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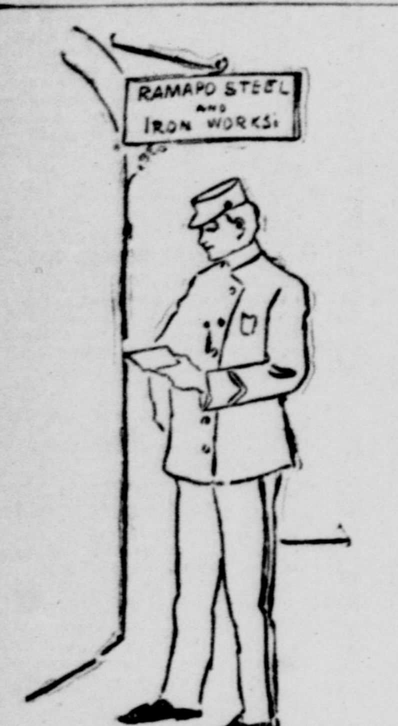
CHAPTER I.

The telegraph messenger looked again at the address on the envelope in his hand and then scanned the house before which he was standing. It was an old-fashioned building of brick, two stories high, with an attic above; and it stood in an old-fashioned part of lower New York not far from the East river. Over the wide archway there was a small and weather-worn sign, "Ramapo Steel and Iron Works," and over the smaller door alongside was a still smaller sign, "Whittier, Wheatcroft & Co."



TELEGRAPH MESSENGER LOOKED AGAIN AT THE ADDRESS.

When the messenger boy had made out the name he opened this smaller door and entered the long, narrow store. Its sides and walls were covered with bins and racks containing sample steel rails and iron beams and coils of wire of various sizes. Down at the end of the store were desks where several clerks and bookkeepers were at work.

As the messenger drew near a red-headed office boy blocked the passage, saying, somewhat aggressively, "Well?"

"Got a telegram for Whittier, Wheatcroft & Co.," the messenger explained, pugnaciously thrusting himself forward.

"In there!" the office boy returned, jerking his thumb over his shoulder toward the extreme end of the building, an extension, roofed with glass and separated by a glass screen from the space where the clerks were at work.

The messenger pushed open the glazed door of this private office, a bell jingled over his head, and the three occupants of the room looked up.

"Whittier, Wheatcroft & Co.?" said the messenger, interrogatively, holding out the yellow envelope.

"Yes," responded Mr. Whittier, a tall, handsome old gentleman, taking the telegram. "You sign, Paul."

The youngest of the three, looking like his father, took the messenger's book and glancing at an old-fashioned clock which stood in the corner, he wrote the name of the firm and the hour of delivery. He was watching the messenger go out when his attention was suddenly called to subjects of more importance by a sharp exclamation from his father.

"Well, well, well," said the elder Whittier, with his eyes fixed on the telegram he had just read. "This is very strange—very strange, indeed!"

"What's strange?" asked the third occupant of the office, Mr. Wheatcroft, a short, stout, irascible-looking man, with a shock of grizzling hair.

For all answer Mr. Whittier handed to Mr. Wheatcroft the thin slip of paper.

No sooner had the junior partner read the paper than he seemed angrier than ever.

"Strange?" he cried. "I should think it was strange! Confoundedly strange—and deuced unpleasant, too."

"May I see what it is that's so very strange?" asked Paul, picking up the dispatch.

"Of course you can see it," growled Mr. Wheatcroft, "and let us see what you can make of it."

The young man read the message aloud: "Deal off. Can get quarter cent better terms. Carkendale."

Then he read it again to himself. At last he said: "I confess I don't see anything so very mysterious in that. We've lost a contract, I suppose—but that must have happened lots of times before, hasn't it?"

"It's happened twice before this fall," returned Mr. Wheatcroft fiercely, "after our bid had been practically accepted, and just before the signing of the final contract!"

"Let me explain, Wheatcroft," interrupted the elder Whittier gently. "You must not expect my son to understand the ins and outs of this business as we do. Besides he has been in the office only ten days."

"I don't expect him to understand," growled Wheatcroft. "How could he? I don't understand it myself."

"Close that door, Paul," said Mr. Whittier. "I don't want any of the clerks to know what we are talking about."

"Here are the facts in the case, Paul, and I think you will admit that they are certainly curious," began Mr. Whittier. "Twice this fall, and now a third time, we have been the lowest bidders for important orders, and yet, just before our bid was formally accepted, somebody has cut under us by a fraction of a cent and got the job. First we thought we were going to get the building of the Barataria Central's bridge over the Little Mackintosh river; but in the end it was the Tuxedo Steel Company that got the contract. Then there was the order for the 50,000 miles of wire for the Transcontinental Telegraph—we made an extraordinarily low estimate on that. We wanted the contract and we threw off not only our profit, but even allowances for office expenses—and yet five minutes before the last bid had to be in the Tuxedo Company put in an offer only a hundred and twenty-five dollars less than ours. Now comes the telegram today. The Methuselah Life Insurance Company is going to put up a big building; we were asked to estimate on the steel framework. We wanted that work—times are hard and there is little doing, as you know, and we must get work for our men if we can. We meant to have this contract if we could. We offered to do it at what was really actual cost of manufacture—without profit, first of all, and then without any charge at all for office expenses, for interest on capital, for depreciation of plant. The vice president of the Methuselah, the one who attends to all their real estate, is Mr. Carkendale. He told me yesterday that our bid was very low, and that we were certain to get the contract. And now he sends me this," and Mr. Whittier picked up the telegram again.

"Do you mean to say that you think the Tuxedo people have somehow been made acquainted with our bids?" asked the young man.

"That's what I'm thinking now," was Wheatcroft's sharp answer. "I can't think anything else. For two months we haven't been successful in getting a single one of the big contracts. We've had our share of the little things, of course, but they don't amount to much. The big things that we really want have slipped through our fingers. We've lost them by the skin of our teeth every time. That isn't accident, is it? Of course not! Then there's only one explanation—there's a leak in this office somewhere."

"You don't suspect any of the clerks, do you, Mr. Wheatcroft?" asked the elder Whittier, sadly.

"I don't suspect anybody in particular," returned the junior partner, brushing his hair the wrong way. "And I suspect everybody in general. I haven't an idea who it is, but it's somebody!"

"Who makes up the bids on these important contracts?" asked Paul.

"Wheatcroft and I," answered his father. "The specifications are forwarded to the works, and the engineers make their estimates of the actual cost of labor and material. These estimates are sent to us here, and we add whatever we think best for interest and for expenses, and for wear and tear and for profit."

"Who writes the letters making the offer—the one with the actual figures, I mean?" the son continued.

"I do," the elder Whittier explained. "I have always done it."

"You don't dictate them to a typewriter?" Paul pursued.

"Certainly not," the father responded. "I write them with my own hand—and what's more, I take the press copy myself, and there is a special letter book for such things. This letter book is kept always in the safe in this office—in fact, I can say that this particular letter book never leaves my hands except to go into that safe. And, as you know, nobody has access to that safe except Wheatcroft and me."

"And the major," corrected the junior partner.

"No," Mr. Whittier explained, "Van Zandt has no need to go there now."

"But he used to," Mr. Wheatcroft persisted.

"He did once," the senior partner returned, "but when we bought those new safes outside there in the main office there was no longer any need of the chief bookkeeper to go to this smaller safe, and so, last month—it was while you were away, Wheatcroft—Van Zandt came in here one afternoon, and said that as he never had occasion to go to this safe, he would rather not have the responsibility of knowing the combination. I told him we had perfect confidence in him—"

"I should think so!" broke in the explosive Wheatcroft. "The major has been with us thirty years now. I'd suspect myself of petty larceny as soon as him."

"As I said," continued the elder Whittier, "I told him that we trusted him perfectly, of course. But he urged me, and to please him I changed the combination of this safe that afternoon. You will remember, Wheatcroft, that I gave you the new word the day you came back."

"Yes, I remember," said Mr. Wheatcroft. "But I don't see why the major did not want to know how to open that safe. Perhaps he is beginning to feel his years now. He must be 60, the major, and I've been thinking for some time he looked worn."

Five minutes later Mr. Whittier, Mr. Wheatcroft and the only son of the senior partner left the glass-framed private office, and walking leisurely through the long store, passed into the street.

They did not notice that the old bookkeeper, Maj. Van Zandt, whose high desk was so placed that he could overlook the private office, had been watching them ever since the messenger had delivered the dispatch.

CHAPTER II.

After luncheon, as it happened, both the senior and the junior partner of Whittier, Wheatcroft & Co. had to attend meetings, and they went their several ways, leaving Paul to return to the office alone. When he came opposite to the house which bore the weather-beaten sign of the firm he stood still for a moment and looked across with mingled pride and affection. The building was old-fashioned, so old-fashioned, indeed, that only a long-established firm could afford to occupy it. It was Paul Whittier's great-grandfather who who had founded the Ramapo works; there had been cast the cannon for many of the ships of the little American navy that gave such a good account of itself in the war of 1812. Again in 1848 had the house of Whittier, Wheatcroft & Co.—the present Mr. Wheatcroft's father having been taken into partnership by Paul's grandfather—been able to be of service to the government of the United States. All through the four years that followed the firing on the flag in 1861 the Ramapo works had been run day and night. When peace came at last and the people had again leisure to expand, a large share of the rails needed by the new overland roads which were to bind the East and the West together in iron bands, had been rolled by Whittier, Wheatcroft & Co. Of late years, as Paul knew, the old firm seemed to have lost some of its early energy, and having young and vigorous competitors, it had barely held its own.

"MIKE, WHO SHUTS UP THE OFFICE AT NIGHT?"

That the Ramapo works should once more take the lead was Paul Whittier's solemn purpose; and to this end he had been carefully trained. He was now a young man of nearly 25—a tall, handsome fellow, with a full mustache over his firm mouth, and with quick eyes below his curly brown hair. He had spent four years in college, carrying off honors in mathematics; he was popular with his classmates, who made him class poet; and in his senior year he was elected president of the college photographic society. He had gone to a technological institute, where he had made himself master of the theory and practice of metallurgy. After a year of travel in Europe, where he had investigated every important steel and iron works he could get into, he had come home to take a desk in the office.

It was only for a moment that he stood on the sidewalk opposite looking at the old building. Then he went over. Instead of entering the long store he walked down the alleyway left open for the heavy wagons. When he came opposite the private office in the rear of the store he examined the doors and the windows carefully to see if he could detect any means of ingress other those open to everybody.

As Paul entered the private office he found the porter there putting coal on the fire.

Stepping back to close the glass door behind him that they might be alone, he said:

"Mike, who shuts up the office at night?"

"Sure I do, Mister Paul," was the prompt answer.

"And do you open it in the morning?" the young man asked.

"I do that," Mike responded.

"Do you see that those windows are always fastened on the inside?" was the next query.

"Yes, Mister Paul," the porter replied.

"Well," and the inquirer hesitated briefly before putting this question, "have you found any one of these windows unfastened any morning lately when you came here?"

"And how did you know that?" Mike returned in surprise.

"What morning was it?" asked Paul, pushing his advantage.

"It was last Monday mornin', Mister Paul," the porter explained, "and how it was I dunno, for I had every wan o' the windows tight Saturday night—an' Monday mornin' wan o' them was unfastened whin I wint to open it to let in a bit o' air into the office here."

"You sleep here always, don't you?" Paul proceeded.

"I've slep' here iviry night for three year now come Thanksgivin'," Mike replied. "I've the whole top of the house to myself. It's an iligant apartment I have there, Mister Paul."

When Mike had left the office, Paul took a chair before the fire and lighted a cigar. For half an hour he sat silently thinking.

He came to the conclusion that Mr. Wheatcroft was right in his suspicion. Whittier, Wheatcroft & Co. had lost important contracts because of underbidding due to knowledge surreptitiously obtained. He believed that some one had got into the store on Sunday while Mike was taking a walk, and that this somebody had somehow opened the safe. There was never any money in that private safe; it was intended to contain only important papers. It did contain the letter-book of the firm's bids, and this is what was wanted by the man who had got into the office and who had let himself out by the window, leaving it unfastened behind him.

"I THINK WE CAN STAND THE LOSS A LITTLE LONGER."

What grieved him when he had come to this conclusion was that the thief—for such the housebreaker was in reality—was probably one of the men in the employ of the firm. It seemed to him almost certain that the man who had broken in knew all the ins and outs of the office. And how could this knowledge have been obtained except by an employe? Paul was well acquainted with the clerks in the outer office. There were five of them, including the old bookkeeper; and although none of them had been with the firm as long as the major, no one of them had been there less than ten years.

While Paul was sitting quietly in the private office, smoking a cigar, with all his mental faculties at their highest tension, the clock in the corner suddenly struck 3.

Paul swiftly swung around in his chair and looked at it. An old eight-day clock it was, which not only told the time of day, but pretended also to supply miscellaneous astronomical information. It stood by itself in the corner.

For a moment after it struck Paul stared at it with a fixed gaze, as though he did not see what he was looking at. Then a light came into his eyes and a smile flitted across his lips.

He turned around in his chair slowly and measured with his eye the proportions of the room, the distance between the desks and the safe and the clock. He glanced up at the sloping glass roof above him. Then he smiled again, and again sat silent for a minute. He rose to his feet and stood with his back to the fire. Almost in front of him was the clock in the corner.

He took out his watch and compared its time with that of the clock. Apparently he found that the clock was too fast, for he walked over to it and turned the minute hand back. It seemed as though this was a more difficult feat than he supposed, or that he went about it carelessly, for the minute hand broke off short in his fingers. A spasmodic movement of his as the thin metal snapped pulled the chain off its cylinder and the weight fell with a clash.

All the clerks looked up; and the red-headed office boy was prompt in answer to the bell Paul rang a moment after.

"Bobby," said the young man to the boy, as he took his hat and overcoat, "I've just broken the clock. I know a shop where they make a specialty of repairing timepieces like that. I'm going to tell them to send for it at once. Give it to the man who will come this afternoon with my card. Do you understand?"

"Cert.," the boy answered. "If he ain't got your card he don't get the clock."

"That's what I mean," Paul responded, as he left the office.

Before he reached the street door he met Mr. Wheatcroft.

"Paul," cried the junior partner, explosively, "I've been thinking about that—about that—you know what I mean! And I've decided that we had better put a detective on this thing at once!"

"Yes," said Paul, "that's a good idea. In fact, I had just come to the same conclusion. I——"

Then he checked himself. He had turned slightly to speak to Mr. Wheatcroft, and now he saw that Major Van Zandt was standing within ten feet of them, and he noticed that the old bookkeeper's face was strangely pale.

CHAPTER III.

During the next week the office of Whittier, Wheatcroft & Co. had its usual aspect of prosperous placidity. The routine work was done in the routine way: the porter opened the office every morning and the office boy arrived a few minutes after it was opened; the clerks came at nine, and a little later the partners were to be seen in the inner office reading the morning's correspondence.

The Whittiers, father and son, had had a discussion with Mr. Wheatcroft as to the most advisable course to adopt to prevent the future leakage of the trade secrets of the firm. The senior partner succeeded in dissuading the junior partner from the employing of detectives.

"Not yet," he said, "not yet. These clerks have all served us faithfully for years and I don't want to submit them to the indignity of being 'shadowed'—that's what they call it, isn't it?—of being shadowed by some cheap hireling who may try to distort the most innocent acts into evidence of guilt, so that he can show us how smart he is."

"But this sort of thing can't go on forever," ejaculated Mr. Wheatcroft. "If we are to be underbid on every contract worth having we might as well go out of the business!"

"That's true, of course," Mr. Whittier admitted, "but we are not sure that we are being underbid unfairly——"

"The Tuxedo Company have taken away three contracts from us in the past two months," cried the junior partner. "We can be sure of that, can't we?"

"We have lost three contracts, of course," returned Mr. Whittier, in his most conciliatory manner, "and the Tuxedo people have captured them. But that may be only a coincidence, after all."

"It is a pretty expensive coincidence for us," snorted Mr. Wheatcroft.

"But because we have lost money," the senior partner rejoined gently, laying his hand on Mr. Wheatcroft's arm, "that's no reason why we should also lose our heads. It is no reason why we should depart from our old custom of treating every man fairly. If there is any one in our employ who is selling us, why, if we give him rope enough he will hang himself, sooner or later."

"And before he suspends himself that way," cried Mr. Wheatcroft, "we may be forced to suspend ourselves."

"Come, come, Wheatcroft," said the senior partner, "I think we can afford to stand the loss a little longer. What we can't afford to do is to lose our self-respect by doing something irreparable. It may be that we shall have to employ detectives—but I don't think the time has come yet."

"Very well," the junior partner declared, yielding an unwilling consent. "I don't insist on it. I still think it would be best not to waste any more time—but I don't insist. What will happen is that we shall lose the rolling of those steel rails for the Springfield & Athens road—that's all."

Paul Whittier had taken no part in this discussion. He agreed with his father, and he saw no need for him to urge any further argument.

Now he looked up and asked when they intended to put in the bid for the rails. His father then explained that they were expecting a special estimate from the engineers at the Ramapo works, and that it would probably be Saturday before this could be discussed by the partners and the exact figures of the proposed contract determined.

"And if we don't want to lose that contract for sure," insisted Mr. Wheatcroft, "I think we had better change the combination of that safe."

"May I suggest," said Paul, "that it seems to me better to leave the combination as it is. What we want to do is not to get this Springfield & Athens contract so much as to find out whether some one really is getting at the letter-book. Therefore we mustn't make it any harder for the some one to get at the letter-book."

"Oh, very well," Mr. Wheatcroft assented, a little ungraciously. "Have it your own way. But I want you to understand now that I think you are only postponing the inevitable."

And with that the subject was dropped. For several days the three men who were together for hours in the office of the Ramapo Iron and Steel Works refrained from any discussion of the question which was most prominent in their minds.

It was on Wednesday that the tall clock that Paul Whittier had broken returned from the repairers. Paul himself helped the men to set it again in its old place in the corner of the office, facing the safe, which occupied the corner diagonally opposite.

It so chanced that Paul came down late on Thursday morning, and perhaps this was the reason that a pressure of delayed work kept him in the office that evening long after every one else. The clerks had all gone, even Major Van Zandt, always the last to leave—and the porter had come in twice before the son of the senior partner was ready to go for the night. The gas was lighted here and there in the long, narrow, deserted store as Paul walked through it from the office to the street. Outside the swift twilight of a New York November had already settled down on the city.

"Can't I carry yer bag for ye, Mister Paul?" asked the porter, who was showing him out.

"No, thank you, Mike," was the young man's answer. "That bag has very little in it. And besides I haven't got to carry it far."

The next morning Paul was the first of the three to arrive. The clerks were in their places already, but neither the senior nor the junior partner had yet come. The porter happened to be standing under the wagon archway as Paul Whittier was about to enter the store.

The young man saw the porter and a mischievous smile hovered about the corners of his mouth.

"Mike," he said, pausing on the doorstep, "do you think you ought to smoke while you are cleaning out our office in the morning?"

"Sure I haven't had me pipe in me mouth this mornin' at all," the porter answered, taken by surprise.

"But yesterday morning?" Paul pursued.

"Yesterday mornin'," Mike echoed, not a little puzzled.

"Yesterday morning at ten minutes before 8 you were in the private office smoking a pipe——"

"But how did you see me, Mister Paul?" cried Mike in amaze; "ye was late in comin' down yesterday, wasn't ye?"

Paul smiled pleasantly.

"A little bird told me," he said.

"If I had the bird I'd wring his neck for tellin' tales," declared the porter.

"I don't mind you smoking, Mike," the young man went on; "that's your own affair; but I'd rather you didn't smoke a pipe while you are tidying up in the private office."

"Well, Mister Paul, I won't do it again," the porter promised.

"And I wouldn't encourage Bob to smoke either," Paul continued.

"I encourage him?" inquired Mike.

"Yes," Paul explained; "yesterday morning you let him light his cigarette from your pipe—didn't you?"

"Were ye peekin' in thro' the winder, Mister Paul?" the porter asked eagerly. "Ye saw me—an' I never saw ye at all."

"No," the young man answered. "I can't say that I saw you myself. A little bird told me."

And with that he left the wondering porter and entered the store. Just inside the door was the office boy, who hastily hid an unlighted cigarette as he caught sight of the senior partner's son.

"CAN'T I CARRY YOUR BAG FOR YOU?"

When Paul saw the red-headed boy he smiled again mischievously.

"Bob," he began, "when you want to see who can stand on his head the longest, you or Danny the bootblack, don't you think you could choose a better place than the private office?"

The office boy was quite as much taken by surprise as the porter had been; but he was younger and quicker witted.

"And when did I have Danny in the office?" he asked, defiantly.

"Yesterday morning," Paul answered, still smiling, "a little before half-past 8."

"Yesterday mornin'?" repeated Bob, as though trying had to recall all the events of the day before. "Maybe Danny did come in for a minute."

"He played leapfrog with you all the way into the private office," Paul went on while Bob looked at him with increasing wonder.

"How did you know?" the office boy asked frankly. "Were you lookin' through the windows?"

"How do I know that you and Danny stood on your heads in the corner of the office with your heels against the safe, scratching off the paint? Next time I'd try the yard if I were you. Sports of that sort are more fun in the open air." And with that parting shot Paul went on his way to his own desk, leaving the office boy greatly puzzled.

Later in the day Bob and Mike exchanged confidences, and neither was ready with any explanation.

"At school," Bob declared, "we uster think teacher had eyes in the back of her head. She was everlastingly catchin' me when I did things behind her back. But Mister Paul beats that—for he see me doin' things when he wa'n't here."

"Mister Paul wa'n't here, for sure, yesterday mornin'," Mike asserted, "I'd take me oath o' that. An' if he wa'n't here how could he see me givin' ye a light from me pipe? Answer me that! He says it's a little bird told him—but that's not it, I'm thinkin'. Not but what they have clocks with birds into 'em that come out an' tell the time o' day—'cuckoo!' 'cuckoo!' 'cuckoo!' An' if that big clock he broke 'ast week had a bird that could tell time that way I'd break the thing quick—so I would."

"It ain't no bird," said Bob, "you can bet your life on that. No birds can't tell him nothin' more'n you can catch 'em by puttin' salt on their tails. I know what it is Mister Paul does—least I know how he does it. It's second sight, that's what it is! I see a man onct at the theayter, an' he—"

But perhaps it is not necessary to set down here the office boy's recollection of the trick of an ingenious magician.

About half an hour after Paul had arrived at the office Mr. Wheatcroft appeared. The junior partner hesitated in the doorway for a second and then entered.

Paul was watching him, and the same mischievous smile flashed over the face of the young man.

"You need not be alarmed today, Mr. Wheatcroft," he said, "there is no fascinating female waiting for you this morning."

"Confound the woman," ejaculated Mr. Wheatcroft, testily, "I couldn't get rid of her."

"But you subscribed for the book at last," asserted Paul, "and she went away happy."

"I believe I did agree to take one copy of the work she showed me," admitted Mr. Wheatcroft, a little sheepishly. Then he looked up suddenly. "Why, bless my soul," he cried, "that was yesterday morning—"

"I WANT YOU TO GO—" BEGAN PAUL.

"Allowing for differences of clocks," Paul returned, "it was about ten minutes to 10 yesterday morning."

"Then how do you come to know anything about it? I should like to be told that!" the junior partner inquired. "You did not get down till nearly 12."

"I had an eye on you," Paul answered, as the smile again flitted across his face.

"But I thought you were detained all the morning by a sick friend," insisted Mr. Wheatcroft.

"So I was," Paul responded. "And if you won't believe I had an eye on you all I can say then is—that a little bird told me."

"Stuff and nonsense!" cried Mr. Wheatcroft. "Your little bird has two legs, hadn't it?"

"Most birds have," laughed Paul.

"I mean two legs in a pair of trousers," explained the junior partner, rumpling his grizzled hair with an impatient gesture.

"You see now how uncomfortable it is to shadowed," said Paul, turning the topic as his father entered the office.

That Saturday afternoon Mr. Whittier and Mr. Wheatcroft agreed on the bid to be made on the steel rails needed by the Springfield & Athens road. While the elder Mr. Whittier wrote the letter to the railroad with his own hand, his son maneuvered the junior partner into the outer office, where all the clerks happened to be at work, including the old bookkeeper. Then Paul managed his conversation with Mr. Wheatcroft so that any one of the five employes who chose to listen to the apparently careless talk should know that the firm had just made a bid on another important contract. Paul also spoke as though both his father and himself would probably go out of town that Saturday night, to remain away until Monday morning.

Just before the store was closed for the night Paul Whittier wound up the eight-day clock that stood in the corner opposite the private safe.

CHAPTER IV.

Although the Whittiers, father and son, spent Sunday out of town, Paul made an excuse to the friends whom they were visiting and returned to the city by a midnight train. Thus he was enabled to present himself at the office of the Ramapo works very early on Monday morning.

It was so early indeed that no one of the employes had yet arrived when the son of the senior partner, bag in hand, pushed open the street door and entered the long store, at the far end of which the porter was still tidying up for the day's work.

"An' is that you, Mister Paul?" Mike asked in surprise, as he came out of the private office to see who the early visitor might be. "An' what brought ye out o' yer bed before breakfast like this?"

"I always get out of bed before breakfast," Paul replied. "Don't you?"

"Would I get up if I hadn't got to get up to get my livin'?" the porter responded.

Paul entered the office, followed by Mike, still wondering why the young man was there at that hour.

After a swift glance around the office Paul put down his bag on the table and turned suddenly to the porter with a question:

"When does Bob get down here?"

Mike looked at the clock in the corner before answering.

"It'll be ten minutes," he said, "or maybe twenty, before the boy does be here today, seein' it's Monday mornin', an' he'll be tired with not workin' of Sunday."

"Ten minutes?" repeated Paul, slowly. After a moment's thought he continued: "Then I'll have to ask you to go out for me, Mike."

"I can go anywhere ye want, Mister Paul," the porter responded.

"I want you to go," began Paul—"I want you to go—" and he hesitated as though he was not quite sure what it was he wished the porter to do. "I want you to go to the office of the Gotham Gazette and get me two copies of yesterday's paper. Do you understand?"

"Maybe they won't be open so early in the mornin'," said the Irishman.

"That's no matter," said Paul, hastily correcting himself. "I mean that I want you to go now and get the papers, if you can. Of course if the office isn't open I shall have to send again later."

"I'll be goin' now, Mister Paul," and Mike took his hat and started off at once.

Paul walked through the store with the porter. When Mike had gone the young man locked the front door and returned at once to the private office in the rear. He shut himself in and lowered all the shades, so that whatever he might do inside the office could not be seen by any one on the outside.

Whatever it was he wished to do he was able to do it swiftly, for in less than a minute after he had closed the door of the office he opened it again and came out into the main store with his bag in his hand. He walked leisurely to the front of the store, arriving there just in time to unlock the door as the office boy came around the corner, smoking a cigarette.

When Bob, still puffing steadily, was about to open the door and enter the store he looked up and discovered that Paul was gazing at him. The boy pinched the cigarette out of his mouth and dropped it outside, and then came in, his eyes expressing his surprise at the presence of the senior partner's son down town at that early hour in the morning.

Paul greeted the boy pleasantly, but Bob got away from him as soon as possible, for ever since the young man had told what had gone on in the office when Bob was its only occupant the office boy was a little afraid of the young man, as though some way mysterious, not to say uncanny.

Paul thought it best to wait for the porter's return; and he stood outside, under the archway, for five minutes, smoking a cigar, with his bag at his feet.

When Mike came back with the two copies of the Sunday newspaper he had been sent to get Paul gave him the money for them and an extra quarter for himself. Then the young man picked up his bag again.

"When my father comes down, Mike," he said, "tell him I may be a little late in getting back this morning."

"An' are ye goin' away now, Mister Paul?" the porter asked. "What good was it then ye got out o' bed before breakfast and come down here so early in the mornin'?"

Paul laughed a little.

"I had a reason for coming here this morning," he answered briefly; and with that he walked away, his bag in one hand and the two bulky and gaudy Sunday newspapers in the other.

Mike watched him turn the corner and then went into the store again, where Bob greeted him promptly with a request to know why the old man's son had been getting up by the bright light.

"If I was the boss or the boss' son, either," said Bob, "I wouldn't get up till I was good and ready. I'd have my breakfast in bed, if I had a mind to—an' my dinner, too—an' my supper. An' I wouldn't do no work an' I'd go to the theayter every night an' twict on Saturdays."

"I dunno why Mister Paul was down," Mike explained. "All he wanted was two of them Sunday papers with pictures into 'em. What did he want two o' thim for, I dunno. There's readin' enough in one o' thim to last me a month o' Sundays."

It may be surmised that Mike would have been still more in the dark as to Paul Whittier's reasons for coming down town so early that Monday morning, if he could have seen the young man throw the two copies of the Gotham Gazette into the first ashcart he passed after he was out of the range of the porter's vision.

Paul was not the only member of Whittier, Wheatcroft & Co. to arrive at the office early that morning. Mr. Wheatcroft was usually punctual, taking his seat at his desk just as the clock struck half past 9. On this Monday morning he entered the store a little before 9.

As he walked back to the office he looked over the desks of the clerks as though he was seeking some one.

At the door of the office he met Bob.

"Hasn't the major come down yet?" he asked shortly.

"No, sir," the office boy answered. "He don't never get here till 9."

"H'm," grunted the junior partner. "When he does come tell him I want to see him at once! At once! Do you understand?"

"I ain't deaf and dumb and blind," Bob responded. "I'll steer him into you soon as ever he shows up."

But, for a wonder, the old bookkeeper was late that morning. Ordinarily he was a model of exactitude. Yet the clock struck 9 and half-past and 10 before he appeared in the store.

Before he had changed his coat Bob was at his side.

"Mr. Wheatcroft, he wants to see you now in a hurry," said the boy.

Major Van Zandt paled swiftly and steadied himself by a grasp of the railing.

"Does Mr. Wheatcroft wish to see me?" he asked, faintly.

"You bet he does," the boy answered, "an' in a hurry, too. He come bright and early this mornin' a-purpose to see you, an' he's been a-waitin' for two hours. An' I guess he's got his mad up now!"

When the old bookkeeper, with his blanched face and his faltering step, entered the private office, Mr. Wheatcroft wheeled around in his chair.

"Oh, it's you, is it?" he cried. "At last!"

"I regret that I was late this morning, Mr. Wheatcroft," Van Zandt began.

"That's no matter!" said his employer. "At least I want to talk to you about something else."

"About something else?" echoed the old man, feebly.

"Yes," responded Mr. Wheatcroft. "Shut the door behind you, please, so that that red-headed cub out there can't hear what I'm going to say. And take a chair. Yes. There is something else I've got to say to you, and I want you to be frank with me."

Whatever it was that Mr. Wheatcroft had to say to Major Van Zandt it had to be said under the eyes of the clerks on the other side of the glass partition. And it took a long time saying, for it was evident to any observer of the two men as they sat there in the private office that Mr. Wheatcroft was trying to force an explanation of some kind from the old bookkeeper, and that the major was resisting his employer's entreaties as best he could. Apparently the matter under discussion was of an importance so grave as to make Mr. Wheatcroft resolutely retain his self-control; and not once did he let his voice break out explosively, as was his custom.

Major Van Zandt was still closeted with Mr. Wheatcroft when Mr. Whittier arrived. The senior partner stopped near the street door to speak to a clerk, and he was joined almost immediately by his son.

"Well, Paul," said the father, "have I got down here before you, after all, anl in spite of your running away last night?"

"No," the son responded, "I was the first to arrive this morning—luckily."

"Luckily?" echoed his father. "I suppose that means that you have been able to accomplish your purpose—whatever it was. You didn't tell me, you know."

"I'm ready to tell you now, father," said Paul, "since I have succeeded."

Walking down the store together, they came to the private office.

As the old bookkeeper saw them he started up and made as though to leave the office.

"Keep your seat, major," cried Mr. Wheatcroft, sternly, but not unkindly. "Keep your seat, please."

"ABOUT SOMETHING ELSE?" ECHOED THE OLD MAN, FEEBLY.

Then he turned to Mr. Whittier. "I have something to tell you both," he said, "and I want the major here while I tell you. Paul, may I trouble you to see that door is closed so that we are out of hearing?"

"Certainly," Paul responded, as he shut the door.

"Well, Wheatcroft," Mr. Whittier asked, "what is all this mystery of yours now?"

The junior partner swung around in his chair and faced Mr. Whittier.

"My mystery?" he cried. "It's the mystery that puzzled us all—and I've solved it."

"What do you mean?" asked the senior partner.

"What I mean is that somebody has been opening that safe there in the corner and reading our private letter-book and finding out what we were bidding on important contracts. What I mean is that this man has taken this information filched from us and has sold it to our competitors, who were not too scrupulous as to be unwilling to buy stolen goods!"

"We all suspected this, as you know," the elder Whittier said. "Have you anything new now?"

"Haven't I?" returned Mr. Wheatcroft. "I've found the man! that's all!"

"You, too!" ejaculated Paul.

"Who is he?" asked the senior partner.

"Wait a minute," Mr. Wheatcroft begged. "Don't be in a hurry and I'll tell you. Yesterday afternoon I don't know what possessed me, but I felt drawn down town for some reason. I wanted to see if anything was going on here. I knew we had made that bid Saturday, and I wondered if anybody would try to get at it on Sunday. So I came down about 4 o'clock—and I saw a man sneak out of the front door of this office. I followed him as swiftly as I could and as quietly, for I did not want to give the alarm until I knew more. The man did not see me, and as he turned to go up the steps of the elevated railroad station at the corner I saw his face."

"Did you recognize him?" asked Mr. Whittier.

"Yes," was the answer. "And he did not see me. There were tears rolling down his cheeks—perhaps that's the reason. This morning I called him in here and he has finally confessed the whole thing."

"Who—who is it?" asked Mr. Whittier, dreading to look at the old bookkeeper, who had been in the employ of the firm for thirty years and more.

"It is Major Van Zandt!" Mr. Wheatcroft declared.

There was a moment of silence: then the voice of Paul Whittier was heard saying:

"I think there is some mistake!"

"A mistake?" cried Mr. Wheatcroft. "What kind of a mistake?"

"A mistake as to the guilty man," responded Paul.

"Do you mean that the major isn't guilty?" asked Mr. Wheatcroft.

"That's what I mean," Paul returned.

"But he has confessed," Mr. Wheatcroft retorted.

"I can't help that," was the response. "He isn't the man who opened that safe yesterday afternoon at half-past 3 and took out the letter-book."

The old bookkeeper looked at the young man in frightened amazement.

"I have confessed it," he said piteously. "I have confessed it."

"I know you did, major," Paul declared, not unkindly. "And I don't know why you did. For you were not the man."

"And if the man who confesses is not the man who did it, who is?"

"I don't know who he is—although I have my suspicions," said Paul; "but I have his photograph—taken in the act!"

"I'M AFRAID I DO UNDERSTAND IT," MR. WHITTIER SAID.

CHAPTER V.

When Paul Whittier said that he had photographs of the man who had been injuring the Ramapo Iron and Steel Works, showing him in the act of opening the safe, Mr. Whittier and Mr. Wheatcroft looked at each other in amazement. Major Van Zandt stared at the young man with fear and shame struggling together in his face.

Without waiting to enjoy his triumph Paul put his hand in his pocket and took out two squares of bluish paper.

"There," he said, as he handed one to his father, "there is a blue-print of the man taken in this office at 3:10 yesterday afternoon, just as he was about to open the safe in the corner. You see he is kneeling with his hand on the lock, but apparently just then something alarmed him and he cast a hasty glance over his shoulder. At that second the photograph was taken, and so we have a full-face portrait of the man."

Mr. Whittier had looked at the photograph, and he now passed it to the impatient hand of the junior partner.

"You see, Mr. Wheatcroft," Paul continued, "that although the face in the photograph bears a certain family likeness to Maj. Van Zandt's, all the same that is not a portrait of the major. The man who was here yesterday afternoon was a young man—a man young enough to be the major's son!"

The old bookkeeper looked at the speaker.

"Mr. Paul," he began, "you won't be hard on the—" Then he paused abruptly.

"I confess I don't understand this at all," declared Mr. Wheatcroft irascibly.

"I'm afraid that I do understand it," Mr. Whittier said with a glance of compassion at the major.

"There," Paul continued, handing his father a second azure square, "there is a photograph taken here ten minutes after the first—at 3:20 yesterday afternoon. That shows the safe open and the same young man standing before it with the private letter-book in his hand. As his head is bent over the pages of the book, the view of the face is not so good. But there can be no doubt that it is the same man. You see that, don't you, Mr. Wheatcroft?"

"I see that, of course," returned Mr. Wheatcroft forcibly; "what I don't see is why the major here should confess if he isn't guilty!"

"I think I know the reason for that," said Mr. Whittier gently.

"There haven't been two men at our books, have they?" asked Mr. Wheatcroft; "the major and also this fellow who has been photographed?"

Mr. Whittier looked at the old bookkeeper for a moment.

"Major," he said, with compassion in his voice, "you won't tell me that it was you who sold our secrets to our rivals? And you might confesss it again and again—I should never believe it. I know you better. I have known you too long to believe any charge against your honesty, even if you bring it yourself. The real culprit, the man who is photographed here, is your son, isn't he? There is no use of trying to conceal the truth now, and there is no need to attempt it, because we shall be lenient with him for your sake, major."

There was a moment's silence, broken by Mr. Wheatcroft's suddenly saying:

"The major's son? Why, he's dead, isn't he? He was shot in a brawl after a spree somewhere out West two or three years ago. At least that's what I understood at the time."

"It is what I wanted everybody to understand at the time," said the old bookkeeper, breaking silence at last. "But it wasn't so. The boy was shot, but he was not killed. I hoped that it would be a warning to him, and that he would make a fresh start. Friends of mine got him a place in Mexico—but luck was against him, so he wrote me, and he lost that. Then an old comrade of mine gave him another chance out in Denver, and for a while he kept straight and did his work well. Then he broke down once more, and he was discharged. For six months I did not know what had become of him. I've found out since that he was a tramp for weeks, and that he walked most of the way from Colorado to New York. This fall he turned up here in the city, ragged, worn out, sick. I wanted to order him away, but I couldn't. I took him back, and got him decent clothes and told him to look for a place, for I knew that hard work was the only thing that would keep him out of mischief. He did not find a place—perhaps he did not look for one. But all at once I discovered that he had money. He would not tell me how he got it. I knew he could not have come by it honestly; and so I watched him. I spied after him, and at last I found that he was selling you to the Tuxedo Company."

"But how could he open the safe?" cried Mr. Wheatcroft. "You didn't know the combination."

"I did not tell him the combination I did know," said the old bookkeeper, with pathetic dignity. "And I didn't have to tell him. He can open almost any safe without knowing the combination. How he does it, I don't know. It is his gift. He listens to the wheels as they turn, and he sets first one and then the other; and in ten minutes the safe is open."

"How could he get into the store?" Mr. Whittier inquired.

"He knew I had a key," responded the old bookkeeper, "and he stole it from me. He used to watch on Sunday afternoon