Caleb Speed pushed back his chair from the dinner-table with anger and disgust in his face. The door had just banged behind a big, hearty boy of seventeen, whom he could still see through the narrow window trudging off toward the barn.

The lively whistle that sounded through the closed windows seemed to aggravate the man’s ill-temper. He walked over to the fireplace, and kicked the smouldering logs with his heavy boot.

“If there’s any one thing that riles me all over,” he exclaimed, angrily, “it’s having that boy always setting himself up to be in the right, and everybody else in the wrong!”

“Well, he ‘most generally is in the right,” answered Caleb’s wife, clearing the table. “It’s remarkable what a memory Jerry has, ’specially for dates. At the quilting here last week the women folks were trying to settle when ’twas old Mis’ Lockett died, and Jerry knew to the day. He said ’twas two days after Deacon Stone’s cows were killed by lightning, and that happened on the thirteenth of September, just a hundred years to the very day after Wolfe captured Quebec. You can’t trip Jerry up in history.”

“Well,” answered her husband, impatiently, “he needn’t be so sassy about it. We had a dispute over them same cows. I was telling the new minister about the storm, and I happened to say they was standing under a pine-tree. He chipped in, ‘Why, no, it wasn’t, uncle; it was an oak.’ ‘It was a pine!’ says I. ‘No, it wasn’t; it was an oak,’ says he.

“Just then Hiram Stone came by, and Jerry yelled to know which ’twas. Hiram said, ‘Oak.’ Then Jerry grinned as malicious, and said, ’I told you so! I knew I was right! ‘If he hadn’t been my dead sister’s only child and the minister looking on—” Caleb stopped in anger.

Mrs. Speed made no comment. She was fond of her husband’s nephew. He had grown to be almost like a son in the five years he had lived with them. They were not old—not many years older than Jerry; for Caleb’s sister had been older than he.

Mrs. Speed only laughed at the patronizing manners which he sometimes assumed, to the great annoyance of his young uncle. But Caleb Speed was too dogmatic himself to tolerate such a spirit in any one else.

“He sha’n’t sit up and contradict me at my own table!” Caleb declared. “I’ll thrash him first! He’s got to show me proper respect. He needn’t think because I’ve given him advantages that I couldn’t have myself, that he knows it all and I don’t know anything!”

“Now, Caleb, what’s the use? It’s only Jerry’s way,” said Mrs. Speed, soothingly.
“Dear me!” she sighed, as Caleb went to his work. “It’s a pity they can’t get along as they used to. Caleb’s so touchy he can’t stand anything. I must tell Jerry to be more careful.”

But when Jerry came in to supper and began his lively joking, she forgot the little lecture she had planned.

“The Spencers are going to move West next week,” remarked Mr. Speed. “Land’s cheap, and I guess they need more elbow-room for such a big family. Greenville is a mighty thriving place, they say.”

“You mean Grandville, don’t you, uncle?” suggested Jerry.

“I generally say what I mean, young man!” was the curt reply.

“Well, it’s Grandville, anyway!” persisted Jerry, feeling in his pockets. “Jack Spencer is out there now. I got a letter from him yesterday begging me to go out there to him. Oh, here it is! Look at the postmark. It is Grandville! I knew I was right about it.”

Nettled by the tone and his own mistake, Mr. Speed finished his supper in moody silence. The boy had no idea how his habit had grown, or how sensitive his uncle had become in regard to it. “Why, Aunt Lucy,” he insisted, when she remonstrated with him, “I never contradict people unless I know positively that they are wrong!”

“Maybe,” she answered. “But what real difference does it make whether the weasels killed five chickens or six, or that it was the black pig and not the spotted one that rooted up the garden? Those are such little things to bicker about, just for the satisfaction of saying, ‘I told you so!’”

She imitated Jerry’s tone and manner so well that he laughed a little sheepishly.

“Well, I’ll turn over a new leaf,” he promised, “just to please you.”

Caleb Speed’s farm was in southern Maine, near the coast. Jerry had grown up with the sound of the sea in his ears. It had long sung only a meaningless monotone to the boy, but it had begun to fill him with something of its own restless spirit. And about this time the Spencer boys were urging him to go West.

“No,” he answered: “I owe it to Uncle Caleb to stay here. He was too good to me when I was a little shaver for me to leave him now when he needs me. He shall have the best service I can give him until I am twenty-one; then I’ll be free to follow you.”

But there came a crisis. Uncle Caleb gave Jerry a sum of money to pay a bill in town. There was a five-dollar piece in a roll of bills, and the gold-piece had disappeared.

Jerry insisted that he could not have had the money. “I know, Aunt Lucy. Uncle Cale handed me the roll of bills, and I put it down in this pocket, and never touched it till I got to town. When I took it out there were the bills just as he had handed them to me, and not a thing more.”

“Maybe there’s a hole in your pocket,” she suggested.

She turned it wrong side out, but found no place where a coin could have slipped through.

“Well, it’s a mystery where it went,” she said. “I can’t understand it.”

“Pooh! It’s no mystery,” answered Jerry, contemptuously. “Uncle simply didn’t give it to me. He thought he had rolled it up in the bills, but was mistaken. That’s all!”

“What do you mean by that?” cried Caleb, jumping up white with anger. “I tell you it was wrapped up in the bills, and if you can’t account for it, you’ve either lost it or spent it!”

Jerry bounded up-stairs to his room, stuffed his best suit of clothes into a little brown carpetbag, and then poured out the contents of an old, long-necked blue vase. He had
thirty dollars saved toward buying a horse of his own. Then he marched defiantly down- 
dstairs to his uncle.

“I never saw or touched your gold-piece,” he declared, “but I’ll not go away leaving 
you to say that I took any of your money!”

He threw down a five-dollar bill and started to the door. As he turned the knob, he 
looked back at the woman by the fireplace, with her face in her apron.

“Good-bye, Aunt Lucy,” he said, with a choke in his voice. “You’ve been awful good 
to me—I’ll never forget that!”

Then he shut the door abruptly, and went out into the night. It lacked only five 
minutes of train-time when he reached the station, determined to go to a cousin of his 
father’s who lived in Vermont, and write from there to Jack Spencer that he would work 
his way out West as soon as he could.

Tingling with the recollection of his uncle’s reproaches, the boy sat up very straight 
and wide-awake in the train for a long time. Then his tension relaxed, and for lack of 
something else to do, he felt in his pocket for Jack Spencer’s letter. As he pulled it from 
sits envelope something else fell into his hand. It was a gold-piece.

He could scarcely believe his eyes as he sat dropping it from one hand into another. 
How had the coin got into the letter? For a time he could not guess; then the truth 
suddenly became clear to him.

The letter had been in his breast-pocket when he stuffed the roll of bills into it, and 
the coin must have slipped into the open end of the envelope as he pushed the bills down. 
When he began to search for the money he had changed the letter to another pocket, 
ever dreaming that it contained anything except Jack’s glowing description of prairie-
life.

Jerry had been keeping his anger warm all the way by telling himself that his uncle 
had been harsh and unjust. He had even pictured to himself with grim satisfaction how 
shamefaced Caleb would look sometime when he should come across the coin among his 
own possessions. And now he had to think of himself as the blunderer and the unjust, 
foolish person.

But now no apology could be too humble. He would get off at the next station and 
take the first train home. The case called for an immediate reconciliation.

Then he reasoned that as he had paid for his ticket, he might as well go on to his 
journey’s end and have a short visit. It would be easier, perhaps, to write than to speak his 
apology.

Jerry soon found his elderly cousin, Tim Bailey, who happened to be working just 
then in a new store—a combination of a bookstore and an old-fashioned daguerreotype 
gallery; not old-fashioned then, for it was before the photograph had penetrated to the 
rural regions. Tim’s rigorous cross-questioning soon drew the whole story from the boy.

“Well, that’s easily settled,” said Tim. “Just you write to ’em and own up, and say 
you’re going to stop with me over Christmas, but that you’ll be along about New Year to 
turn over a new leaf. They’ll bring out the fatted calf when you get back. I know Caleb 
like a book. He can’t hold spite.”

Jerry settled himself to write the letter. But he found himself hard to please, and tore 
up several drafts. Writing apologies was not such easy work, after all! Then Tim put his 
grizzled head in at the door, with a beaming smile.

“Look here, boy, I’ve got an idee! The picture business is dull this morning. Go up 
and get yours took. You can send it along for a Christmas gift. Sha’n’t cost you a cent, 
either. I get all my work done gratis, for sending him so much trade.”
Three days after, Jerry dropped into the post-office a little package addressed to his uncle, containing, besides a letter, an excellent likeness of himself. Jerry made in the letter a straightforward acknowledgment of his mistake, and accompanied this manly apology with an earnest request to be allowed to return home.

He had grown so homesick for a sight of the old place that he could scarcely see the lines on his paper. And Aunt Lucy—well, he almost broke down at the thought of all her motherly kindness to him.

“No I’ll surely get an answer by Wednesday,” he thought, but Wednesday went by, and another week passed, and although he called regularly at the post-office, no word came.

“Well, I’ve done all I could,” he said. “It’s plain they don’t want me back.”

Tim’s sympathetic old heart ached for the boy’s distress. He even offered to go up to the farm and intercede in his behalf.

“No indeed!” Jerry answered, defiantly. “I’ll never beg my way back. I’m not the kind to go where I’m not wanted.”

“Maybe they never got your letter.”

Jerry hooted at the idea. “No, they don’t want to make up. That’s the long and the short of it.”

When he finally started West. Tim Bailey went with him. Out on the far Western prairies, Jerry struck deep root in the favourable soil, and as the years passed on, became as much of a fixture as the new town that bore his name. Year after year he worked on, widening his fields, improving his buildings, working early and late, solely for the pleasure of accumulating.

Tim Bailey had grown old and rheumatic, almost childish, but he still assumed a sort of guardianship over Jerry. One day he put down his newspaper, wiped his spectacles, and scanned the rough, burly-looking man on the other side of the stove, as if he had been a stranger.

“Look here, Jerry,” he said presently, “you’re getting to look old, and your hair’s all a-turning gray. Now you’ve got to quit pegging away so hard and take a holiday, before you get like me, so stiff and rheumatic you can’t get away. Why don’t you go to the
World’s Fair? It ’ud be a burning shame for the richest man in Trigg County to miss such a show.”

Thus it came about that one day Jerry rubbed his eyes in a bewildered way to find himself in the midst of a surging crowd that thronged the entrances of the Fair.

He plodded along the Midway Plaisance, his umbrella under his arm and his hands in his pockets; he walked and stared till late in the afternoon. It was late in May, the spring ploughing had been a good preparation in pedestrianism, but the long furrows, enlivened only by the pipe of a quail or the cry of a catbird, had never brought such weariness as Jerry felt now.

He did not realize he was so tired until he dropped into a seat in one of the gondolas on the lagoon, and remarked confidentially to the gondolier that he was “clean beat out.”

It was the first time Jerry had spoken since he entered the grounds. The man made no reply.

He studied the fellow keenly a moment, and then turned to the crowds, surging along the banks in every direction. Not a soul in all that multitude even knew his name.

A feeling of utter loneliness crept over him, and when the boat landed he was saying to himself that he would give the finest colt in his pastures for the sight of a familiar face.

A few steps farther, and he saw one. It was in the government building, where an amused crowd was exclaiming over the Dead Letter Exhibit. Jerry edged along in front of the case, wondering at the variety of shipwrecked cargoes that had drifted into this government haven.

A vague pity stirred in him for all the hopes that had gone into the grave of the dead letter office—rings that had never found the fingers they were to have clasped, gifts that might have unlocked long silences, tokens of friendship that were never received, never acknowledged—all caught in this snarled web that no human skill could possibly unravel.

Then he saw the familiar face. It smiled out at him from the case of an old daguerreotype, till his heart began to beat so hard that he glanced guiltily around, to see if any one else heard it. The blood rushed to his head, and he felt dizzy.

It was that picture of himself, taken so long ago up in Vermont! He was not likely to be mistaken in it—the only picture he had ever had taken in his life.

He chuckled as he recalled the anxious oiling he had given the curly hair to make it lie flat, the harrowing hesitation over his necktie, the borrowing of the watch-chain that stood out in such bold relief against his brocaded vest. How quaint and old-fashioned it looked!

He passed his hand over his grizzled beard with a sigh, for the smooth, boyish face was not all he saw. It brought back the whole faded past so overwhelmingly that for awhile he forgot where he was.

Thirty-three years since he had dropped that little package in the office! He did not question why the letter had gone astray. He had lost his boyish faith in his own infallibility. He had probably mailed it with only half the address, perhaps none.

Now he was a boy again, back in Maine. Aunt Lucy’s knitting-needles clicked in the firelight. Uncle Caleb was making him a sled. How warm and comfortable the kitchen felt, and how good Aunt Lucy’s doughnuts tasted!

The crowds jostled him. He stood as if grown to the spot, until a sharp-nosed woman elbowed her way in front of him, to see what interested him. She looked inquisitively from the picture to the weather-beaten face above her, and passed on, none the wiser. There was little likeness between the two.
Her penetrating glances aroused him. He came to himself with a start, looked hastily around, and then set out from the building, heedless of direction. A keen, raw wind struck him as he strode along the lake shore. He shivered and turned up his coat collar.

A drizzling mist of rain began to fall. People going by with their umbrellas up looked at him curiously as he plodded along with his own umbrella under his arm.

Soon a heavy dash of rain aroused him to the necessity of finding immediate shelter. A group of State buildings was just ahead. Glancing up he saw the name of his native State on one, and hurried in.

A great log heap blazed and crackled in the huge fireplace, filling the room with a glowing comfort that warmed him, soul and body. He drew a chair close up to it, and spread his chilly fingers to the flames.

The sticks against the forelog burnt to embers and fell into the ashes. The crane seemed to swing backward like a great finger, pointing to the past, as he sat and stared into the fire.

People passing through the room saw only a rough old farmer, his clumsy boots stretched out on the hearth. They never dreamed of the scenes that passed before him in the fire. There were glimpses of snow-covered pine woods, of sparkling trout-streams gurgling in the June sunshine, of long stretches of level sea-sands where the tide crawled in.

The old homesickness waked again. What had they thought of him through all these silent years? He wondered how they would receive his long-delayed apology. He must write as soon as he got back to the hotel.

The rain had stopped. He stood up and shook himself, then went outdoors again, pulling his beard meditatively, as he walked toward the gate. It seemed a week since he had entered it.
Outside, while he waited for a car, he kept poking the end of his umbrella savagely into a crack in the pavement. As he swung himself to the platform of a passing car, he turned back for another look at the domes and towers inside the gates.

It was his last look. He had seen enough. He was going back to Uncle Caleb and Aunt Lucy.

**Annie Fellows-Johnston.**

[End of text.]