

Mr. Bungletree's Collapse
by Judge Clark

At the station we had just passed a melancholy-looking youth had entered the car and taken the very limited portion of one of the seats left vacant by the ample proportions of a corpulent passenger next the window, whose general appearance betokened good digestion and a quiet conscience.

“Sorry to discommode you, sir,” said the newcomer, as he edged into the narrow space unoccupied by the fat gentleman.

“Don’t speak of it,” replied the other. “If apology is due it is on my side for taking up more room in the world than is ordinarily allotted to mortals by the laws of nature and the railway regulations.”

“Ticket, sir,” said the conductor.

“I had no time to get one,” the new passenger answered. “What is the fare to the next stopping place!”

“A dollar.”

The young man thrust a hand into his pocket and withdrew it nervously. Then both hands made rapid and repeated searches of all his pockets.

“Good heavens! I have lost my pocketbook!” he exclaimed wildly. “It must have been stolen from me in passing through the crowd to the train.”

“You must pay your fare or get off at the next station,” replied the conductor, in the sharp, business tone employed by such officials.

The melancholy youth burst into tears.

“What is your destination?” inquired the corpulent gentleman.

“Chic—chic—chicawgo,” was the answer, in a paroxysm of sobs.

“Well, well, don’t be cast down,” the other soothingly returned. “Saul Bungletree’s not the man to see a fellow-creature in distress for a trifle. How much’ll take you through?”

“Oh! sir, it isn’t that that is my chief concern. Two weeks ago I received intelligence of my father’s death. Ruined by the dishonesty of false friends, he sank into his grave broken-hearted, leaving my mother and an only sister destitute. I was hastening to their aid with the fruits of three years of toil, when this last misfortune—”

Here grief choked the speaker's utterance, and covering his face he gave free vent to his emotions.

Mr. Bungletree wiped his glasses and blew his nose sympathetically.

"Here's a case, gentlemen," he said, "which seems to appeal strongly to our common humanity. But there are so many imposters abroad that it behooves those charitably disposed to be circumspect. Our young friend, therefore, I am sure will pardon me if I put a few questions."

And Mr. Bungletree, with a worldly shrewdness scarcely to have been expected from one of his sympathetic nature, put the unfortunate young stranger through a sharp examination as to the persons and places he was acquainted with, many of which were familiar to Mr. Bungletree, who declared the answers satisfactory; and several thought it was carrying prudence to excess when that gentleman inquired if the young man had any papers which might fortify his story.

"Here's a letter of recommendation from my last employer, sir," replied the youth modestly.

"Ha!" cried Mr. Bungletree, after a hasty glance at the document—"what's this? As I live, my old friend, Roger Cooley's hand and signature! Hum—'Mr. Elbridge Grackles—young gentleman of highest probity—two years in my employ—every way trustworthy.'

"I'm quite satisfied," said Mr. Bungletree, handing back the letter. "Happy to know you, Mr. Grackles," shaking the latter's hand. Then turning to the group who had gathered round: "I'm prepared to vouch for this gentleman without reserve," he added. "There can be no doubt about anyone recommended by Roger Cooley. What shall we do towards assisting Mr. Grackles in his trouble? I'll give ten dollars."

"And I," "and I," "and I," was heard on every side; and soon Mr. Grackles had his hands full of greenbacks.

"Can anybody change me a fifty?" Inquired Mr. Bungletree, who discovered he had no smaller change about him.

"I think I can," said a plain-looking man, in country garb, taking out his pocketbook and handing over the amount, whereupon Mr. Bungletree added his contribution to the rest.

The gratitude of Mr. Grackles knew no bounds.

"The blessings of those your generosity has succored will attend you and yours!" he faltered, turning aside to conceal the tears which again began to flow.

At this point the whistle sounded and the train began to slacken speed.

"I must leave you here, kind friends," said Mr. Bungletree, reaching down his satchel from the rack; and with a request to Mr. Grackles to remember him to Mr. Cooley, he started to the door, when his course was interrupted by the countryman who had changed the note.

“Stop!” command the latter, with a sudden grasp of Mr. Bungletree’s arm.

“Save me from this maniac!” appealed Mr. Bungletree, turning pale with fright.

And maniac we had soon reason to believe the assailant was, for, before we had time to interfere, he drew a glittering poniard, and thrust it into Mr. Bungletree’s body!

“As he plucked his cursed steel away” we could not but mark that no blood of Bungletree’s followed it; and the victim, instead of sinking at the assassin’s feet, suddenly collapsed till his spacious garments hung in folds upon his shriveled form, as though it had been the frame of a skeleton.

“Calm your fears, gentlemen,” said the countryman, “I have only punctured the india-rubber under-suit which was part of the disguise of this rascal, who is one of the most accomplished swindlers and counterfeiters in the country. The spurious fifty-dollar note just passed upon me will ensure him a five years’ sentence; and his ‘pal’ there, whom he pretended not to know, is good for an equal term for obtaining money under false pretenses.”

Turning up his collar, the countryman displayed a detective’s badge; and the two rogues, without attempting resistance, suffered themselves to be handcuffed together and led from the car.

New York Ledger, June 26, 1880