

## 18. A Narrow Escape

The Auditorium Tower, where "the weather man" sits to flash his reports throughout the country, offered an inviting place for the boy to alight. He dropped quietly upon the roof of the great building and walked down the staircase until he reached the elevators, by means of which he descended to the ground floor without exciting special attention.

The eager rush and hurry of the people crowding the sidewalks impressed Rob with the idea that they were all behind time and were trying hard to catch up. He found it impossible to walk along comfortably without being elbowed and pushed from side to side; so a half hour's sight-seeing under such difficulties tired him greatly. It was a beautiful afternoon, and finding himself upon the Lake Front, Rob hunted up a vacant bench and sat down to rest.

Presently an elderly gentleman with a reserved and dignified appearance and dressed in black took a seat next to the boy and drew a magazine from his pocket. Rob saw that he opened it to an article on "The Progress of Modern Science," in which he seemed greatly interested.

After a time the boy remembered that he was hungry, not having eaten a tablet in more than twenty-four hours. So he took out the silver box and ate one of the small, round disks it contained.

"What are those?" inquired the old gentleman in a soft voice. "You are too young to be taking patent medicines."

"There are not medicines, exactly," answered the boy, with a smile. "They are Concentrated Food Tablets, sorted with nourishment by means of electricity. One of them furnishes a person with food for an entire day."

The old gentleman stared at Rob a moment and then laid down his magazine and took the box in his hands, examining the tablets curiously.

"Are these patented?" he asked.

"No," said Rob; "they are unknown to any one but myself."

"I will give you a half million dollars for the recipe to make them," said the gentleman.

"I fear I must refuse your offer," returned Rob, with a laugh.

"I'll make it a million," said the gentleman, coolly.

Rob shook his head.

"Money can't buy the recipe," he said; "for I don't know it myself."

"Couldn't the tablets be chemically analyzed, and the secret discovered?" inquired the other.

"I don't know; but I'm not going to give any one the chance to try," declared the boy, firmly.

The old gentleman picked up his magazine without another word, and resumed his reading.

For amusement Rob took the Record of Events from his pocket and began looking at the scenes reflected from its polished plate.

Presently he became aware that the old gentleman was peering over his shoulder with intense interest. General Funston was just then engaged in capturing the rebel chief, Aguinaldo, and for a few moments both man and boy observed the occurrence with rapt attention. As the scene was replaced by one showing a secret tunnel of the Russian Nihilists, with the conspirators carrying dynamite to a recess underneath the palace of the Czar, the gentleman uttered a long sigh and asked:

"Will you sell that box?"

"No," answered Rob, shortly, and put it back into his pocket.

"I'll give you a million dollars to control the sale in Chicago alone," continued the gentleman, with an eager inflection in his smooth voice.

"You seem quite anxious to get rid of money," remarked Rob, carelessly. "How much are you worth?"

"Personally?"

"Yes."

"Nothing at all, young man. I am not offering you my own money. But with such inventions as you have exhibited I could easily secure millions of capital. Suppose we form a trust, and place them upon the market. We'll capitalize it for a hundred millions, and you can have a quarter of

the stock--twenty-five millions. That would keep you from worrying about grocery bills."

"But I wouldn't need groceries if I had the tablets," said Rob, laughing.

"True enough! But you could take life easily and read your newspaper in comfort, without being in any hurry to get down town to business. Twenty-five millions would bring you a cozy little income, if properly invested."

"I don't see why one should read newspapers when the Record of Events shows all that is going on in the world," objected Rob.

"True, true! But what do you say to the proposition?"

"I must decline, with thanks. These inventions are not for sale."

The gentleman sighed and resumed his magazine, in which he became much absorbed.

Rob put on the Character Marking Spectacles and looked at him. The letters "E," "W" and "C" were plainly visible upon the composed, respectable looking brow of his companion.

"Evil, wise and cruel," reflected Rob, as he restored the spectacles to his pocket. "How easily such a man could impose upon people. To look at him one would think that butter wouldn't melt in his mouth!"

He decided to part company with this chance acquaintance and, rising from his seat, strolled leisurely up the walk. A moment later, on looking back, he discovered that the old gentleman had disappeared.

He walked down State Street to the river and back again, amused by the activity displayed in this busy section of the city. But the time he had allowed himself in Chicago had now expired, so he began looking around for some high building from the roof of which he could depart unnoticed.

This was not at all difficult, and selecting one of many stores he ascended by an elevator to the top floor and from there mounted an iron stairway leading to the flat roof. As he climbed this stairway he found himself followed by a pleasant looking young man, who also seemed desirous of viewing the city from the roof.

Annoyed at the inopportune intrusion, Rob's first thought was to go back to the street and try another building; but, upon reflecting that the young man was not likely to remain long and he would soon be alone, he decided to wait. So he walked to the edge of the roof and appeared to be interested in the scenery spread out below him.

"Fine view from here, ain't it?" said the young man, coming up to him and placing his hand carelessly upon the boy's shoulder.

"It is, indeed," replied Rob, leaning over the edge to look into the street.

As he spoke he felt himself gently but firmly pushed from behind and, losing his balance, he plunged headforemost from the roof and whirled through the intervening space toward the sidewalk far below.

Terrified though he was by the sudden disaster, the boy had still wit enough remaining to reach out his right hand and move the indicator of the machine upon his left wrist to the zero mark. Immediately he paused in his fearful flight and presently came to a stop at a distance of less than fifteen feet from the flagstones which had threatened to crush out his life.

As he stared downward, trying to recover his self-possession, he saw the old gentleman he had met on the Lake Front standing just below and looking at him with a half frightened, half curious expression in his eyes.

At once Rob saw through the whole plot to kill him and thus secure possession of his electrical devices. The young man upon the roof who had attempted to push him to his death was a confederate of the innocent appearing old gentleman, it seemed, and the latter had calmly awaited his fall to the pavement to seize the coveted treasures from his dead body. It was an awful idea, and Rob was more frightened than he had ever been before in his life--or ever has been since.

But now the shouts of a vast concourse of amazed spectators reached the boy's ears. He remembered that he was suspended in mid-air over the crowded street of a great city, while thousands of wondering eyes were fixed upon him.

So he quickly set the indicator to the word "up," and mounted sky-ward until the watchers below could scarcely see him. Then he fled away into the east, even yet shuddering with the horror of his recent escape from death and filled with disgust at the knowledge that there were people

who held human life so lightly that they were willing to destroy it to further their own selfish ends.

"And the Demon wants such people as these to possess his electrical devices, which are as powerful to accomplish evil when in wrong hands as they are good!" thought the boy, resentfully. "This would be a fine world if Electric Tubes and Records of Events and Traveling Machines could be acquired by selfish and unprincipled persons!"

So unnerved was Rob by his recent experiences that he determined to make no more stops. However, he alighted at nightfall in the country, and slept upon the sweet hay in a farmer's barn.

But, early the next morning, before any one else was astir, he resumed his journey, and at precisely ten o'clock of this day, which was Saturday, he completed his flying trip around the world by alighting unobserved upon the well-trimmed lawn of his own home.