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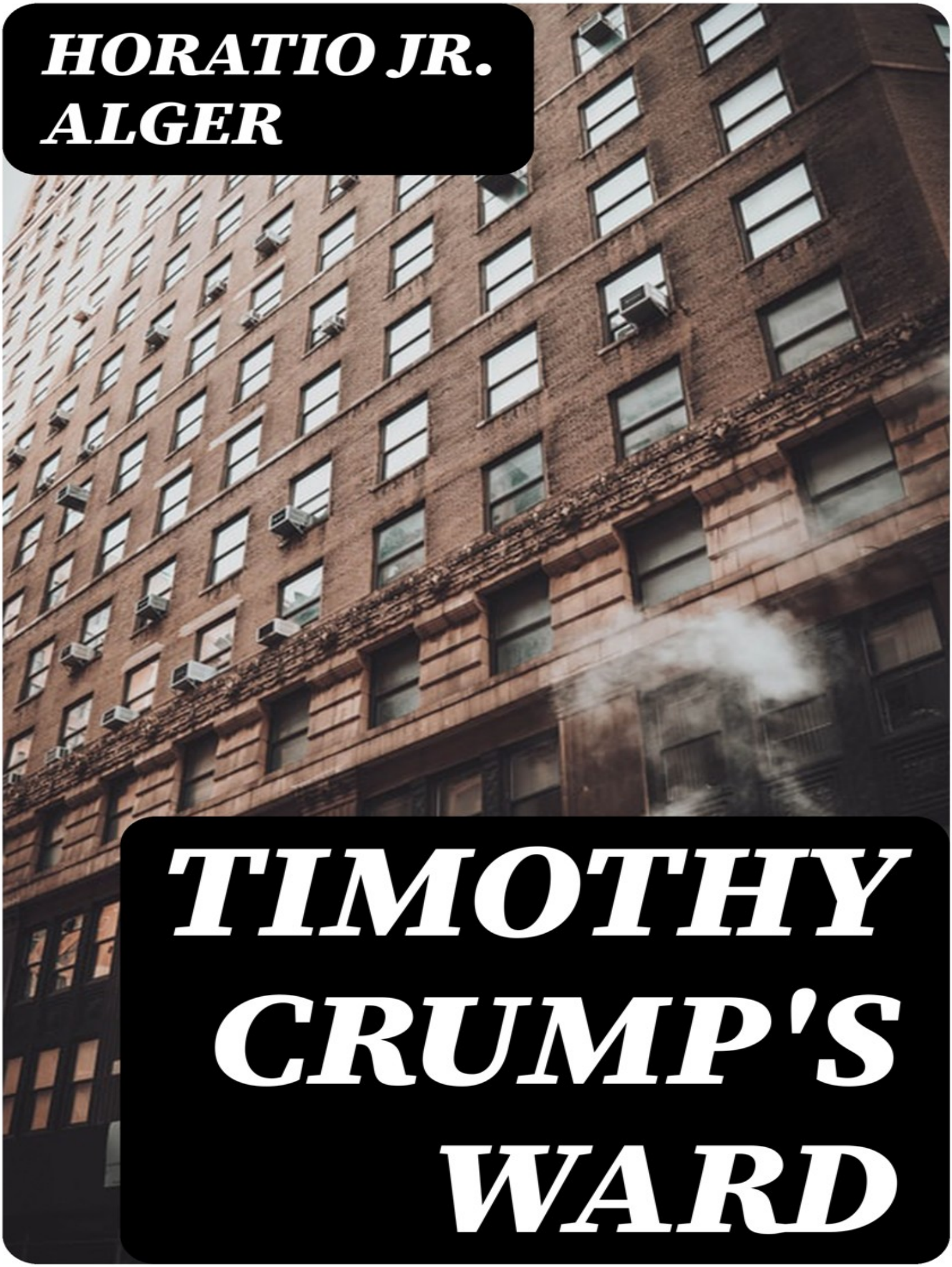

TIMOTHY CRUMP'S WARD

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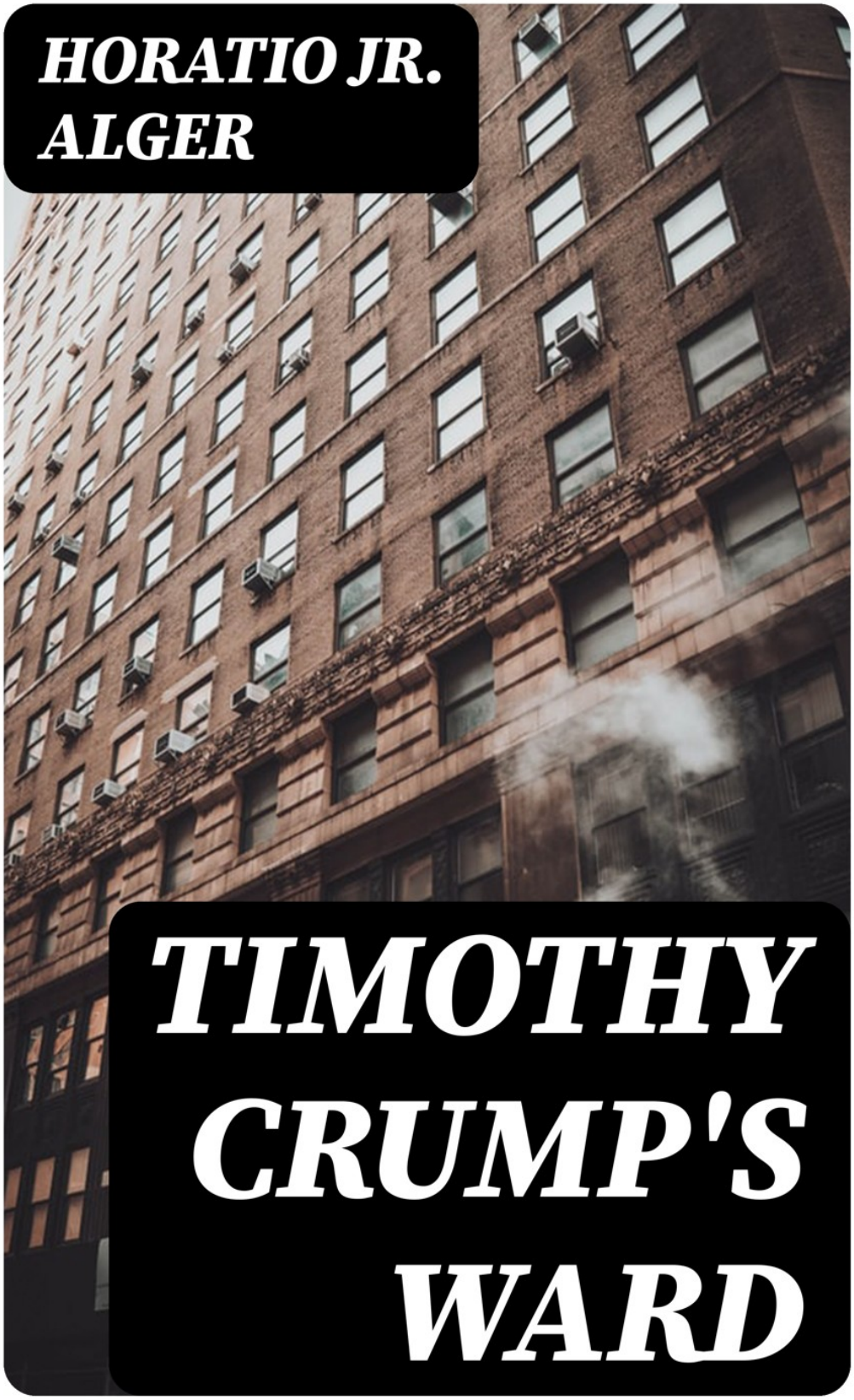

TIMOTHY CRUMP'S WARD

Horatio Jr. Alger

Timothy Crump's Ward

A Story of American Life

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CHAPTER XXVII. CONCLUSION.

CHAPTER I. INTRODUCES THE CRUMPS.

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IT was drawing towards the close of the last day of the year. A few hours more, and 1836 would be no more.

It was a cold day. There was no snow on the ground, but it was frozen into stiff ridges, making it uncomfortable to walk upon. The sun had been out all day, but there was little heat or comfort in its bright, but frosty beams.

The winter is a hard season for the poor. It multiplies their necessities, while, in general, it limits their means and opportunities of earning. The winter of 1836-37 was far from being an exception to this rule. It was worse than usual, on account of the general stagnation of business.

In an humble tenement, located on what was then the outskirts of New York, though to-day a granite warehouse stands on the spot, lived Timothy Crump, an industrious cooper. His family consisted of a wife and one child, a boy of twelve, whose baptismal name was John, though invariably addressed, by his companions, as Jack.

There was another member of the household who would be highly offended if she were not introduced, in due form, to the reader. This was Miss Rachel Crump, maiden sister of Uncle Tim, as he was usually designated.

Miss Rachel was not much like her brother, for while the latter was a good-hearted, cheerful easy man, who was inclined to view the world in its sunniest aspect, Rachel was cynical, and given to misanthropy. Poor Rachel, let us not be too hard upon thy infirmities. Could we lift the veil that hides

the secrets of that virgin heart, it might be, perchance, that we should find a hidden cause, far back in the days when thy cheeks were rounder and thine eyes brighter, and thine aspect not quite so frosty. Ah, faithless Harry Fletcher! thou hadst some hand in that peevishness and repining which make Rachel Crump, and all about her, uncomfortable. Lured away by a prettier face, you left her to pass through life, unblessed by that love which every female heart craves, and for which no kindred love will compensate. It was your faithlessness that left her to walk, with repining spirit, the flinty path of the old maid.

Yes; it must be said—Rachel Crump was an old maid; not from choice, but hard necessity. And so, one by one, she closed up the avenues of her heart, and clothed herself with complaining, as with a garment. Being unblessed with earthly means, she had accepted the hearty invitation of her brother, and become an inmate of his family, where she paid her board by little services about the house, and obtained sufficient needle-work to replenish her wardrobe as often as there was occasion. Forty-five years had now rolled over her head, leaving clearer traces of their presence, doubtless, than if her spirit had been more cheerful; so that Rachel, whose strongly marked features never could have been handsome, was now undeniably homely.

Mrs. Crump, fortunately for her husband's peace, did not in the least resemble her sister-in-law. Her disposition was cheerful, and she had frequent occasion to remonstrate with her upon the dark view she took of life. Had her temper been different, it is very easy to see that she would have been continually quarrelling with Rachel; but, happily, she

was one of those women with whom it is impossible to quarrel. With her broad mantle of charity, she was always seeking to cover up and extenuate the defects of her sister-in-law, though she could not help acknowledging their existence.

It had been a hard winter for the cooper. For a month he had been unable to obtain work of any kind, and for the two months previous he had worked scarcely more than half the time. Unfortunately for him, his expenses for a few years back had kept such even pace with his income, that he had no reserved fund to fall back upon in such a time as this. That was no fault of his. Both he and his wife had been economical enough, but there are a great many things included in family expenses—rent, fuel, provisions, food, clothing, and a long list of sundries, besides; and all these had cost money, of which desirable article Uncle Tim's trade furnished not a very large supply.

So it happened that, as tradesmen were slow to trust, they had been obliged to part with a sofa to defray the expenses of the month of December. This article was selected because it was best convertible into cash,—being wanted by a neighbor,—besides being about the only article of luxury, if it could be called such, in possession of the family. As such it had been hardly used, being reserved for state occasions; yet hardly had it left (sic) the the house, when Aunt Rachel began to show signs of extreme lowness of spirits, and bewailed its loss as a privation of a personal comfort.

“Life's full of disappointments,” she groaned. “Our paths is continually beset by 'em. There's that sofa! It's so

pleasant to have one in the house when a body's sick. But there, it's gone, and if I happen to get down, as most likely I shall, for I've got a bad feeling in my stummick this very minute, I shall have to go up-stairs, and most likely catch my death of cold, and that will be the end of me."

"Not so bad as that, I hope," said Mrs. Crump, cheerfully. "You know, when you was sick last, you didn't want to use the sofa—you said it didn't lay comfortable. Besides, I hope, before you are sick again we may be able to buy it back again."

Aunt Rachel shook her head despondingly.

"There ain't any use in hoping that," said she. "Timothy's got so much behindhand that he won't be able to get up again; I know he won't."

"But if he manages to get steady work soon, he will."

"No, he won't. I'm sure he won't. There won't be any work before spring, and most likely not then."

"You are too desponding, Aunt Rachel."

"Enough to make me so. If you had only taken my advice, we shouldn't have come to this."

"I don't know what advice you refer to, Rachel."

"No, I don't expect you do. You didn't pay no attention to it. That's the reason."

"But if you'll repeat it, perhaps we can profit by it yet," said Mrs. Crump, with imperturbable good humor.

"I told you you ought to be layin' up something ag'in a rainy day. But that's always the way. Folks think when times is good it's always a goin' to be so, but I knew better."

"I don't see how we could have been more economical," said Mrs. Crump, mildly.

“There's a hundred ways. Poor folks like us ought not to expect to have meat so often. It's frightful to think what the butcher's bill must have been the last six months.”

Inconsistent Rachel! Only the day before she had made herself very uncomfortable because there was no meat for dinner, and said she couldn't live without it. Mrs. Crump might have reminded her of this, but the good woman was too kind to make the retort. She contented herself with saying that they must try to do better in future.

“That's always the way,” muttered Rachel. “Shut the stable door when the horse is stolen. Folks never learn from experience till it's too late to be of any use. I don't see what the world was made for, for my part. Everything goes topsy-turvy, and all sorts of ways except the right way. I sometimes think 'taint much use livin'.”

“Oh, you'll feel better by and by, Rachel. Hark, there's Jack, isn't it?”

“Anybody might know by the noise who it is,” pursued Rachel, in the same general tone that had marked her conversation hitherto. “He always comes *stomping* along as if he was paid for makin' a noise. Anybody ought to have a cast-iron head that lives anywhere in his hearing.”

Her cheerful remarks were here broken in upon by the sudden entrance of Jack, who, in his eagerness, slammed the door behind him, unheeding his mother's quiet admonition not to make a noise.

“Look there!” said he, displaying a quarter of a dollar.

“How did you get it?” asked his mother.

“Holding horses,” answered Jack.

“Here, take it, mother. I warrant you'll find a use for it.”

“It comes in good time,” said Mrs. Crump. “We're out of flour, and I had no money to buy any. Before you take off your boots, Jack, why can't you run over to the store, and get half a dozen pounds?”

“You see the Lord hasn't quite forgotten us,” remarked his mother, as Jack started on his errand.

“What's a quarter of a dollar?” said Rachel, gloomily. “Will it carry us through the winter?”

“It will carry us through to-night, and perhaps Timothy will have work to-morrow. Hark, that's his step.”

CHAPTER II. THE EVENTS OF AN EVENING.

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AT this moment the outer door opened, and Timothy Crump entered, not with the quick elastic step of one who brings good tidings, but slowly and deliberately, with a quiet gravity of demeanor, in which his wife could read only too well that he had failed in his efforts to procure work.

His wife, reading all these things in his manner, had the delicacy to forbear intruding upon him questions to which she saw that he could give no satisfactory answers.

Not so Aunt Rachel.

“I needn't ask,” she began, “whether you got work, Timothy. I knew beforehand you wouldn't. There ain't no use in tryin'. The times is awful dull, and, mark my words, they'll be wuss before they're better. We mayn't live to see 'em. I don't expect we shall. Folks can't live without money, and when that's gone we shall have to starve.”

“Not so bad as that, Rachel,” said the cooper, trying to look cheerful; “don't talk about starving till the time comes. Anyhow,” glancing at the table on which was spread a good plain meal, “we needn't talk about starving till to-morrow, with that before us. Where's Jack?”

“Gone after some flour,” replied his wife.

“On credit?” asked the cooper.

“No, he's got the money to pay for a few pounds,” said Mrs. Crump, smiling, with an air of mystery.

“Where did it come from?” asked Timothy, who was puzzled, as his wife anticipated. “I didn't know you had any

money in the house.”

“No more we had, but he earned it himself, holding horses, this afternoon.”

“Come, that's good,” said the cooper, cheerfully, “We ain't so bad off as we might be, you see, Rachel.”

The latter shook her head with the air of a martyr.

At this moment Jack returned, and the family sat down to supper.

“You haven't told us,” said Mrs. Crump, seeing her husband's cheerfulness in a measure restored, “what Mr. Blodgett said about the chances for employment.”

“Not much that was encouraging,” answered Timothy. “He isn't at all sure how soon it will be best to commence work; perhaps not before spring.”

“Didn't I tell you so?” commented Rachel, with sepulchral sadness.

Even Mr. Crump could not help looking sober.

“I suppose, Timothy, you haven't formed any plans,” she said.

“No, I haven't had time. I must try to get something else to do.”

“What, for instance?”

“Anything by which I can earn a little, I don't care if it's only sawing wood. We shall have to get along as economically as we can; cut our coat according to our cloth.”

“Oh, you'll be able to earn something, and we can live *very* plain,” said Mrs. Crump, affecting a cheerfulness greater than she felt.

“Pity you hadn't done it sooner,” was the comforting suggestion of Rachel.

“Mustn't cry over spilt milk,” said the cooper, good-humoredly. “Perhaps we might have lived a *leetle* more economically, but I don't think we've been extravagant.”

“Besides, I can earn something, father,” said Jack, hopefully. “You know I did this afternoon.”

“So you can,” said Mrs. Crump, brightly.

“There ain't horses to hold every day,” said Rachel, apparently fearing that the family might become too cheerful, when, like herself, it was their duty to become profoundly gloomy.

“You're always trying' to discourage people,” said Jack, discontentedly.

Rachel took instant umbrage at these words.

“I'm sure,” said she; mournfully, “I don't want to make you unhappy. If you can find anything to be cheerful about when you're on the verge of starvation, I hope you'll enjoy yourselves, and not mind me. I'm a poor dependent creetur, and I feel to know I'm a burden.”

“Now, Rachel, that's all foolishness,” said Uncle Tim. “You don't feel anything of the kind.”

“Perhaps others can tell how I feel, better than I can myself,” answered his sister, knitting rapidly. “If it hadn't been for me, I know you'd have been able to lay up money, and have something to carry you through the winter. It's hard to be a burden upon your relations, and bring a brother's family to poverty.”

“Don't talk of being a burden, Rachel,” said Mrs. Crump. “You've been a great help to me in many ways. That pair of

stockings now you're knitting for Jack—that's a help, for I couldn't have got time for them myself.”

“I don't expect,” said Aunt Rachel, in the same sunny manner, “that I shall be able to do it long. From the pains I have in my hands sometimes, I expect I'm going to lose the use of 'em soon, and be as useless as old Mrs. Sprague, who for the last ten years of her life had to sit with her hands folded in her lap. But I wouldn't stay to be a burden. I'd go to the poor-house first, but perhaps,” with the look of a martyr, “they wouldn't want me there, because I should be discouragin' 'em too much.”

Poor Jack, who had so unwittingly raised this storm, winced under the words, which he knew were directed at him.

“Then why,” said he, half in extenuation, “why don't you try to look pleasant and cheerful? Why won't you be jolly, as Tom Piper's aunt is?”

“I dare say I ain't pleasant,” said Aunt Rachel, “as my own nephew tells me so. There is some folks that can be cheerful when their house is a burnin' down before their eyes, and I've heard of one young man that laughed at his aunt's funeral,” directing a severe glance at Jack; “but I'm not one of that kind. I think, with the Scriptures, that there's a time to weep.”

“Doesn't it say there's a time to laugh, also?” asked Mrs. Crump.

“When I see anything to laugh about, I'm ready to laugh,” said Aunt Rachel; “but human nature ain't to be forced. I can't see anything to laugh at now, and perhaps you won't by and by.”

It was evidently of no use to attempt a confutation of this, and the subject dropped.

The tea-things were cleared away by Mrs. Crump, who afterwards sat down to her sewing. Aunt Rachel continued to knit in grim silence, while Jack seated himself on a three-legged stool near his aunt, and began to whittle out a boat after a model lent him by Tom Piper, a young gentleman whose aunt has already been referred to.

The cooper took out his spectacles, wiped them carefully with his handkerchief, and as carefully adjusted them to his nose. He then took down from the mantel-piece one of the few books belonging to his library,—“Captain Cook's Travels,”—and began to read, for the tenth time it might be, the record of the gallant sailor's circumnavigations.

The plain little room presented a picture of peaceful tranquillity, but it proved to be only the calm which precedes a storm.

The storm in question, I regret to say, was brought about by the luckless Jack. As has been said, he was engaged in constructing a boat, the particular operation he was now intent upon being the excavation or hollowing out. Now three-legged stools are not the most secure seats in the world. That, I think, no one can doubt who has any practical acquaintance with them. Jack was working quite vigorously, the block from which the boat was to be fashioned being held firmly between his knees. His knife having got wedged in the wood, he made an unusual effort to draw it out, in which he lost his balance, and disturbed the equilibrium of his stool, which, with his load, tumbled over backwards. Now it very unfortunately happened that Aunt Rachel sat close

behind, and the treacherous stool came down with considerable force upon her foot.

A piercing shriek was heard, and Aunt Rachel, lifting her foot, clung to it convulsively, while an expression of pain distorted her features.

At the sound, the cooper hastily removed his spectacles, and letting “Captain Cook” fall to the floor, started up in great dismay—Mrs. Crump likewise dropped her sewing, and jumped to her feet in alarm.

It did not take long to see how matters stood.

“Hurt ye much, Rachel?” inquired Timothy.

“It's about killed me,” groaned the afflicted maiden. “Oh, I shall have to have my foot cut off, or be a cripple anyway.” Then turning upon Jack, fiercely, “you careless, wicked, ungrateful boy, that I've been wearin' myself out knittin' for. I'm almost sure you did it a purpose. You won't be satisfied till you've got me out of the world, and then—then, perhaps ——” here Rachel began to whimper, “perhaps you'll get Tom Piper's aunt to knit your stockings.”

“I didn't mean to, Aunt Rachel,” said Jack, penitently, eyeing his aunt, who was rocking to and fro in her chair. “Besides, I hurt myself like thunder,” rubbing vigorously the lower part of the dorsal-region.

“Served you right,” said his aunt, still clasping her foot.

“Sha'n't I get something for you to put on it?” asked Mrs. Crump of (sic) her-sister-in-law.

This Rachel steadily refused, and after a few more postures, (sic) indicating a great amount of anguish, limped out of the room, and ascended the stairs to her own apartment.