although at the time he could not fully grasp the idea that appealed so dimly to his investigating mind.

Then Deacon Winslow found his voice, though it was thick and husky when he went on to say hastily:

"Yes, it does look mighty like the one you had for the boy; and we never found it again, you remember, after he---left home; so we thought he had taken it along with everything else he owned. But wait, wife, don't jump at conclusions. It is next to impossible that this should be the tiny chain with the plain gold pendant that you bought for our little Joel. Surely there must have been many others like it made."

Apparently, he was sorely afraid lest the bitter disappointment would follow. The blasting of those new, wild hopes of hers might have a bad effect on the old lady. That was why the deacon tried to keep her from being too sanguine, even though he himself was possibly hugging suddenly awakened rapturous dreams to his heart.

"There may have been others, Joel!" she cried exultantly; "but look on the back of the medallion. I feared it might be lost some day, Joel, so I scratched his initials there. My glasses are too moist for me to see well; look and tell me if you can make out anything, husband!"

Even Hugh held his breath while the deacon turned the tiny medallion over in his hands. Then he snatched up a reading glass of considerable power from the table, and held it close to the object in his quivering clutch.

They heard him give a cry, and it did not hint at disappointment.

"Oh! Joel, are the three letters there?" she begged piteously, as she hugged the still calmly sleeping child closer and closer to her heart.

"Something I can see, wife, although it is very faint," he told her. "But then think of the many years that have elapsed. The scratches must have been very lightly done at best. Hugh, your eyes are younger than mine; and, besides, I'm afraid there are tears dimming my sight. Look, and tell us what you see!"

It was a picture, with those two old people so eagerly hanging on the decision of the clear-eyed youth. Hugh used the glass, for he wanted to make certain. It would be doubly cruel if by any mistake on his part those anxious hearts were deceived.

"I can plainly make out the first initial, which is J beyond question," he almost immediately said.

At hearing that the deacon cast a swift look toward his wife, which she returned in kind. Neither of them could find utterance for a single word, however, such was the mental strain under which they labored.

"The last letter looks like a W," continued Hugh. "Yes, now that I've rubbed it with my finger I am positive of that. As for the middle one, I think it must be either an O or a C, though it's rather hard to say."

Deacon Winslow gave a deep sigh.

"And our boy's middle name was Carstairs, named after his mother's family!" he hastened to say.

Then they exchanged more wondering looks. It was very like a miracle, the bringing of the little child into the home of that couple whose fireside had so long awaited the coming of such a sunbeam.

Deacon Winslow turned almost fiercely on Hugh, and gripped his sleeve.

"You must tell us more about the boy," he said. "Who is he, and where did he come from? Those are vital things for us to learn. We could never know peace again if this mystery were not made clear. So tell us, Hugh, tell us as quickly as you can, so that we may learn the best, or the worst."

He saw that they were strangely shaken, and Hugh wisely believed it best to reassure them in the very beginning.

"First of all, sir," he started to say, "I begin to believe it may be what you would wish most of all. This boy who so much resembles your own child of the past is likely to turn out his son or perhaps grandson, for his mother's name is Walters, we've learned. You ask me where I found him, and I meant to tell you later on, never dreaming that it would interest you more than casually. I picked him and his mother up Thursday evening just at dusk, when I was coming home from a farm in a sleigh, where I had been to get a sack of potatoes. The young woman was trying to ask me something when she swooned away."

"Go on, lad, go on!" pleaded the deacon hoarsely, as Hugh paused for breath.

"Of course, the only thing I could do was to get them into the sleigh and whip up the horse," Hugh continued. "Once I reached home my mother would not hear of the poor thing being taken to the hospital. She had her put to bed and the doctor called in. Since that time she has been threatened with fever; in fact, is partly out of her head, though Doctor Cadmus says he believes she will be sensible by to-morrow morning. She was simply half-starved, and dreadfully worried about something."

"But could you not hear a few random words she uttered that would give you some idea as to her identity, and where she came from?" asked the deacon.

"Besides her name, which seemed to be Walters, she has said nothing that gives us a clue, save that we imagine they must have lived somewhere in the West."

"In the West---and our Joel started for that section of the country!" gasped the old lady, still patting the curly head on her lap lovingly.

"And then the lad's name is very similar," broke in the deacon. "Are you sure, Hugh, if isn't Joel? Might not the child have simply given the baby pronunciation of Joey?"

"I think that would be very likely, sir," admitted the boy readily.

Again the agitated couple exchanged looks. Hugh would certainly never forget the joyous expression that sat upon both faces. It was as though Heaven had opened to them, and given them back the child of their younger years.

The deacon dropped down on his knees. One arm went around his aged wife and the little fellow she cuddled in her lap. In sonorous tones he lifted up his voice and gave thanks from the depths of his heart for the great mercy shown to them that night.

Hugh was deeply affected. He believed some invisible hand must have guided him when he took that sudden notion to have the child go walking with him, his mother having suggested that it might do the little chap good to get an airing after being shut up in the house all day long.

His mind raced back, and once more he marshalled all the facts, as far as he knew them, before him. Yes, there did not seem to be any reason to believe such a thing as a sad mistake could be made. That boy certainly had the Winslow blood in him; why, he greatly resembled the Joel of more than fifty years back, as shown in that old-time daguerreotype.

Then Deacon Winslow once more rose to his feet. His face was fairly radiant, as was that of his wife.

"I believe I can understand how this comes about," he was saying, just as if he might have had a revelation as he prayed there. "It is no accident, but the hand of a special Providence. Our petitions have been heard, and this is the answer; so the last few years of our lives may be made happy by the sight of our own flesh and blood. My poor service has come up as a memorial before Heaven. And let us hope that tomorrow, when that poor girl comes into her senses again, she will be able to tell us all of the wonderful story."

"There is one thing I should have mentioned, sir, which slipped my mind," Hugh went on to say just then. "Always in her delirium she seems to be pleading with someone not to deny her a place under his family roof with her little Joey. And it is to an imaginary *grandfather* she is appealing, so pathetically that I have seen my mother crying time and again, for very sympathy."

"A grandfather, and cruel at that!" said the old man, shaking his head, while the tears rolled unheeded down his furrowed cheeks. "At least, that does not apply to me. She will learn presently that we stand ready to take her into our hearts and home as our own. Oh! it seems too good to be true, this blessing that has come to us to-night. And, Hugh Morgan, you must always be associated in our minds with this realization of our utmost hopes, which of late years we have not even dared whisper to each other."

He wrung the boy's hand until Hugh almost writhed under the pressure; while the happy "grandma" continued to devour the plump, rosy-cheeked face of her charge with her eyes, as though she could not tear her gaze away.

Long they continued to sit there and talk, always upon that one subject, because everything else must be subordinated to the wonderful revelation that had come to them, to prove that truth is often stranger than fiction.

Three times did Hugh suggest that he had better be heading towards home: but they pleaded with him to stay "just a little longer"; for their starved hearts found it hard to let the newly found treasure out of sight, even for a short time.

"But I must really be going," Hugh finally told them. "It is now after ten, and mother will be worrying about the child, not knowing, of course, that he has found a new protector, two of them, in fact. You can both come over after breakfast in the morning, and visit the boy. If his mother has regained her senses, and the doctor permits it, you will be able to settle the matter once and for all by seeing her."

So with that they had to rest content. The child was bundled up warmly, and tenderly placed in the sleigh by his huge grandfather, after the old lady had kissed his forehead and cheeks a dozen times.

Then they were off, and shortly afterwards arrived at the Morgan home. Deacon Winslow insisted on carrying the tiny chap indoors; after which he hastened back, to sit up most of the night with his wife, talking of the wonderful thing that had come to bless them in their old age.

And Hugh, on his part, had a deeply interested auditor in his mother, as he spun the yarn that equaled anything he had ever read in the Arabian Nights.

CHAPTER XVIII

IN A SAFE HARBOR AT LAST

Hugh had finished breakfast on Sunday morning, and was out looking after a few pets he had in the way of Belgian hares and homing pigeons, when he heard his mother calling him.

"Coming, Mother!" he answered back, thinking on the spur of the moment he was needed to look after the furnace or steam boiler, from which the hired girl did not always succeed in getting the best results on particularly frosty mornings.

She waited for him just inside the door. Hugh saw immediately that his first surmise was wrong, for there was a look on her face to tell him it was no trivial matter she had to communicate.

"What is it, Mother?" he asked quickly.

"She is asking for you, Hugh," he was told.

Then he suddenly remembered about the young mother who had lain there since Thursday evening, and out of her mind with fever.

"Oh! then the good old Doc was right!" Hugh exclaimed; "he said, you know, that he felt sure she'd be in her right senses by Sunday morning. You've been talking with her, have you, Mother?"

"Yes, and relieving her immediate curiosity and alarm," he was told. "Naturally, she was full of wonder when she awoke to find herself in a strange room, with no little Joey near by. She thought it was the hospital, and that the cold had claimed him for a victim. But I soon calmed her fears, and she knows now all about how she came here; and also that her boy is still sleeping happily close by; for he is taking a long nap this morning, after his dissipation of last night."

"But, you didn't say anything about the deacon and his dear old wife, did you?" continued Hugh.

"Not a word, my son. I wished you to be the one to convey the glad news to that poor young mother. She wanted to ask me further questions, but I avoided committing myself. She did come from the Far West, it appears. Her money ran out just too soon and they had to leave the train at a station this side of Waldron Falls. She was so determined to reach Scranton before night that she actually started out afoot, it seems, despite the cold and the snow-covered roads. Several kind-hearted men gave them lifts on the way; but it was a long journey, and she became exhausted before reaching her destination. But come with me, Hugh; she wishes to thank you face to face."

Hugh did not like that part of it. As a rule, he ran away from such scenes; but in this case he knew that would never do, since he wished to learn further concerning Joey and his mother; and, besides, had some pleasant information to tell her that must cheer her heart amazingly, and also hasten her recovery.

So he followed his mother into the spare room where the young woman lay. She had been propped up with extra pillows by Mrs. Morgan while they talked, though kept well covered up. Indeed, the loving hands of the older lady had succeeded in placing a warm, knitted sack upon her arms and shoulders, Hugh saw.

She looked eagerly at the boy. Her face was not so feverish as before; indeed, he could see without being a physician that the patient was much better.

"And this is Hugh?" she said, in a voice that trembled. "Yes, I seem to remember your face, and how you listened to me trying to tell you how much I wanted to get to Scranton before I fell sick, for I could feel it coming on. And your mother tells me you carried us both home in your sleigh. It was a generous heart that could take an utter stranger in, as you have done, and care for her as if she were your own flesh and blood. Please let me thank you, Hugh, from the bottom of my heart."

Hugh took the hand she extended; but he was careful not to give it one of his customary vigorous squeezes; she looked so wan and frail that he knew he must hold himself in check.

"Oh! it was a mighty little thing for anyone to do, Mrs. Walters," he said, in some confusion, but speaking the name with a purpose in view.

"How did you know that was my name, Hugh?" she asked immediately.

"You mentioned it, my dear, in your delirium," explained Mrs. Morgan; "and then, besides, Joey told us that much."

"And did I tell you anything more in my ravings?" she asked, looking worried.

"Only something about a certain grandfather whom you seemed to think might not receive you as you ardently hoped when you started forth on this long journey," the older lady told her. "But then you did not know what was in store for you. Sometimes great blessings, as well as dire calamities, spring upon us without the least warning. Hugh, I shall leave the telling to you from this point on."

The young mother looked from one face to the other.

"Oh! what is it?" she almost gasped. "You are keeping something from me I ought to know. Please tell me, Hugh, I beg of you. If it is good news I shall be so very grateful, for little Joey's sake mostly. Everything I do, everything I think of, is in connection with my darling child."

"Then I hope you will forgive me if I'm rushing things too fast!" exclaimed the eager boy, unable to restrain his news longer; "but little Joey spent two hours last evening asleep in the loving arms of his great grandmother; while Deacon Winslow again and again embraced both, and gave thanks for the great blessing that had come to his fireside!"

How her eyes sparkled when she heard what he said. If Doctor Cadmus had been in the room just then he might have cautioned them against too much excitement, lest the fever return; but surely such glorious news could not do harm, with her heart singing songs of thanksgiving.

"Oh! tell me all about this wonderful thing!" she cried; "how could you guess my secret, if I did not betray it in my delirium? Now that you have said this much I must know all about it. Please go on, Hugh!"

He needed no such urging when the words were ready to fall in a stream from his lips. So Hugh commenced, and rapidly sketched the strange happenings of the preceding evening--how he had taken the little fellow with him for a walk, and stopped at the smithy to see the sparks flying upwards in showers; of the invitation to take supper, and spend an hour in chatting with the deacon and his good wife. Then, quick on the heels of this he told how Mrs. Winslow, while holding Joey in her arms so lovingly as he slept in his innocence, had suddenly made that amazing discovery in connection with

the baby chain, and smooth medallion, shaped like a locket.

She lay there with her eyes closed, eagerly drinking in every word the boy uttered. The unrestrained tears crept unheeded down her cheeks; but Mrs. Morgan did not worry, because only too well did she know these were tears of overpowering joy; and not of grief.

Finally the story was all told, and she opened her eyes, swimming as they were, to look fondly at each of them in turn.

"What happiness has come into my life!" she said, with a great sigh; and, evidently, the load of years had rolled from her heart. "And how grateful I must always be to the kind friends who have brought it to me and mine. I can never do enough to show you how I appreciate it all."

Then Hugh thought himself privileged to ask a few questions in turn, wishing to thoroughly satisfy himself with regard to several points that were as yet unexplained.

She told them how her husband had lost his life; and that, when she and the boy faced poverty, the resolution had come to her to go East and try to find the relatives whom she had only lately learned were located somewhere near Scranton. She had come across an old and time-stained diary kept by her mother's father, who, of course, was the runaway son of Deacon Winslow; and thus she learned how he had left his home in the heat of anger, and never once communicated with his parents up to the time of his death, which occurred a short three years after his marriage.

It was all very simple, and supplied the missing links in the chain.

After she had told them these things once more she asked Hugh about the aged couple. That was a subject the boy could talk about most enthusiastically for a whole hour, he was that full of it. And the happy look on her face told how like balm to her heart his words came.

"And they are coming to see you early this morning," he finally assured her. "I wouldn't be surprised if either of them has had a single wink of sleep last night for counting the minutes creep by, they are that anxious to claim you and Joey."

Just then the doorbell rang. Hugh laughed, as though he had been expecting such a happening; in fact, he had heard the sound of sleigh runners without creaking on the hard-frozen snow, and suspected what it signified.

"There they are this minute!" he exclaimed; "shall I run down and let them in, Mother? And ought they come right upstairs?"

"Have them take off their wraps first, and warm their hands at the radiator," she wisely told him, thinking of the invalid who would soon be in their embrace.

It was a very brief time before he ushered them into the room. First the old lady was assisted across the floor, for she could hardly walk, even when so determined to come over, and greet her granddaughter. And when her arms were twined around the weak little figure on the bed, and she pressed her to her matronly bosom, Joey's mother broke down in hysterical sobs, and, in turn, twined her arms about the neck of her newly found relative.

The old deacon looked radiant. He kissed her on the forehead, and tried to say something appropriate, but was compelled to turn his head aside and blow his nose vigorously, for his emotions overpowered him.

Presently, however, they were able to talk rationally, and then it was all settled how Joey and his mother were to live with the old couple, and be their very own always. Everything was explained, and Hugh finally found himself able to "break away," being consumed by a desire to run across lots to Thad's house, and tell him the wonderful story.

There is no need of accompanying Hugh on his errand, and seeing how Thad took the amazing news. Of course, he was simply thunder-struck, and delighted also beyond measure. He must have made Hugh tell the full particulars as many as several times, for they were all of an hour together. But then, Thad's folks had been called in, and told how after all these years a descendant of Deacon Winslow had come back to the old roof-tree, to make the happiness of the aged couple complete.

Of course, the story was soon known all over Scranton, and everybody rejoiced with the beloved old blacksmith who had so long been the best friend of the boys of the neighborhood. But Hugh, who was really the hero of the occasion, was congratulated by everybody for being the means of re-uniting these lonely souls, and incidentally providing Little Joey with a good home.

CHAPTER XIX

MEETING BELLEVILLE'S STRONG TEAM

Another week rolled around, and once again school had closed for the Saturday and Sunday period of rest from studies.

It seemed as though luck favored the young people of Scranton this season, so far as fair weather went. There had been no snowfall of consequence during the entire week; and now Saturday opened with fair skies, as if inviting them to go forth and enjoy themselves to their full bent.

The great hockey game with Belleville High was to take place in the neighboring town, as Captain Kramer (known far and wide simply as "O. K.," because those were his initials) had drawn the long straw in settling this matter with Hugh, and was, therefore, given the choice of territory, according to custom.

Really no one in Scranton was sorry. They had held the last match there on the new rink, and could not expect to have a monopoly of these happenings all through the season. Besides, they had a splendid lake over at Belleville, which would be considerable of an attraction to the young people of Scranton, whom fortune had not treated so kindly, since they had formerly been compelled to trudge several miles to Hobson's mill-pond when they wished to skate, swim, or fish; though now, of course, they had the newly flooded area in the baseball park for diversion.

A great many went over to Belleville in every manner of vehicle. Sleighs were in great demand, but, besides these, cars could be seen by dozens on the highroad leading to the rival town, situated some ten miles away.

It must needs be something over which they had no control that could keep any Scranton High boy or girl away from Belleville that Saturday morning. The very atmosphere seemed to be charged with electricity, and was calling them to hasten away, to join the throngs already pouring forth, bent on giving encouragement to those gallant young athletes representing their school, who had as yet not tasted of defeat on the ice that season.

The lake just outside of Belleville was quite extensive, and could not be insulted with the name of "pond," for it ran at least a mile in length, and half that in width.

While the ice was no longer as smooth as had earlier been, the case, still it seemed in fair condition. Besides, the Belleville boys had managed to flood that section to be given over as a rink; and ordinary skaters were warned to keep

off, so that it might not be all "cut up" with sharp runners before the match was started.

The Belleville team looked dangerous. They were, of course, pretty much the same fellows whom Scranton High had met the preceding summer on the baseball diamond; some of them had also taken part in the athletic tournament late in the Fall, accounts of which events will be found duly chronicled in earlier volumes of this series.

When all the preliminaries had been settled good-naturedly, the rival teams lined up to hear the last instructions of the referee. This party was the same gentleman who had officiated with such satisfaction in the game with Keyport on the preceding Saturday.

Here is the list of players, and the positions they occupied, Scranton having kept the identical Seven with which the last game had been so cleverly won, though many people were of the opinion they had a much more difficult proposition before them in the Belleville boys:

<i>Scranton High</i>	<i>Position</i>	<i>Belleville</i>	
Stevens	Goal	Leonard	
Hobson	Point	Wright	
Danvers	Cover Point	"O. K."	Kramer
Smith	Right End	Gould	
Dugdale	Center	Waterman	
Morgan	Rover	Conway	
Juggins	Left End	Haggerty	

The game had hardly begun before Hugh realized that those Belleville fellows had determined to down the visitors, if it took every ounce of strenuous ability they possessed. Previous defeats at the hands of Scranton High rankled in their hearts, and they were grimly resolved, "to do or die," as one of them told Thad Stevens while chatting before the game was called.

They made a whirlwind beginning, and had scored two goals before the visitors began to "find" themselves. This would never do, Hugh determined. He gave his players a signal that called for a spurt, and himself led the way by capturing the puck, and shooting it into the cage of their opponents amidst loud footings of great joy from the loyal and now anxious Scranton rooters.

Juggins distinguished himself also immediately afterwards by a lightning play that amazed the Belleville spectators. He dodged all interference and when finally too hard pressed, managed to send the rubber disc across to Dugdale, who continued the good work by shooting it into the charge of Hobson; and, almost before Leonard could try to stop its flight, it had gone with a crash into the cage for the second goal on Scranton's side.

Things began to look brighter. If Belleville could play brilliant hockey through the coaching of an efficient instructor, the visiting team knew a few things also, which were calculated to surprise their rivals.

Of course, most, if not all of the Belleville Seven had attended the game on the preceding Saturday, their own match for that day, which they had easily won, coming off in the afternoon. Consequently, they had studied the methods of the Scranton boys, and believed they would be able to profit by their knowledge later on.

But Hugh had been wise to this fact, and posted Mr. Leonard, the coach; who, meanwhile, taught them a few new little wrinkles that were calculated to disturb the calculations of Belleville when the time came for the meeting. As in football, ice hockey presents a fruitful field for diplomacy and clever tactics; and the wisest general usually manages to carry his

team to victory over those who may be much more nimble skaters and even smarter with their sticks, but not so able in the line of strategy.

Belleville also took a "hunch," as some of the boys called it, and again forged to the front. Indeed, they scored three times against one more goal for the visitors; and when the first half of the match had been finished the game stood at five to three against Scranton.

Hugh was in a dilemma. He knew that to win out he must have an infusion of new blood, for those husky players of the local school were too rapid for the Scranton boys. But, according to the rules of the game, substitutes can only be allowed in case of serious injury. So, unless one of his player chanced to be hurt in such a way as to necessitate his withdrawal from the game there could be no changes made in the line-up.

This is so hedged about with safeguards against fraud that even if a player is hurt he must be examined by someone competent to say whether he may be able to commence work again inside of seven minutes; and if so, the game must proceed. Should he be excused from further participation in the contest his captain may have the privilege of putting in another man; or, if he chooses to play with only six on the ice, the other side must also eliminate a player, so as to make the line-up equal.

Perhaps some of Hugh's comrades must have guessed what was gripping their leader around that time. Nothing else could have induced Smith, for instance, to say, as he did to Hugh, while they were resting in preparation for the last half of the game to start in:

"I'm awfully ashamed of that rotten run I made, Hugh, when you handed me the rubber so handsomely. If I'd known my business as I should I'd have landed it in the wire cage as snug as anything. But I fumbled, and that Conway got it away from me, the robber. I'm no good, Hugh; and I'd give a heap if only you could kick me out of the game, and get a better substitute."

"It can't be done, Just," Hugh told him; "a player has to be pretty badly hurt to be dropped, you know, and a substitute taken on. Cheer up, and get a fresh start. Two goals shouldn't be a hard job for us to tackle, once we get going at our old pace. There are a few tricks left in the bag still, before we reach the bottom."

"But, see here, I'm pretty lame at that, after the stumble and fall I had, Hugh," said "Just" Smith eagerly; "perhaps the referee would let me throw up my job if he saw how badly my shin has been scraped."

"Oh! you're in pretty good shape still, 'Just,' and you know it," remarked Hugh, smiling at the evident determination of his friend to sacrifice himself for the general good. "When we start play again we'll try the last dodge Mr. Leonard taught us, and see if it'll work for a goal. It's clean sport, and nothing tricky, you know."

So "Just" Smith shrugged his shoulders, and did not seem at all happy, though he let the matter drop. Hugh wondered, though, what that grim look on his face meant, and, later on, had a hazy idea that he had found out.

The game started again. Encouraged by their success, Belleville again took matters in their own hands and forced the fighting. There were several weak places in the Scranton High line-up. Many who diagnosed the play were of the opinion that the game was already as good as lost.

Then came a most violent scrimmage, into which "Just" Smith plunged with the utmost recklessness, as though determined to wipe out all his former mistakes in some brilliant playing. Suddenly the referee's whistle called the game. Something had happened to bring about a stoppage of play. A fellow was down on the ice, with half a dozen others

bending over him.

It was "Just" Smith, and he was apparently badly injured in the bargain. A doctor was speedily called, who pronounced it a fracture of the leg, and decided that the player would have to be taken home immediately for a physician's attention.

As "Just" Smith passed his captain, being carried by two husky players to a waiting car that would convey him home, he actually had the nerve to grin in Hugh's face. A suspicion came into the latter's mind to the effect that the player had purposely taken terrible risks in the hope that he might be disabled, so that a substitute could be put in his place; though, of course, Hugh tried to banish this thought as soon as it gripped him.

"Get your substitute, Hugh, or else we'll have to drop a man!" called the Belleville captain; and Hugh glanced apprehensively around; then broke through the dense crowd, and seized upon a skater who had been hovering near.

It was Nick Lang!

"We need another player, Nick!" Hugh exclaimed eagerly; "and I want you to help get the team out of this nasty hole, for the sake of good old Scranton High. So don't say you won't, but come along, and do your level best to bring us out ahead!"

CHAPTER XX

NICK MAKES GOOD-----CONCLUSION

The look upon the face of Nick Lang when Hugh spoke in this way told the leader of the Scranton Hockey Seven he would fight with might and main to turn the tables on the winning Belleville team.

Nick's hour had struck!

The long-awaited opportunity to prove the genuine nature of the change that had taken place within his heart had arrived. He was going into play as one of the Regulars; he had been especially picked for that important service among twenty likely lads who only too gladly would have accepted a chance to distinguish themselves in such an emergency.

Accordingly Nick had a large letter S fastened to his jersey, to mark the side on which he fought, so that the referee might easily know where he belonged. One word from the coach as he strode forward Nick would never forget as long as he lived; it was a word of confidence; and, remembering how Mr. Leonard had at one time detested and distrusted this boy, it meant everything to Nick.

The game started again after the lapse of seven minutes.

Belleville considered that they had "the edge" on the visitors, and immediately went at it as though bent on adding considerably to the number of goals marked to their credit. But almost immediately it was discovered that the infusion of new blood had somehow altered the complexion of things greatly.

Thanks principally to the marvelous agility and strategy of Nick, a goal was shot inside of two minutes. It was immediately followed by another, this time Nick winning the score without the least help from anyone.

Wild applause rang out from parts of the crowd, where, of course, Scranton rooters mostly congregated. How sweet those cheers must have sounded in the ears of Nick Lange, who for years had only earned the hoots and jeers of his

fellows in Scranton, on account of their distrust, and his own evil ways.

Why, the Belleville folks sat up and rubbed their eyes. They had never dreamed that any fellow not a professional player could prove himself such a marvelous wizard on steel runners. Nick fairly dazzled them with his speed, his eccentric twistings when hotly pursued, and the clever way in which he kept that rubber disc just in front of his hockey stick, always carrying it along toward the point where he meant to strike for goal.

And when he did make that stroke vain were the frantic efforts of the usually dependable Leonard to block its amazing passage; for almost before he swung he heard the plug of the puck landing in the wire cage which he was especially set to guard, and knew that another tally had been added to Scranton's growing score.

The conditions had changed, and the shoe was now on the other foot.

Thanks to the fine playing of Nick Lang Scranton was now ahead, and it seemed extremely doubtful whether Belleville would have another chance to make a single tally. The boys were plainly disconcerted by the excellent work of the substitute, and seemed to have lost much of that aggressive spirit so absolutely necessary in ice hockey in order to win games. They played almost sullenly, as if realizing that it was all over but the shouting.

Vain were the efforts of Captain Kramer to put new life in his followers. He himself fought more desperately than ever, and once even succeeded in taking the puck away from the triumphant Nick, the only one who attained that glory; only to lose it immediately afterwards to Owen Dugdale, who transferred it to Stevens by way of Hobson; and then it plunged into the cage, despite Leonard's mad attempt to stay its swift flight.

"Who's this you Scranton boys have thrown into the game?" demanded one chagrined Belleville gentleman, as he saw what a radical change Nick's coming had made in the affair on the ice rink. "He plays suspiciously like a certain Canadian I saw last winter, who set everybody in New York City wild with his work. Is Jean La Rue visiting anybody in Scranton; and have you rung him in on us to-day, to send our poor chaps down to defeat?"

"Don't you believe it, Mister," chortled a boy standing near by, whose jersey was decorated with the letters "S. H. S.," standing, of course, for Scranton High School. "That fellow is only our Nick Lang, who was born and brought up in our home town. The place was never proud of that face until this great day, because Nick, you see, has been the worst boy ever known in Scranton. Why, his escapades would take a week to tell you. He used to be the terror of everybody, the bully all boys feared and shunned. But it seems like Nick has turned over a new leaf. Folks didn't all believe in his change of heart; but after to-day, say, Nick could own the whole town if he was so minded. I'd give a heap if I was standing in his shoes this same day. He'll be a hero, as sure as he used to be the town scapegrace!"

It was just that way up to the time the referee signaled that the last half of the game had been played to a finish. Nick seemed capable of doing almost as he pleased. Whenever he got possession of the puck it was, as one enthusiastic Scranton boy whooped, a "regular procession." The Belleville lads just couldn't touch him. His actions bewildered them, so that they were continually becoming mixed up with their own side when they thought to corner Nick and the puck.

The score?

Well, it seemed too bad that after such a brilliant beginning Belleville should fall so low, and see the terrible figures, thirteen to seven, marked up against them.

In the annals of sport, as chronicled at Scranton High, that contest would always be known as the "Battle of Winchester," just because, as in the Civil War, when the Union army was in retreat and demoralized, the coming of a single man, General Phil Sheridan, caused them to turn about, and presently win a conclusive and overwhelming victory. And Nick Lang had been the Phil Sheridan for Scranton on that glorious day!

Nick tried to make a "grand sneak" as soon as the game finished, but the crowd would have none of that, hemming him in so that he could not run; and then for the first time in all his life the one-time bully of Scranton tasted of the joys of popularity.

Fellows wrung his hand who had always treated him with disdain. He was slapped on the back and praised to the skies. Why, even Sue Barnes, Ivy Middleton, Peggy Noland, and a lot of other school-girls seemed proud to shake hands with Nick, who was as red in the face as a turkey gobbler, and rendered quite breathless trying to answer the myriad of sincere congratulations that were showered on him.

But by the happy light in his eyes Hugh knew the die was cast, once and for all. Having tasted of the sweets of popularity and honest praise, nothing on earth could now tempt Nick to fall back again to his former ignoble ways. His foot was firmly planted on the second round of the ladder, and he had his aspiring eye on the better things nearer the top.

The deacon had come over to see the game. He and Hugh went home together, and the talk was mostly concerning the wonderful reformation of Nick Lang.

"I'm hoping to have Nick come to me when he leaves school," the good old man was saying. "He has the making of a clever blacksmith in him, and I'd dearly like to turn over my shop to him some day not far in the future; because it's almost time the old man retired, now that he has a sunbeam coming to his house, which is going to take up much of his attention."

So it seemed that Nick's future was assured, if so be he cared to take up that honorable trade, by means of which the deacon had accumulated his little fortune.

As for the two former pals of Nick, Tip Slavin and Leon Disney, in due time they were convicted of the robbery of Paul Kramer's store, and sent away to the excellent State institution, to remain there until they had reached the age of twenty-one.

There was at least a fair hope that long before that time arrived one or both of the boys would have learned a trade and decided to live a respectable life in the future; for many lads who were deemed uncontrollable at home, under the lax training they received there, have been fashioned into splendid men because of the strict discipline at the Reform School.

There is little more to add to make our story complete.

Joey and his mother were soon installed under the hospitable roof of the deacon, where they found themselves the objects of love and devotion. The miseries of the past would soon be forgotten in the great happiness that had come to them. And certain it is that no one would be a more welcome guest there than Hugh Morgan, because it was partly through his efforts that this joyous event had been made possible.

Since Scranton High had taken such a leading part in the outdoor sports so beloved by all wide-awake boys, it could be set down as certain that the fellows in Allandale and Belleville would not be content to let them rest upon their well-earned laurels, but would strive with might and main to excel them on the diamond, the cinder-path, the football gridiron, or some other field of athletic endeavor.

That many fiercely contested games would result was a foregone conclusion; and it is to be hoped that we shall have the privilege of meeting the readers of this volume in the pages of subsequent books, where some of those exciting happenings may be set down in an interesting manner.

THE END