

Partners of the Tide

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CHAPTER I.

"WAS you callin' to buy one of them turnovers, bub?" casually inquired Mr. Clark, ceasing to gaze at his steaming boots, which were planted against the bulging center of the station stove, and turning toward the boy at the lunch counter.

"Yes, sir," said the boy. He had taken off one worsted mitten and held a five cent piece clutched tightly in his red fist.

The station agent wrapped the pastry in a piece of newspaper and handed it to his customer.

The boy, a youngster of about twelve years of age, with a freckled face and a pair of bright gray eyes, took his "turnover" to the setting in the corner of the waiting room and began to eat. He had on a worn cloth cap with an attachment that could be pulled down to cover the ears and a shabby overcoat of man's size, very much too large for him. As he munched the greasy crust and the thin layer of "evaporated" apple he looked around him with interest.

The station itself was like the average railway building on Cape Cod. Except for the sign "Harniss" that hung outside it might have been the station at Wellmouth, which he had seen so often. Battered settees around the walls; lithographs of steamers, time tables and year old announcements of excursions and county fairs hung above them; big store sets in a box of sawdust—all these were the regulation fixtures. Regulation also were the "refreshments" on the counter at the side—"turnovers" arranged copiously under a glass cover, with a dingy "Washington" pie under another cover and jars of striped stick candy, with boxes of "jaw-breakers" and similar sweets between.

It was snowing hard, and in the dusk of the winter evening the flakes rustled against the windows as if unseen old ladies in starched summer gowns were shivering in the storm and crowding to get a peep within. The air in the shut waiting room smelled of hot stove, sawdust, wet clothing and Mr. Clark's cigar. To this collection of perfumes was presently added the odor of kerosene as the station agent lit the big lamps in their brackets on the wall.

From outside came the sounds of creaking wheels and stamping horses, the stamping muffled by the snow which covered the ground.

The door opened, and a big man with a face of which gray whiskers and red nose were the most prominent features came stamping and puffing into the room. He jerked off a pair of leather gloves, playfully shook the congealed moisture from them down Mr. Clark's neck inside his collar, tossed a long whip into the corner and, holding his spread fingers over the stove, began to sing, "Whoo, Emma! How's the trav'lin'?"

"Hello, Barney Small! How's the trav'lin'?" "Have a rough time drivin' over?" "Oh, middlin', middlin'," replied the driver of the Orham stage, unbuttoning his overcoat and reaching for his pipe, "but this earth's a vale of tears anyhow, so what's the odds so long's you're happy. Hello, Dan!" The last a shouted greeting to the station agent in the little room, whose answer was a wave of the hand and a sidelong nod across the telegraph instrument.

"What's doin' over in Orham, Barney?" inquired Mr. Clark.

"Prissy and Tempy's adopted a boy." The agent evidently was interested.

"The old maids?"

"Yep, the old maids. I s'pose they come to realize that they needed a man 'round the house, but as there wa'n't no bids in that line they sort of compromised on a boy."

"You don't mean the Allen old maids that live down on the 'lower road,' do you?" asked Mr. Bodkin.

"Sartin. I said the old maids, didn't I? There's plenty of single women in Orham, but when you say the 'old maids' in our town everybody knows you mean Prissy and Tempy."

"What about the boy, Barney?" said the station agent, coming into the waiting room.

"Why," said Mr. Small, "it's this way: Seems that Prissy and Tempy's father, old Cap'n Darius Allen—her's been dead six years, or more now—had a niece named Sophia, that married Cap'n Ben Nickerson over to Wellmouth. Cap'n Ben and his wife had one son. I think the boy's name's Bradley. Anyhow Cap'n Ben and his wife was drowned off the Portuguese coast two years ago when Ben's bark was lost. Maybe you remember? Well, the boy was left at home that voyage with Ben's half brother, Solon Nickerson, so's the youngster could go to school. When his folks was drowned that way the boy kept on livin' with Solon till 'bout three weeks ago Solon was took with pneumonia and up and died. Prissy and Tempy's the only relations there was, you see, so it was left to them to say what should be done with the boy. I cal'late there must have been some high old pow-wowin' in the old house, but the old

maids are pretty conscientious spite of their bein' so everlastin' old maids, and they finally decided 'twas their duty to take the little feller to bring up. That's the way I heard the yarn. They kept it a secret until yesterday, but now the whole town's talkin' 'bout it. You see, it's such a good joke for them two to have a boy in the house. Why, Prissy's been used to shooin' every stray boy off the place as if he was a hen."

Mr. Small laughed so heartily at this that the others joined in. When the hilarity had subsided the station agent asked:

"When's the Nickerson boy comin' over from Wellmouth?"

"Why, today, come to think of it. He was to come up on the afternoon train from Wellmouth and go to Orham with me tonight. You ain't seen nothin'?"

The station agent interrupted him with a sidelong movement of the head. "Huh?" queried Mr. Small. Then he, in company with Mr. Clark and Mr. Bodkin, turned toward the corner of the waiting room.

The boy who had bought the apple "turnover," having finished the last crumb of that viand, had turned to the window and was looking out through a hole he had scraped in the frost on the pane. He had shaded his face with his hands to shut out the lamplight, and though he must have heard the conversation, his manner betrayed no interest in it.

Mr. Small interrogated the station agent by raising his eyebrows. The agent whispered, "Shouldn't wonder," and added, "He came on the up train this afternoon."

"Hey, boy," said Mr. Clark, who never let consideration for other people interfere with his own curiosity, "what's your name?"

The boy turned from the window and, blinking a little as the light struck his eyes, faced the group by the door. His freckled cheeks glistened as the light shone upon them; but, as he knew this, he pulled the big sleeve of the overcoat across his face and rubbed them dry.

"What's your name, sonny?" said the stage driver kindly.

"Nickerson," said the boy in a low tone.

"I want to know. Your fust name ain't Bradley, is it?"

"Yes, sir."

"Sho, well, there now! Guess you're goin' to ride over with me then. I drive the Orham coach. Hum, well, I declare!" And Mr. Small pulled his beard in an embarrassed fashion.

"Come over to the stove and get warm, won't you?" asked the station agent.

"I ain't cold," was the reply.

But in spite of this cheerful prophecy a full fifteen minutes passed before the train, which had been started from



"What's your name, sonny?"

Boston with the vague idea that some time or other it might get to Provincetown, came coughing and panting round the curve and drew up at the station platform. Only one passenger got out at the Harniss station, and he, stopping for a moment to hand his trunk check to the station agent, walked briskly into the waiting room and slammed the door behind him.

"Hello," he hailed, pulling off a buckskin glove and holding out a big hand to the stage driver. "Barney, how's she headin'?"

Mr. Small grinned and took the proffered hand.

"Well, for the land's sake, Ez Titcomb!" he exclaimed. "Where'd you drop from? Thought you was somewhere off the coast between New York and Portland jest 'bout now."

"Got shore leave for'n't 'bout now," said the newcomer, unbuttoning his overcoat with a smart jerk and throwing it wide open. "Schooner sprung a leak off 'Gaz bee' last trip, and she's

hailed up at East Boston for repairs. Bad weather, ain't it? Hello, Lon! How'd you like it?"

Mr. Clark and his friend grinned and responded. "How are you, Cap'n Ez?"

The arrival was a short, thickset man with a sunburned face, sharp eyes, hair that was a reddish brown sprinkled with gray and a close clipped mustache of the same color. He wore a blue overcoat over a blue suit and held a cigar firmly in one corner of his mouth. His movements were quick and sharp and he slipped out his sentences with vigor.

"Full cargo tonight?" he asked of Mr. Small, who was buttoning his overcoat and pulling on his gloves.

"Pretty nigh an empty hold," was the reply. "Only 'bout one and a half goin' over. You're the one, and the boy here's the half. All aboard! Come on, Brad. You and the cap'n git inside, while me and Dan git the dunnage on the rack."

The boy picked up the carpet bag and followed Mr. Small out to the rear platform of the station, where the coach, an old fashioned, dingy vehicle, drawn by four sleepy horses, stood waiting.

Captain Titcomb followed, his overcoat flapping in the wind.

"Here, Barney," he observed, "have a cigar to smoke on the road. Have one, Dan? Here, Lon; here's a couple for you and Ike. Who's the little feller?" he added in a whisper to the station agent.

"Ben Nickerson's boy from Wellmouth. He's comin' down to Orham to live with the old maids. They've adopted him."

"The old maids? Not the old maids? Not Prissy and Tempy?"

"Yep. All right, Barney; I'm comin'."

The station agent hurried away to help the driver with the captain's sea chest, and his owner, apparently overcome with astonishment, climbed mutely into the coach, where his fellow passenger had preceded him.

The old vehicle rocked and groaned as the heavy chest was strapped on the racks behind. Then it tipped again as Mr. Small climbed clumsily to the driver's seat.

"All ashore that's goin' shore!" shouted Mr. Small. "So long, Dan. Git 'em, Two-forty!"

The whip cracked, the coach reeled on its springs, and the whole equipage disappeared in the snow and blackness.

The boy, Bradley Nickerson, had never ridden in a stagecoach before, and after ten or fifteen minutes of jolt and roll he decided that he never wanted to ride in one again.

Suddenly Captain Titcomb, who had been silent so far, spoke.

"Heavy sea on tonight," he observed. "Tears to me Barney'd better take a reef. She's rollin' consider'ble."

The boy laughed and said, "Yes, sir."

"Goin' all the way to Orham?" asked the captain.

"Got folks over there, I presume likely. Friends or nothin' but jest relations?"

"Relations, I-I guess."

"Bo! Well, I've got a good many relations over there myself. Fact is, I've got relations seems to me, 'most everywhere. Father used to have so many of 'em that when he went visitin' he used to call it 'goin' cousinin'."

My name's Titcomb. What do they call you when your back ain't turned?"

The boy laughed again in a puzzled way—he scarcely knew what to make of his questioner—and said that his name was Bradley Nickerson.

"Nickerson, hey? That settles it; you're a Cape Codd. Minute I meet anybody named Nickerson I always know they've got the same kind of sand in their boots that I have. Is it Obed Nickerson's folks you're goin' to see?"

"No, sir. I'm goin' to live with Miss Priscilla Allen. Her and her sister. They was some of mother's people."

"Sho, well I swan!" muttered the captain. "Prissy and Tempy, hey? Then Dan wa'n't foolin'. And you're goin' to live with 'em?"

"Yes, sir. Do you know 'em?"

"Who-me? Oh, yes! I know 'em. I'm a partic'lar friend of theirs—that is," he added cautiously, "I call 'em once in awhile jest to say 'How are you? Why? You didn't hear any of them fellers at the depot say anything 'bout me and them did you? Nol Well, all right, I jest thought—Oh, yes! I know 'em. Nice folks as ever was, but what you might call a little mite 'st in their ways. Do you always wipe your feet when you come into the house?"

"Why—why—yes, sir, if I don't forget it."

"All right. It's a good habit to git into, specially if you're goin' to walk on Prissy's floors. Sometimes I've wished I could manage to put my feet in my pocket when I've been there. I wonder if I knew your father? What was his name?"

Bradley told his father's name and in response to the captain's tactful questioning a good deal more besides. In fact, before long Captain Titcomb knew all about the boy, where he came from, how he happened to come and all the rest. And Bradley for his part learned that his companion commanded the coasting schooner Thomas Doane, that he had been a sailor ever since he was fourteen, that he had a marvelous fund of sea yarns and knew how to spin them and that he (Bradley) liked him.

By and by the captain noticed that the boy's replies to his cheerful observations were growing rather incoherent, and, suspecting the reason, he ceased to talk. A few minutes later he leaned forward and smiled to find his

fellow traveler, who had slipped down upon the cushion, fast asleep.

When Bradley awoke, Captain Titcomb was standing on the ground by the open door of the coach.

"Good night, Brad," he said. "Here's where I'm bound for. You've got a five minute ride or so more 'fore you git to the old maids—that is, to Prissy and Tempy's. I'll see you tomorrow. You and me's goin' to be chums, you know."

The door was shut. Mr. Small struck up "Camptown Races," and the stage bumped on again. This time the boy did not sleep, but, holding on to the strap, tried to peer through the snow-crusted window. He saw a light here and there, but little else. After a short interval the coach turned a sharp corner, rolled on for perhaps twice its length and then stopped.

Mr. Small opened the door, and Bradley, looking past him, saw the side of a large house and a lighted doorway, with two female figures, one plump and the other slender, standing in it. From behind them the lamplight streamed warm and bright and sent their shadows almost to his feet.

"Come on, bub," said the stage driver. "Here's where you git out. Prissy!" he shouted, "here's your new boarder."

CHAPTER II.

THE plump woman, whom Mr. Small had addressed as "Miss Prissy," was counting into the "stage driver's" palm a sum in small change from a portentous black wallet that fastened with a strap.

"Good night," said the driver, pocketing the money, with a grunt and a jingle. Like the boy, he had been very careful not to step off the mat. Good night, Miss Tempy. Snow's lettin' up a little mite. Guess 'twill be clear by mornin'. Good night, Brad."

The plump lady closed the door behind him just in time to shut out the opening notes of the "Sweet By and By." Then she dropped the book into the staple, wound the leather strap carefully about the wallet, placed the latter in a compartment of a tall chest of drawers in the corner, turned the key upon it and put the key under the alabaster candlestick on the mantel. Then she turned to the boy, who, holding his carpet bag with both hands, still stood uneasily on the mat, while the slim lady fidgeted in front of him.

"Bradley," said the plump lady—she was dressed in some sort of black material that rustled and wore a lace collar, jet earrings and a breastpin with a braided lock of hair in the center of it—"Bradley, we're real glad to see you, Miss Tempy."

"Yes, Bradley," coincided "Miss Tempy," "we're real glad to see you."

She was the younger of the two and was gowned in what the boy learned later was her "brown poplin." Her hair was not worn plain, like her sister's, but had a little bunch of curls over each ear. She also wore a lace breastpin, but her earrings were gold.

Bradley shook the extended hands. Miss Prissy's red and dimpled and Miss Tempy's thin and white, with two old fashioned rings on the fingers.

"Won't you—won't you set down?" ventured Miss Tempy after a rather awkward pause.

"Why, yes, of course," said Miss Prissy, "and take your things right off—do."

Bradley placed the carpetbag on the corner of the mat and pulled off the shabby overcoat. The jacket and trousers beneath were also shabby, but it was at his shoes that Miss Prissy glanced, and, oddly enough, their condition served to break the formality.

"My goodness me!" she ejaculated. "Jest look at his poor feet, Tempy Allen! Come right over to the stove this minute and take off those shoes. They're soppin' wet through."

"No, ma'am," protested the boy. "They ain't, honest. They only look so."

"Don't tell me!" commanded Miss Prissy. "Go right over to the stove this minute."

Bradley reluctantly obeyed, stepping gingerly across the spotless oilcloth and taking as long strides as possible. It did not add to his comfort to see Miss Tempy shake the melting snow into the center of the rope mat, fold the latter carefully together and disappear with it into the kitchen.

Miss Prissy piloted him to the chintz covered rocker by the big "airtight" stove. Then she proceeded to unlace the patched brogans, commenting in an undertone upon the condition of the stockings beneath.

"I'm 'fraid," said Bradley fearfully, "that I've got some snow water on your floor, ma'am."

"Don't say a word. Thank goodness your feet ain't so wet as I thought they was. Put 'em right on the rail of the stove there while I go up to the garret and get those slippers of father's. I'll be right back."

She hurried out of the room just as her sister entered it by the other door.

"Now, set right still," said Miss Tempy, bustling about with the steaming teakettle in her hand. "I'm goin' to make you some pepper tea. There's nothin' in the world like pepper tea when you're likely to catch cold."

"Pepper tea" was a new prescription for the boy, and he watched with interest while Miss Tempy turned some milk into a bowl, flooded it with boiling water, added a spoonful of sugar and vigorously shook the pepper box over the mess.

"There!" she said. "Now, drink that, every drop. Ain't you hungry?"

Bradley, with tears in his eyes, the result of the first swallow of pepper tea, gaspingly protested that he wasn't hungry, not very. The sight and smell of the loaded supper table were so tempting that the denial was rather half-hearted.

"Not very! When did you have anything to eat last?"

"Mr. Bartlett—he's the s'lectman at

Wellmouth—gave me a sandwich at the depot 'fore I started, ma'am, and I bought a turnover at Harniss."

"My sakes! Prissy!"—to her sister, who came rustling in—"he hasn't et a thing but a sandwich and a turnover since mornin'. Now, come right over to the table, Bradley, and set down."

As the boy ate he looked about the room. It was a big room, with a low ceiling, spotlessly whitewashed. The oilcloth on the floor was partially covered with braided rug mats with carpet centers. On the window shades were wonderful tatted pictures of castles and mountains. The table was black walnut, and there were five rush seated chairs, each in its place against the wall and looking as if it were glued there. The sixth of the set he occupied. Then there was the chintz covered rocker and another rocker painted black, with a worn picture of a ship at sea on the back. There was another ship over the face of the tall wooden clock in the corner. This craft was evidently the Flying Dutchman, for every time the clock ticked it rolled heavily behind a fence of tin waves, but didn't advance an inch. On the walls were several works of art, including a spatter work motto, a wreath made of seashells under a glass and an engraving showing a boat filled with men, women and children rowed by a solemn individual in his shirt sleeves, moving over a placid sheet of water toward an unseen port.

"Cap'n Titcomb," remarked Bradley, whose "bashfulness" was wearing off, "came over in the coach with me tonight."

The effect of this announcement was remarkable. Miss Prissy looked at

Bradley shook the extended hands.

Miss Tempy, and the latter returned the look. Strange to say, both colored.

"Cap'n Titcomb?" faltered Miss Prissy. "Cap'n Ezra Titcomb?"

"Yes, ma'am. He talked to me 'most all the way. I liked him first rate."

"Why—why, I do declare! I didn't know the cap'n was expected, did you, Tempy?"

"No, I'm sure I didn't!" exclaimed the flustered younger sister. "Did he tell you why he was comin'?"

"No, ma'am, but I heard him tell the man that drove the coach that he had shore leave for a week 'cause his schooner was laid up for repairs. He said he knew you, though, and that he was comin' round to see me tomorrow."

This remark caused quite as much embarrassment and agitation as that concerning the captain's presence in the coach. The two ladies again glanced hurriedly at each other.

"Goodness gracious!" exclaimed Miss Prissy. "And the settin' room 'most swept and the windows not washed! I'll have to get up early tomorrow mornin'. I'm so glad I fixed that ruffle on my alpaca," she added in an absent-minded soliloquy.

"And I must finish that tidy for the sofa," said Miss Tempy nervously. "I've only got a little more to do on it, thank goodness! Prissy, I'm goin' to put an iron on. I want to press my alpaca collar. Did-did the cap'n say anything more about me—us, I mean?" she asked, looking at the stove.

"No, ma'am, he didn't," replied the boy. "He jest asked about me and told stories and talked."

Miss Tempy seemed a little disappointed and made no comment. Her sister, too, was silent. Presently Bradley yawned. He tried to hide it, but Miss Prissy, coming out of her trance, saw him.

"My sakes," she exclaimed, "what are we thinkin' of, keepin' you up this way? It's after 9 o'clock. Let me get the lamp. Tempy, you do up that soapstone for his feet."

Bradley was up early the next morning, and his dressing was a sort of jig, for it was freezing cold. When he went downstairs it was evident that things had been going on. Miss Prissy came out of the sitting room, bearing a broom and with her "alpaca" gown covered with an apron. Miss Tempy, her curls done up in papers, was busy with the "tidy" for the sofa. Each of the sisters was nervous and excited.

Miss Prissy said a stiff little grace at the breakfast table. Miss Tempy had a large cup of "pepper tea" for herself and urged Bradley to partake, but the elder sister came to the rescue and gave him hot milk and water instead. After the meal was over and the dishes washed Miss Prissy went out to feed the hens and Bradley went with her. The house, seen by day, was a big, square building, badly in need of paint. The roof was four sided and sloped upward to a cupola in the center. From its closely shut front door snow covered box hedges in parallel lines defined the path to the front gate, also locked and fastened and, like the front door, only used on occasions. There was a large tumble-down barn, with an empty pigeon back of the

house and a henhouse and yard in the rear of the barn.

Next door to the left, on the right was a vacant field—was a small story and a half cottage, separated from the Allen household by a board fence. One of the boards in this fence had fallen down, and as Bradley, walking in Miss Prissy's wake, passed this opening he saw a girl, apparently about his own age open the back door of the house next door and look out at him. He wanted to ask who she was, but didn't feel well enough acquainted with his guide to do so just yet.

Just as the dozen hens and lonesome looking rooster were fed—Miss Prissy informed him that by and by looking after the poultry would be one of his duties—Miss Tempy's voice was heard calling excitedly from the kitchen door.

"Prissy!" she screamed—"Prissy, come in the hase quick! He's comin'! The cap'n's comin'!"

"My land!" exclaimed the elder sister wildly, and, her dignity forgotten, she almost ran to the house, followed by Bradley, who didn't understand the cause of the excitement.

"Oh, my sakes," ejaculated Miss Tempy as they entered the kitchen, "what made him come so early? You'll have to see him first, Prissy. I've got to fix my hair."

Miss Prissy rushed into the sitting room, wheeled a chair into place, set it straight, laid the photograph album exactly in the center of the table instead of two inches from the edge and patted her own hair with her hands, dodging in front of the big gilt framed mirror as she did so. Then, as a smart knock sounded at the dining room door, she assumed her "company" smile and marched sedately to receive the visitor.

It was Captain Titcomb who had knocked, and after cleaning the snow from his boots on the "scraper" he entered the house, bearing two packages wrapped in brown paper.

"Well, Prissy," said the captain, laying down the packages to shake hands, "how'd you do? Didn't expect to see me in this port just now, did you?"

"No, indeed, Cap'n Titcomb," was the reply. "But we're real glad to see you all the same. Come right in. Take your things off. Bradley said he rode down with you in the coach last night. Dreadful storm we had, wasn't it? How's your health nowadays? Walk right into the sittin' room. You must excuse the looks of things. I've been sweepin'."

There was a good deal more, but when Miss Prissy stopped for breath the captain, who had thrown his cap and overcoat on a chair, replied that the storm was bad, that his health was good and that the room looked "first rate," so far as he could see. Then he held out his hand to the boy, who had seated himself on a chair close to the door, and said cheerily:

"Mornin', Brad. Well, how are you after your shake up last night? Wan's seasick after I got out, was you?"

Bradley grinned bashfully and stammered that he was "all right."

"Good! We had a rugged trip comin' over, Prissy. The old coach rolled so I felt like goin' on deck and shortenin' sail. Your new boy here's goin' to make a good sailor, I can see that. Where's Tempy?"

"Oh, she's upstairs for a minute. She'll be right down," answered Miss Prissy carelessly. "Tell me what brought you home so unexpected."

"Sprung a leak and had to lay the old hooker up for repairs. That's a specialty of my own—repairs. They'd rather patch up for a hundred years than build new vessels. I—I—Brad, fetch me them bundles out of the dinin' room."

Bradley obediently brought the brown paper parcels, and the captain handed one of them to Miss Prissy, saying: "Here's a little somethin' I picked up over to New York, Prissy. I thought you might like it. I ain't got much use for such things myself."

The lady took the package and began to untie the string in a nervous manner, blushing a little as she did so.

"I know it's somethin' nice, Cap'n Ezra. You do buy the nicest things. It's real kind of you to remember me this way. Oh, ain't that pretty?"

The package contained a Japanese silk fan, with ivory sticks and a red tassel. Miss Prissy opened it and spread it out in her lap, exclaiming over its beauty, her face the color of the tassel.

"Oh, it ain't nothin'," said the captain. "I did a favor for a friend of mine that's skipper of a barkentine jest home from Hongkong, and he gave it to me. He had some stuff he'd brought for his daughter, and the duty on it would have been pretty expensive, so I fixed—but never mind that. I thought maybe you'd like it to carry to church in the summer time or somethin'. Why, hello, Tempy! How'd you do?"

The younger sister entered the room, her poplin rustling and every curl in place. She gushingly shook the captain's hand and said she was so glad to see him.