



***EDWARD
DYSON***

***THE GOLD-
STEALERS***

Edward Dyson

The Gold-Stealers

A Story of Waddy

EAN 8596547353034

DigiCat, 2022

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CHAPTER I.

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THE schoolhouse at Waddy was not in the least like any of the trim State buildings that now decorate every Victorian township and mark every mining or agricultural centre that can scrape together two or three meagre classes; it was the result of a purely local enthusiasm, and was erected by public subscription shortly after Mr. Joel Ham, B.A., arrived in the district and let it be understood that he did not intend to go away again. Having discovered that it was impossible to make anything else of Mr. Joel Ham, Waddy resolved to make a schoolmaster of him. A meeting was held in the Drovers' Arms, numerous speeches, all much more eloquently expressive of the urgent need of convenient scholastic institutions than the orators imagined, were delivered by representative men, and a resolution embodying the determination of the residents to erect a substantial building and install Mr. J. Ham, B.A., as headmaster was carried unanimously.

The original contributors were not expected to donate money towards the good cause; they gave labour and material. The work of erection was commenced next day. Neither plans nor specifications were supplied, and every contributor was his own architect. Timber of all sorts and shapes came in from fifty sources. The men of the day shift at the mines worked at the building in the evening; those on

the four-o'clock shift put in an hour or two in the morning, and mates off the night shift lent a hand at any time during the day, one man taking up the work where the other left off. Consequently—and as there was no ruling mind and no general design—the school when finished seemed to lack continuity, so to speak. As an architectural effort it displayed evidence of many excellent intentions, but could not be called a brilliant success as a whole—although one astute Parliamentary candidate did secure an overwhelming majority of votes in Waddy after declaring the schoolhouse to be an ornament to the township. The public-spirited persons who contributed windows, it was tacitly agreed, were quite justified in putting in those windows according to the dictates of their own fancy, even if the result was somewhat bizarre. Jock Summers gave a bell hung in a small gilded dome, and this was fixed on the roof right in the centre of the building, mainly for picturesque effect; but as there was no rope attached and no means of reaching the bell—and it never occurred to anybody to rectify the deficiency—Jock's gift remained to the end merely an ornamental adjunct. So also with Sam Brierly's Gothic portico. Sam expended much time and ingenuity in constructing the portico, and it was built on to the street end of the schoolhouse, although there was no door there, the only entrance being at the back.

The building was opened with a tea-fight and a dance, and answered its purpose very well up to the time of the first heavy rains; then studies had to be postponed indefinitely, for the floor was a foot under water. A call was made upon the united strength of the township, and the

building was lifted bodily and set down again on piles. When the open space between the ground and the floor was boarded up, the residents were delighted to find that the increased height had given the structure quite an imposing appearance. Alas! before six months had passed the place was found to be going over on one side. Waddy watched this failing with growing uneasiness. When the collapse seemed inevitable, the male adults were again bidden to an onerous public duty; they rolled up like patriots, and with a mighty effort pushed the school up into the perpendicular propping it there with stout stays. That answered excellently for a time, but eventually the wretched house began to slant in the opposite direction. Once more the men of Waddy attended in force, and spent an arduous half-day hoisting it into an upright position, and securing it there with more stays. It took the eccentric building a long time to decide upon its next move; then it suddenly lurched forward a foot or more, and after that slipped an inch or two farther out of plumb every day. But the ingenuity of Waddy was not exhausted: a few hundred feet of rope and a winch were borrowed from the Peep o' Day; the rope was run round the schoolhouse, and the building was promptly hauled back into shape and fastened down with long timbers running from its sides to a convenient red-gum stump at the back. Thus it remained for many years, bulging at the sides, pitching forward, and straining at its tethers like an eager hound in a leash.

It was literally a humming hot day at Waddy; the pulsing whirr of invisible locusts filled the whole air with a drowsy hum, and from the flat at the back of the township, where a

few thousand ewes and lambs were shepherded amongst the quarry holes, came another insistent droning in a deeper note, like the murmur of distant surf. No one was stirring: to the right and left along the single thin wavering line of unpainted weatherworn wooden houses nothing moved but mirage waters flickering in the hollows of the ironstone road. Equally deserted was the wide stretch of brown plain, dotted with poppet legs and here and there a whim, across the dull expanse of which Waddy seemed to peer with stupid eyes.

From within the school were heard alternately, with the regularity of a mill, the piping of an old cracked voice and the brave chanting of a childish chorus. Under the school, where the light was dim and the air was decidedly musty, two small boys were crouched, playing a silent game of 'stag knife.' Besides being dark and evil-smelling under there, it was damp; great clammy masses of cobweb hung from the joists and spanned the spaces between the piles. The place was haunted by strange and fearsome insects, too, and the moving of the classes above sent showers of dust down between the cracks in the worn floor. But those boys were satisfied that they were having a perfectly blissful time, and were serenely happy in defiance of unpropitious surroundings. They were 'playing the wag,' and to be playing the wag under any circumstances is a guarantee of pure felicity to the average healthy boy.

Probably the excessive heat had suggested to Dick Haddon the advisability of spending the afternoon under the school instead of within the close crowded room; at any rate he suggested it to Jacker McKnight, commonly known as

Jacker Mack, and now after an hour of it the boys were still jubilant. The game had to be played with great caution, and conversation was conducted in whispers when ideas could not be conveyed in dumb show. All that was going on in the room above was distinctly audible to the deserters below, and the joy of camping there out of the reach of Joel Ham, B.A., and beyond all the trials and tribulations of the Higher Fifth, and hearing other fellows being tested, and hectorred, and caned, was too tremendous for whisperings, and must be expressed in wild rollings and contortions and convulsive kicking.

'Parrot Cann, will you kindly favour me with a few minutes on the floor?'

It was the old cracked voice, flavoured with an ominous irony. Dick paused in the middle of a throw with a cocked ear and upturned eyes; Jacker Mack grinned all across his broad face and winked meaningly. They heard the shuffling of a pair of heavily shod feet, and then the voice again.

'Parrot, my man, you are a comedian by instinct, and will probably live to be an ornament to the theatrical profession; but it is my duty to repress premature manifestations of your genius. Parrot, hold out!

They heard the swish of the cane and the school master's sarcastic comments between the strokes.

'Ah-h, that was a beauty! Once more, Parrot, my friend, if you please. Excellent! Excellent! We will try again. Practice of this kind makes for perfection, you know, Parrot. Good, good—very good! If you should be spoiled in the making, Parrot, you will not in your old age ascribe it to any paltry desire on my part to spare the rod, will you, Parrot?'

'S'help me, I won't, sir!

There was such a world of pathos in the wail with which Parrot replied that Dick choked in his efforts to repress his emotions. The lads heard the victim blubbing, and pictured his humorous contortions after every cut—for Parrot was weirdly and wonderfully gymnastic under punishment—and Jacker hugged himself and kicked ecstatically, and young Haddon bowed his forehead in the dirt and drummed with his toes, and gave expression to his exuberant hilarity in frantic pantomime. The rough and ready schoolboy is very near to the beginnings; his sense of humour has not been impaired by over-refinement, but remains somewhat akin to that of the gentle savage; and although his disposition to laugh at the misfortunes of his best friends may be deplorable from various points of view, it has not been without its influence in fashioning those good men who put on a brave face in the teeth of tribulation.

'Gee-rusalem! ain't Jo got a thirst?' whispered Dick when the spasm had passed.

'My oath, ain't he!' replied Jacker, 'but he was drunk up afore twelve.'

It is necessary to explain here that the school committee, in electing Mr. Ham to the position of schoolmaster, compelled him to sign a formal agreement, drawn up in quaint legal gibberish, in which it was specified that 'the herein afore-mentioned Joel Ham, B.A.,' was to be limited to a certain amount of alcoholic refreshment per diem, and McMahan, at the Drovers' Arms, bound himself over to supply no more than the prescribed quantity; but it was

understood that this galling restriction did not apply to Mr. Ham on Saturdays and holidays.

The noises above subsided into the usual school drone, and the boys under the floor resumed their game. It was an extremely interesting game, closely contested. Each player watched the other's actions with an alert and suspicious eye, and this want of confidence led directly to the boys' undoing; for presently Dick detected Jacker in an attempt to deceive, and signalled 'Down!' with an emphatic gesture. 'Gerrou!' was the word framed by the lips of the indignant Jacker. Haddon gesticulated an angry protest, and McKnight's gestures and grimaces were intended to convey a wish that he might be visited with unspeakable pains and penalties if he were not an entirely virtuous and grievously misjudged small boy.

'It's a lie,' hissed Dick; 'it was down!

'You're another—it wasn't!

''Twas, I tell you!'

'Twasn't!

'Gimme my knife; I don't play with sharps an' sneaks.'

'Won't!'

Gimme it!

All caution had been forgotten by this time, voices were shrill, and eyes spoke of battle. Dick made at Jacker with a threatening fist, and Jacker, with an adroitness for which he was famous, met him with a clip on the shin from a copper-toed boot. Then the lads grappled and commenced a vigorous and enthusiastic battle in the dirt and amongst the cobweb curtains.

In the schoolroom above Joel Ham, startled from a dreamy drowsiness, heard with wonder fierce voices under his feet, the sounds of blows and of bumping heads, and saw his scholars all distracted. The master divined the truth in a very few minutes.

'Cann, Peterson, Moonlight,' he called, 'follow me.'

He selected a favourite cane from the rack, and strutted out with the curious boys at his heels.

'Now then, Peterson,' he said, and he paused with artful preoccupation to double his cane over and under, and critically examine the end thereof, 'you are a very observant youth, Peterson; you will tell me how those boys got under the school.'

'Dunno,' said Peterson, assuming the expression of an aged cow.

The master seized him by the collar.

'Peterson, you have the faculty of divination. I give you till I have counted ten to exert it. I am counting, Peterson.'

Very often the schoolmaster's language was Greek to the scholars, but his meaning was never in doubt for a moment.

'Eight, Peterson, nine.'

Peterson slouched along a few yards, and kicked stupidly and resentfully at a loose board.

'Might 'a' got in there,' he growled. 'Why couldn't you 'a' asked

Moonlight?—he don' mind bein' a sneak.'

But Mr. Ham was down on his knees removing the loose board, and for two or three minutes after crouched at the opening like a famished yellow cat at a rat-hole, awaiting his opportunity. Meanwhile the fight under the school was being

prosecuted with unabated fury. Dick and Jacker gripped like twin bull-terriers, rolling and tumbling about in the confined space, careless of everything but the important business in hand. Suddenly Mr. Ham made his spring, and a smart haul brought a leg to light. Another tug, and a second leg shot forth.

'Pull, boys!' he cried.

Moonlight seized the other limb, and a good tug brought the two boys out into the open, still fighting enthusiastically and apparently oblivious of their surroundings. Two soldier ants never fought with greater determination or with such a whole-souled devotion to the cause. Over and over they tumbled in the dust, clutching hair, hammering ribs, and grunting and grasping, blind, deaf, and callous as logs; and Joel Ham stood above them with the familiar cynical twist on his blotched visage, twisting his cane and making audible comments, but offering no further interference.

'After you, my boys—after you. There is no hurry, Haddon, I can wait as you are so busy. McKnight, your future is assured. The prize ring is your sphere: there wealth and glory await you. Peterson, you see here how degraded that boy becomes who forgets those higher principles which it is my earnest effort to instil into the hearts and minds of the boys of this depraved township. Cann, my boy, behold how brutalising is ungoverned instinct.'

But, wearying of the contest, the master made a sudden descent upon Jacker, and tore him from his enemy's grasp. The effort brought Dick to his feet, panting and still eager for the fray. He could not see an inch beyond his nose, and for a few moments moved about fiercely, feeling for his foe.

'D'you gimme best?' he spluttered. 'If you don't, come on—I ain't done up!' Then he flung the curtain of cobweb from his eyes, and the situation flashed upon him in all its grim significance. For a swift moment he thought of flight, but the master's grip was on his collar.

'Blowed if it ain't Jo,' he murmured in his consternation, and yielded meekly, like one for whom Fate had proved too strong.

The schoolmaster's white-lashed eyelids blinked rapidly for a second or so, and he screwed his face into a hard wrinkled grin of gratification.

'Yes, Ginger, my lad,' he said genially, 'Jo, at your service—very much at your service; and yours, McKnight. We will go inside now, boys. The sun is painfully hot, and you are fatigued.'

He marched his captives before him into the school room and ranged them against the wall, under the wide-open wondering eyes of the scholars, by whom even the most trifling incident of rebellion was always welcomed with glee as a break in the dull monotony of Joel Ham's peculiar system. But this was no trifling incident, it was a tremendous outrage and a delightful mystery; for the boys as they stood there presented to the amazed classes a strange and amazing spectacle, and were clothed in an original and, so far as the children were concerned, an inexplicable disguise. Fighting and tumbling about under the school house, Haddon and McKnight had gathered much mud, but more cobwebs. In fact, they had wiped up so many webs that they were covered from head to foot in the clammy dusty masses. Their hats were lost early in the

encounter, and their hair was full of cobwebs; sticky curtains of cobweb hung about their faces, and swathed them from top to toe in what looked like a dirty grey fur. Each boy had cleared his eyes of the thick veil, but so inhuman and unheard of was their appearance that there was presently a suspicion amongst the scholars that the master had captured two previously unknown specimens of the animal kingdom, and consequently further astonishing developments might be looked for.

CHAPTER II.

Mr. HAM, with wise forethought, carefully locked the door and pocketed the key after disposing of the lads; and this was well, for Dick Haddon, fully appreciating the possibilities of the situation, was already plotting—plotting with every faculty of an active and inventive mind.

The master faced his prisoners, and stood musing over them like a pensive but kindly cormorant. Mr. Joel Ham, B.A., was a small thin man with a deceitful appearance of weakness. There was a peculiar indecision about all his joints that made the certainty of his spring and the vigour of his grip matters of wonder to all those new boys who ventured to presume upon his seeming infirmities. He had a scraggy red neck, a long beak-like nose, and queer slate-coloured eyes with pale lashes; his hair was thin and very fine in colour and texture, strangely like that of a yellow cat; and face, neck, and nose were mottled with patches of small purple veins. To-day he was dressed in a long seedy black coat, a short seedy black vest, and a pair of now moleskins, glaringly white, and much too long and too large.

'Haddon,' said the master in a reflective tone, 'you are not looking as neat as usual. You need dusting. I will perform that kind office presently, and, believe me, I will do it well. Jacker, I intend to leave you standing here for a few moments to cool. You may have noticed, boys, that the youthful form when over-heated or possessed with unusual excitement has not that poignant susceptibility which might be thought necessary to the adequate appreciation of a judicious lambasting. Has that ever occurred to you, McKnight?'

Jacker shifted his feet uneasily, rolled his body, and, knowing that nothing could aggravate his offence, answered sullenly:

'Oh, dry up!'

Mr. Ham grinned at the boy in silence for a few moments, and then returned to his high stool and desk. Mr. Ham never made the slightest effort to maintain before his scholars that dignity which is supposed to be essential to the success of a pedagogue. In addressing the boys he used their correct names, or the nicknames liberally bestowed upon them by their mates, indiscriminately, and showed no resentment whatever when he heard himself alluded to as Jo, or Hamlet, or the Beetle, his most frequent appellations in the playground. He kept a black bottle in his desk, at the neck of which he habitually refreshed himself before the whole school; and he addressed the children with an elaborate and caustic levity in a thin shaky voice quite twenty years too old for him. His humour was thrown away upon the rising generation of Waddy, and might have been supposed to be the cat-like pawing of a vicious mind; but

Joel Ham was not cruel, and although when occasion demanded he could use the cane with exceeding smartness, he frequently overlooked misdemeanours that might have justified an attack, and was never betrayed into administering unmerited cuts even when his black bottle was empty and his thirst most virulent.

In spite of his eccentricities and his weaknesses, and the fact that he was neither respected nor dreaded, Ham brought his scholars on remarkably well. There were three big classes in the room—first, third, and fifth—and a higher and lower branch of each; he managed all, with the assistance of occasional monitors selected from the best pupils. Good order prevailed in the school, for little that went on there escaped the master's alert eye. Even when he drowsed at his desk, as he sometimes did on warm afternoons, the work was not delayed, for he was known to have a trick of awakening with a jerk, and smartly nailing a culprit or a dawdler.

The school to-day was in a tense and excitable condition, now heightened to fever by the two cobwebbed mysteries standing against the wall, but the imperative rattle of Joel's cane on the desk quickly induced a specious show of industry.

'Gable!'

The individual addressed, a big scholar in the Lower Third, was so absorbed in the spectacle provided by Haddon and McKnight that he failed to hear the master's voice, and continued staring stupidly with all his eyes.

'Gable! This way, my dear child.'

Gable started guiltily, and then fell into confusion. He climbed awkwardly, out of his seat, and advanced hesitatingly with shuffling feet towards the master. It was now evident that Gable was not a large boy, but a little old man, slightly built, with a round ruddy clean-shaven face and thick white hair. But his manner was that of a boy of eight.

'Hold out, my young friend!' Joel commanded, with an expressive flourish of his cane.

Gable held out his hand; his toothless mouth formed itself into a dark oval, his eyes distended with painful expectancy, and he assumed the shrinking attitude of the very small boy who expects the fall of the cane. The situation was absurd, but no one smiled. Ham raised the extended hand a little with the end of the dreaded weapon.

'You are going the right way to come to a dishonoured old age, Gable,' he said, and the cane went up, but the cut was not delivered. 'There,' continued the master, 'I forgive you in consideration of your extreme youth. Go to your place, and try to set a better example to the older boys.'

The old man trotted back to his seat, grinning all over his face, and set to work at his book with an appearance of intense zeal; and Joel Ham turned his attention to the prime culprits. Having marched the youngsters from the front desk of the third class, he drew desk and form forward into the middle of the clear space, and then beckoned to McKnight.

'Jacker, my man,' he said cheerfully, 'bring your slate and sit here. I have a little job for you.'

Dick, standing alone, watched his mate seat himself at the desk, elated for a moment with the idea that perhaps Jo

was not going to regard their offence as particularly heinous after all; but his better judgment scouted the idea, and he returned to his scrutiny of the wall. There was a weak spot near where Hector, Peterson's billy-goat, had butted his way through on a memorable occasion, and escape was still a comforting contingency.

The master approached McKnight with a pencil as if to set a lesson, but this was merely a ruse; Jacker was a hard-headed vicious youth whose favourite kick Ham wisely reckoned with on an occasion like this. To the boy's surprise and disgust he was presently seized by the neck and hauled forward on to the desk. His legs, being against the seat, which was attached to the desk, were quite useless for defence, so that he was a helpless victim under the chastening rod. It was a degrading attitude, and the presence of the girls made the punishment a disgrace to rankle and burn. Jacker, for pride and the credit of his boyhood made no sound under the first dozen cuts; but his younger brother Ted, from his place in the Lower Fifth, set up a lugubrious wail of sympathy almost immediately, and, as his feelings were more and more wrought upon by the painful sight, his wailing developed into shrill and tearful abuse of the master.

'You let him alone, see!' yelled Ted, when Jacker, unable longer to contain himself, uttered a dismal cry.

'Hit some one yer size—go on, hit some one yer size!' screamed Ted.

But Mr. Ham's whole attention was devoted to his task, and the younger McKnight's threats, commands, and

warnings were entirely ignored, although the boy continued to utter them between his heart broken sobs.

'Mind who you're hittin'! You'll suffer for this, Hamlet, you'll see!

We'll get some one what'll show you! Rocks for you nex' Saterdee!

Ted howled, Jacker howled, but the master caned on until he thought he had quite accomplished his duty in that particular; then he let the limp youth slide back into his seat.

Mr. Ham returned to his high stool to rest and recuperate. Throughout the proceedings he had displayed no heat whatever, and when he addressed Jacker it was with his usual bland irony.

'You should thank me for my pains, my boy, but youth is proverbially ungrateful. You will think better of my efforts a few years hence; meanwhile I can afford to wait for the verdict of your riper judgment, Jacker—I can afford to wait, my boy.'

Jacker's only reply to this was a long wail expressive of a great disgust. That outburst was too much for the already over-wrought youngster in the Lower Fifth; starting up with a cry, Ted snatched one of the leaden ink-wells from its cell in the desk, and took aim at the master's head. The well struck the wall just above its mark, and scattered its contents in Joel Ham's pale hair, in his eyes, down his cheeks, and all over his white moles. Amazement—blind, round-eyed, dumb amazement—possessed the school, and for a few seconds a dead silence prevailed. The spell was broken by Dick Haddon, who discovered his opportunity, plunged like a

diver at the weak spot in the wall, went clean through and disappeared from view. Ted McKnight, who had awakened to the enormity of his crime at the sight of the master knuckling the ink out of his eyes, and had gone grey to the lips in his trepidation, looking anxiously to the right and left for a refuge, saw Dickie's departure; jumping the desk in front he rushed at the aperture the latter had left in the wall, and was gone in the twinkling of an eye.

The master mopped the ink from his hair and his face with a sheet of blotting paper, and calling Belman, Cann, Peterson, Jinks, and Slogan, made for the door. Already Dick Haddon was halfway across the flat, scattering the browsing sheep to the right and left in his flight, and Ted was following at his best pace.

'After them!' cried the master. 'Two whole days' holiday for you if you run them down.'

The pursuit was taken up cheerfully enough, but it was quite hopeless. The breakaways were heading for the line of bush, and the sapling scrub along the creek was so thick that the boys would have been perfectly secure under its cover, even if the pursuers were not in hearty sympathy with the pursued, and the pursuit were not a miserable and perfidious pretence.

Mr. Ham, recognising after a few minutes how matters really stood, returned to the school. His approach had been signalled by a scout at one of the windows, and he found the classes all in order and suspiciously industrious, and Jacker McKnight still sitting with his head sunk upon his arms—a monument of sturdy resentment.

'My boys,' said the master, looking ludicrously piebald after his ink bath, 'before resuming duties I wish to draw your attention to the crass foolishness of which our young friends Haddon and McKnight are guilty. You perceive that their action is not diplomatic, eh?'

'Ye—yes, sir,' piped a dubious voice here and there.

'To be sure. Had they remained they would have been caned; as they have run away, they will receive a double dose and certain extra pains and penalties, and meanwhile they suffer the poignant pangs of anticipation. Anticipation, Jacker, my boy, the smart of future punishments, is the true hell-flame.'

Jacker replied with a grunt of derisive and implacable bitterness, but the schoolmaster seemed much comforted by his apophthegm, and stood for several minutes surveying the back of McKnight's head, and wearing a benignant and thoughtful smile.

CHAPTER III.

WADDY was soon possessed of the facts of the shameful acts of insubordination at the school and the escape of Dick Haddon and Ted McKnight, and nobody—according to everybody's wise assurances—was the least bit surprised. The fathers of the township (and the mothers, too) had long since given Dick up as an irresponsible and irreclaimable imp. One large section declared the boy to be 'a bit gone,' which was generally Waddy's simple and satisfactory method of accounting for any attribute of man, woman, or child not in conformity with the dull rule of conduct prevailing at Waddy. Another section persisted in its belief

that 'the boy Haddon' was possessed with several peculiar devils of lawlessness and unrest, which could only be exorcised by means of daily 'hidings,' long abstinence from any diet more inflammatory than bread and water, and the continuous acquisition of great quantities of Scripture.

An extraordinary meeting of the School Committee was held at the Drovers' Arms that evening to confer with Joel Ham, B.A., and consider what was best to be done under the circumstances. The men of the township recognised that it was their bounden duty to support the master in an affair of this kind. When occasion arose they assisted in the capture of vagrant youths, and when Joel imagined a display of force advisable they attended at the punishment and rendered such assistance as was needful in the due enforcement of discipline. It was understood by all that the school would lose prestige and efficiency if Haddon and McKnight were not taken and at once subjected to the rules of the establishment and the rod of the master.

The meeting was quite informal. It was held in the bar, and the discussion of the vital matter in hand was concurrent with the absorption of McMahan's beer. Mr. Ham's best attention was given to the latter object.

'Bring the boys to me, gentlemen,' he said, 'and I will undertake to induce in them a wholesome contrition and a proper respect for letters—temporarily, at least.'

Neither of the lads had yet returned to his home; but the paternal McKnight promised, like a good citizen, that immediately his son was available he would be reduced to subjection with a length of belting, and then handed over to the will of the scholastic authority without any reservation.

Mr. McKnight was commended for his public spirit; and it was then agreed that a member of the Committee should wait upon Widow Haddon to invite her co-operation, and point out the extent to which her son's mental and moral development would be retarded by a display of weakness on her part at a crisis of this kind?

Mr. Ephraim Shine volunteered for this duty. Ephraim was a tall gaunt man, with hollow cheeks, a leathery complexion, and large feet. He walked or sat with his eyes continually fixed upon these feet—reproachfully, it seemed—as if their disproportion were a source of perennial woe; he carried his arms looped behind him, and had acquired a peculiar stoop—to facilitate his vigilant guardianship of his feet, apparently. Mr. Shine, as superintendent of the Waddy Wesleyan Chapel, represented a party that had long since broken away from the School Committee, which was condemned in prayer as licentious and ungodly, and left to its wickedness when it exhibited a determination to stand by Joel Ham, a scoffer and a drinker of strong drinks, as against a respectable, if comparatively unlettered, nominee of the Chapel and the Band of Hope. His presence at the committee meeting to-night was noted with surprise, although it excited no remark; and his offer to interview the widow was accepted with gratitude as a patriotic proposal. There was only one dissentient—Rogers, a burly faceman from the Silver Stream.

'Don't send Shine to cant an' snuffle, an' preach the poor woman into a fit o' the miserables,' he said.

Ephraim lifted his patient eyes to Rogers's face for a moment with an expression of meek reproof, then let them

slide back to his boots again, but answered nothing. The enmity of the two was well known in Waddy. Rogers was a worldly man who drank and swore, and who loved a fight as other men loved a good meal; and Shine, as the superintendent, must withhold his countenance from so grievous a sinner. Besides, there was a belief that at some time or another the faceman had thrashed Shine, who was searcher at the Stream in his week-day capacity, and for that reason was despised by the miners, and regarded as a creature apart. Ephraim, it was remarked, was always particularly careful in searching Rogers when he came off shift, in the hope, as the men believed, of one day finding a secreted nugget, and getting even with his enemy by gaoling him for a few years.

As Ephraim passed out from the bar he again allowed his eyes to roll up and meet those of his enemy from the dark shadow of his thick brows.

'Don't forget the little widow was sweet on Frank Hardy before you jugged him, Tinribs,' said the miner.

Tinribs was a name bestowed upon the superintendent by the youth of Waddy, and called after him by irreverent small boys from convenient cover or under the shelter of darkness. He found the Widow Haddon at home. She it was who answered his knock.

'I have come from the School Committee, ma'am,' he said, still intent upon his boots.

'About Dickie, is it? Come in.'

Mrs. Haddon was dressmaker-in-ordinary to the township, and her otherwise carefully tended kitchen was littered with clippings and bits of material. She resumed her task by the

lamp a soon as the delegate of the School Committee was comfortably seated.

'Has Richard come home, ma'am?' Ephraim was an orator, and prided himself on his command of language.

The widow shook her head. 'No,' she said composedly. 'I don't think he will come home to-night.'

'We have had a committee meeting, missus,' said Ephraim, examining the toe of his left boot reproach fully, 'an' it's understood we've got to catch these boys.'

'What!' cried Mrs. Haddon, dropping her work into her lap. 'You silly men are going to make a hunt of it? Then, let me tell you, you will not get that boy of mine to-morrow, nor this week, nor next. Was ever such a pack of fools! Let Dickie think he is being hunted, and he'll be a bushranger, or a brigand chief, or a pirate, or something desperately wicked in that amazin' head of his, and you won't get a-nigh him for weeks, not a man Jack of you! Dear, dear, dear, you men—a set of interferin', mutton-headed creatures!

'He's an unregenerate youth—that boy of yours, ma'am.'

'Is he, indeed?' Mrs. Haddon's handsome face flushed, and she squared her trim little figure. 'Was he that when he went down the broken winze to poor Ben Holden? Was he that when he brought little Kitty Green and her pony out of the burnin' scrub? Was he all a little villain when he found you trapped in the cleft of a log under the mount there, when the Stream men wouldn't stir a foot to seek you?

During this outburst Shine had twisted his boots in all directions, and examined them minutely from every point of view.

'No, no, ma'am,' he said, 'not all bad, not at all; but—ah, the—ah, influence of a father is missing, Mrs. Haddon.'

'That's my boy's misfortune, Mr. Superintendent.'

'It—it might be removed.'

'Eh? What's that you say?'

The widow eyed her visitor sharply, but he was squirming over his unfortunate feet, and apparently suffering untold agonies on their account.

'The schoolmaster must be supported, missus,' he said hastily.

'Discipline, you know. Boys have to be mastered.'

'To be sure; but you men, you don't know how. My Dick is the best boy in the school, sometimes.'

'Sometimes, ma'am, yes.'

'Yes, sometimes, and would be always if you men had a pen'orth of ideas.

Boys should be driven sometimes and sometimes coaxed.'

'And how'd you coax him what played wag under the very school, fought there, an' then broke out of the place like a burgerler?'

'I know, I know—_that's bad; but it's been a fearful tryin' day, an' allowances should be made.'

'Then, if he comes home you'll give him over to be—ah, dealt with?'

'Certainly, superintendent; I am not a fool, an' I want my boy taught. But don't you men go chasm' those lads; they'll just enjoy it, an' you'll do no good. You leave Dickie to me, an' I'll have him home here in two shakes. Dickie's a high-spirited boy, an' full o' the wild fancies of boys. He's done this sort o' thing before. Run away from home once to be a

sailor, an' slep' for two nights in a windy old tree not a hundred yards from his own comfortable bed, imaginin' he was what he called on the foretop somethin'. But I know well enough how to work on his feelings.'

'A father, ma'am, would be the savin' o' that lad.'

Mrs. Haddon dropped her work again and her dark eyes snapped; but Ephraim Shine had lifted one boot on to his knee, and was examining a hole in the sole with bird-like curiosity.

'When I think my boy needs special savin' I'll send for you, Mr. Shine—

'It'd be a grave responsibility, a trial an' a constant tribulation, but I offer myself. I'll be a father to your boy, ma'am, barrin' objections.'

'An' what is meant by that, Mr. Shine?'

The widow, flushed of face, with her work thrust forward in her lap and a steely light in her fine eyes, regarded the searcher steadily.

'An offer of marriage to yourself is meant, Mrs. Haddon, ma'am.'

Shine's eyes came sliding up under his brows till they encountered those of Mrs. Haddon; then they fell again suddenly. The little widow tapped the table impressively with her thimble finger, and her breast heaved.

'Do you remember Frank Hardy, Ephraim Shine?'

'To be certain I do.'

'Well, man, you may have heard what Frank Hardy was to me before he went to—to—'

'To gaol, Mrs. Haddon? Yes.'