EARLY IN 1868 something happened to our family fortunes. I do not know what it was more than that my father lost all of his money, every cent. It actually took the carpets off the floors to pay out, and there was no hesitation about permitting them to be taken. It was one of those occurrences that are continually happening and directly or indirectly, mostly the latter, exert a great influence both upon individuals and society, serving to cure pride and remind man in a decisive manner of his self-insufficiency.

All of a sudden we were as a family translated from luxury to necessity—from affluence to abysmal poverty. It seems to me that I must have been taken out of the big house while asleep. I was eight years old, and must have had sufficient intellect to comprehend things to some degree. Perhaps my senses were numbed by the shock. Anyhow all I remember is that I seemed to go to sleep in the big house and to awaken in a little frame shack, with only two rooms and a lean-to. The big parlor lamp was gone and so was the parlor and the base-burner with the red coals shining through the mica. Each youngster had had a horse to ride. They were all gone. Two old crowbaits, that were dying of old age and were a liability, and were only kept in deference to a creditable sentiment, remained. We called them "Baldy" and "Coalie," because one had a white forehead and the other was coal black. The first real fight I ever had was with a boy who shouted after me "flip-flop!" "flip-flop!" "flip-flop!" as I was urging old Baldy into a sort of earthquake, bone-racking trot. He was rather too big for me, and I got a bloody nose and a black
eye. He got enough so that he did not yell "flip-flop!" at me again.

I did not understand then why my parents wished to keep these worthless animals and were so tender with them. As for myself, I was so ashamed of them and so angered at times that I hate a "flip-flop" to this day. Also I am thankful to have a feeling grow within me that would not permit me to turn out a faithful old horse or dog to starve to death.

The new abode is known in our family history as "the little brown house." And it was small. The furniture consisted of a few wooden chairs, a wooden table, poorly equipped beds, iron knives and forks, tin plates, cheap cooking utensils and one stove, a cooking stove with two holes and a square box oven on top at the back, supported by long, spider-like iron legs. Food was scarce too. We children were put on a corn meal diet and not any too much corn meal. Every Friday was hog killing day at the slaughter house down on the old Plank Road. At such times hogs' hearts could be had for five cents a pound. Father and mother took advantage of that and as a consequence we had hogs' heart meat once a week and no meat at all between times. I noticed a change in everything. The big dogs were gone. Only we had kept Pinkie, a little black and tan feist with a hole in her throat, cut by a ground hog she had crawled after into a den.

Father acted strangely. He was depressed. I did not know that then. He hung out his doctor sign and one for mother, too. Also he would parade in front of the house with his long coat, gold-headed cane and silk hat, which he had managed somehow to hang onto. After thus showing himself he would return to the house, put on cotton overalls and waist, and departing by the rear and through the alley go to a remote part of town and work as a carpenter—a trade he had well learned as a boy. He was not strong. Soon he grew ill and was very sick. He could not eat. Delicacies were tried.

One day I smelled what to a hungry boy was about the sweetest odor I could remember. It came from the cook stove where five cents' worth of prunes were simmering in a tin cup. They
were for father and his life might have depended upon them for all I knew. That did not shield me from temptation. I made up my mind to steal those prunes and eat them and then run away to Texas. My mother must have suspected me in that divine way that mothers have. Anyhow she watched me and kept such a vigil over the prunes that I was foiled.

That was my first tangible temptation, and there flowed from it my first crystallized ambition. I made up my mind then and there that when I became a man I would not stop in my efforts until I had all the prunes I wished for, even if I had to be a pirate.

Sometimes all of us were hungry and we were ill-clad but cleanly. Old clothing was transformed dexterously and handed down from child to child.

We were sent to school. Other children made fun of us because we were poorly garbed. This made me so sensitive and wounded me to such an extent that I would not look at other children. Fatty Tyner, Nigger Bill and a German boy named Theodore Mersch, called by the urchins “Tater Mash,” as being near the German pronunciation, were particularly kind to me. They would back me in my fights and permitted me to lead them in expeditions for nuts, berries, paw paws, fishing, and against the “Micks” of the Plank Road.

Always there seemed to be war among the boys of LaFayette. If some of us went to the “old sycamore” to swim in the Wabash our enemies were nearly certain to come and muss our clothes, tie them in wet knots, and as we dragged at them with our teeth they would deride us with “Chawed beef and roasted mutton! Chawed beef and roasted mutton!”

We learned to keep a standing guard and pickets. If the Micks outnumbered us we would run. If there was a fair chance we stood our ground and fought, with honors about even from day to day.

I learned to swim at the “wide water,” an impounding reservoir used to adjust the canal levels. It looked big to me as a boy and it was over a man’s head in depth. A bigger crowd than ours chased us away from the “old sycamore” swimming hole. We grabbed our clothing and ran across the Wabash bottoms to the
wide water. I remember that I arrived bleeding and stinging from the smarting wounds of thorns and sandburrs. Although I could not swim or had not swum before I was on fire. I rushed down the steep, artificial bank into the wide water where it was about ten feet in depth. I went to the bottom. When I came up I struck out just as naturally as though I was a good swimmer, not dog fashion, but a full sweeping stroke. It was not long before I developed into a good swimmer.

One day Nigger Bill showed me how to cure warts. He was the son of Reverend Maveety, who preached on Sunday and wielded a whitewash brush week days. His mother knew how to “Kunjer” he said and was sister of a hoodoo (voo-doo) queen. I was deeply impressed and told my mother. She ordered me to keep away from the negro boy and told me the rules he gave me were foolish.

I still had faith in Nigger Bill. A block from our house lived the Purnells. They had a nice little girl named Laura, about my age. She had more warts on her hands than a Texan toad and was quite proud of them. I got her to let me try to take off just one of them, and because we were good friends she consented.

Nigger Bill had told me to take a piece of blue thread, tie it in a hard knot over the wart and then slip it off and bury it, repeating as I did so,

Hoblin, goblin, go an’ snort,
Rot in the groun’ an’ kill a wart.

As the thread rotted the wart would rot and come off. Mystery of mysteries, but to me perfectly natural then, Laura Purnell’s big wart on her left hand, that I had tied the blue thread over, became inflamed, and the swelling communicated to the entire hand and arm. Laura was in great pain, and some thought she might die. I was frightened to death. After a really severe siege she recovered, minus the wart. Then I went and dug for the thread to see if it had rotted. Either I dug in the wrong place or it had disintegrated, for I could not find it. I was afraid to be a
wart doctor because somebody might die before the wart came off. Just what happened I do not know unless I slightly cut or irritated the wart and it was infected by the thread. Warts are not nice to have but they are preferable to Nigger Bill's cure, in which there is the philosophy of the ages.

To help out I became a rag picker, which included gathering old iron as well. I got to know the alleys of the town better than the streets. Also I carried a newspaper route and sold papers. It brought me into contact with all phases and strata of life, and I early came to know, I do not know how I knew but I did, that God takes especial care of boys and girls or there wouldn't be one on earth uncontaminated. Down in the Wabash bottoms I used to see men and women derelicts. In the summer they infested the now dry flood lands. I had as much abhorrence of them as of a snake. Nobody told me about them or the great dangers of boyhood. I just knew instinctively, and I think other boys do.

Once the circulator of William S. Lingle's *Daily Courier* asked me to carry papers in a part of the town where the carrier was always being licked and his papers destroyed. He said I would have to fight and that maybe as many as twenty boys would attack me at once. I couldn't whip twenty boys without preparedness, so I bought a second-hand, twenty-two caliber, seven-shot revolver.

It was autumn. The coming January I would be eleven years old. Hard knocks and life in the alleys were developing me fast. I took the papers and started out really hoping to get a chance to shoot a few boys just to test the killing power of my gun. I had already tried it on a cow out in the commons, and when she walked away seemingly unconcerned I was ready to take the revolver back to the second-hand man. But I thought I might have better luck shooting boys. At the corner of Thirteenth and Union streets a colored boy, possibly a little larger than I, came up to me in a bantering way and grabbed at my papers. I forgot my revolver and laid down my sack and waded into the Negro. We were rolling around on the ground and I was getting a little
the best of him I thought, until he got my left fore arm between his sharklike teeth. That made me desperate and caused me somehow to remember the gun in my pocket. I got it out and when the Negro boy saw it he yelled "murder" and "help" and gave up.

Then boys began to appear from everywhere, but mostly from behind an old barn near by and from under a street bridge over an open surface sewer called Pearl River. When I saw them I ran for my papers and bolted. The yelling crowd of boys pursued me. I thought there must be a hundred. Some were larger than I. As I was ascending to the sidewalk after crossing that Pearl River, a bigger boy struck me over the head with a broken shinny stick. Down I went. I had already been hit several times by rocks and clubs but I was not hurt. Now was the time to use the revolver. I pulled it out and shot all seven shots slam into that crowd. Really I expected to kill seven boys at least and maybe more. There was a scattering in all directions and it wasn’t long before a policeman had me. I don’t know where he came from. There weren’t many in LaFayette those days.

He took my gun and instead of taking me to the calaboose, as we called the local lockup, he took me home. I had not lost many papers. As soon as the officer turned me loose I got an older brother to go with me and we finished the paper delivery that night. I hadn’t hit a boy. Just like shooting into a flock of anything without picking your bird. From that day I carried that route unmolested. I wouldn’t advise boys to follow my example, even though in what I did I was perfectly innocent of intentional wrong doing.

As I grew stronger I did all kinds of work. It seems to me now that the hardest work of my youth was cutting and shocking green corn. When I was thirteen, my brother Steve and I took a contract cutting corn and shocking it for ten cents a shock every fourteen rows and fourteen hills of corn. Those who know Indiana corn along the Wabash will think of each stalk as almost a tree. I wielded the corn cutter and Steve carried the big heavy
bundles and shocked them. He was older by eight years and was equal to the work.

When I would be awakened in the morning I would ache from head to toe and would be so stiff and sore I could have cried out with pain when I essayed to move. And I was too young to harden and get used to it.

Also I learned to cradle, rake, bind, mow, stack hay and grain, load hay, rive clapboards, split rails and chop cordwood. I still enjoy swinging an ax just as I liked it best of all as a boy. Many hardships have been my lot by land and sea, if one calls enjoyable, exacting adventures hardships, but not one caused me as much suffering as corn cutting in the Indiana maize forest.

I went to Sunday school. My mother was a Methodist and my father a Wesleyan, between which denominations there is little difference. At Christmas time I managed to get to six Sunday schools. It required no end of scheming, but I really received gifts one Christmas from six different trees. It was not right I now know but I thought no wrong of it then. In fact, I thought a boy who went to only one Sunday school at Christmas time was downright shiftless.

Two things I best remember that I heard in church while a boy. One was the temperance examples told by Francis Murphy. The other is a picture of a devout Sunday school superintendent of the Ninth Street M. E. Church of LaFayette, named J. Q. A. Perrin, as I slyly glanced at him while he repeated the childhood prayer:

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Now I lay me down to sleep,
I pray the Lord my soul to keep,
And if I die before I wake,
I pray the Lord my soul to take.
This I ask for Jesus' sake.
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The above is not the way Billy Sunday words and spells it but it is the way Mr. Perrin recited it, and it is the way I have repeated
it every night of my life since I was nine, with the alteration since I have had a wife and children to “our” instead of “my.” It is a selfish little prayer but one does not have to stop with it.

The pangs of poverty and attendant humiliation ground into me more and more. I did not have as good clothing as had the other boys that I thought I would like to consort with, and many fisticuffs grew out of the scorn and derision of those who assumed to look down upon me. I did not win all these by any means, but all of them gave me a kind of confidence in myself. I got hold of several dime novels and read also the Jack Harkaway adventures, and a lot of stuff about Jesse James and his brother Frank, who were just beginning to limn on the lurid horizon of boys' brains. I also read the more wholesome “Ashore and Afloat” books by William Taylor Adams, who signed himself Oliver Optic. History began to unfold to me interesting pages, and I found ornithology, entomology, botany and astronomy fascinating. Not that I went very far with any of them; only I liked them better than mathematics. Zoological and biological things were entertainment and mathematics were study. About the very first book I read was a brave little tome called “Little Prudy’s Captain Horace,” by Sophie May, one of the Little Prudy series of delightful books for children. I was nine years of age when I got it off a Baptist Sunday school Christmas tree.

The year before three impressive little books fell into my hands. They were the “Burial of the Firstborn,” by Joseph Alden; “The Little Brown Jug,” by Mrs. C. M. Edwards, and “Not a Minute to Spare,” by S. C. I read all these before I was nine. Really I seemed to partially understand in “Not a Minute to Spare” Tupper’s line—“now is the constant syllable ticking from the clock of Time.”

At least forever after the tick-tocks said to me, “Never return, never return”!

So early does the mind of the average child begin to function. In fact, I read just about everything I could lay my hands on, including all the doctor books I could find around the house.
At an early age, too early, I had read Gray’s “Anatomy,” Dalton’s physiology, Thomas on “Diseases of Women and Children,” pages of Dunglison’s medical dictionary, Gully’s and also Shew’s hydropathy.

Fine reading for a youth of ten to twelve! and it made me knowing beyond my years. I would gather a crowd of boys on the curbstone on dark nights and before a Rembrandt fire in the gutter, with its vivid chiaroscuro, I would tell them the secrets of these doctor books in low tones.

The greatest horror of impression would be made by the descriptions of awful diseases that befel men and women who were not good.

Nearly all of us had read “Robinson Crusoe” and “Swiss Family Robinson.”

We would tell riddles and ghost stories also until all of us were a shiver. Then there were famous nights when we played “Blank Lie Low” and hunted coon and ’possums, and, best of all, camping on the banks of the Wabash all night keeping up a fire big enough for a lion country, while those of us who were bigger baited and ran “trot” lines. We used liver for bait and sometimes we had a thousand hooks out.

They were fine fish, those channel cats (siluridae), but they would sort of gurgle and squawk when we slit them just through the skin behind their horns, and then holding them between the fingers of the left hand would pull off the skin with pincers in the right hand.

The niggers used to say that the catfish were trying to tell what they would do to us when they were men and we were catfish, and their strange metempsychosis folklore made a deep impression.

We boys thought we could see the catfish squirm, like eels and frog meat do when first put into a hot frying pan. This the niggers said was nothing to the way bad boys would squirm in hell.

All through the dimmest social fabric there seemed to run the certainty that good is rewarded and bad is punished, which must
have been one way the Creator has of manifesting a fundamental truth.

Boys were wild and adventurous but they were not nasty or impure, and if there was a degenerate unfortunate he soon come to be marked and shunned.

I wish to believe that that is the way of boys to-day.