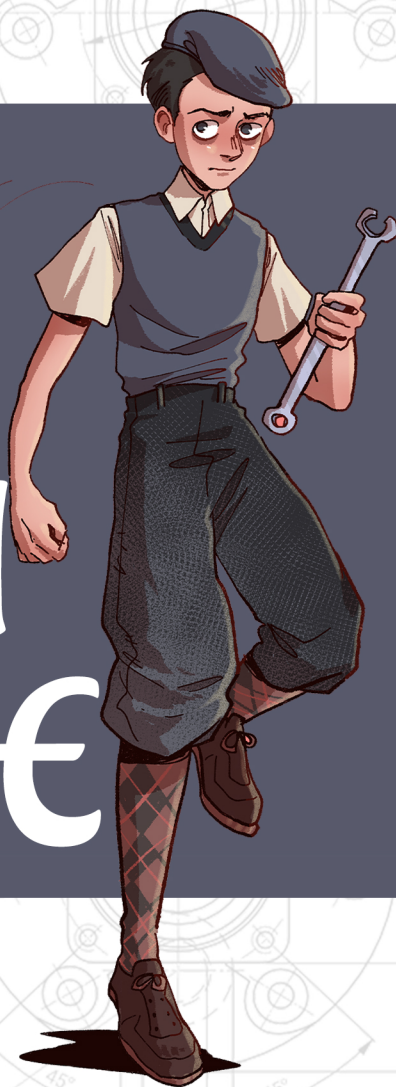


THE YOUNG ENGINEERS

STEVE  
AND THE  
STEAM  
ENGINE



SARA WARE BASSETT

Also by Sara Ware Bassett

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# STEVE AND THE STEAM ENGINE

*by*

SARA WARE BASSETT





“IT WAS THE CONQUERING OF THIS MULTITUDE OF DEFECTS THAT GAVE TO THE WORLD THE INTRICATE, EXQUISITELY MADE MACHINE.”

# CONTENTS

1.	AN UNPREMEDITATED FOLLY	1
2.	A MEETING WITH AN OLD FRIEND	16
3.	A SECOND CALAMITY	28
4.	THE STORY OF THE FIRST RAILROAD	42
5.	STEVE LEARNS A SAD LESSON	55
6.	MR. TOLMAN'S SECOND YARN	63
7.	A HOLIDAY JOURNEY	76
8.	NEW YORK AND WHAT HAPPENED THERE	89
9.	AN ASTOUNDING CALAMITY	102
10.	AN EVENING OF ADVENTURE	118
11.	THE CROSSING OF THE COUNTRY	127
12.	NEW PROBLEMS	137
13.	DICK MAKES HIS SECOND APPEARANCE	144
14.	A STEAMBOAT TRIP BY RAIL	156
15.	THE ROMANCE OF THE CLIPPER SHIP	167
16.	AGAIN THE MAGIC DOOR OPENS	176
17.	MORE STEAMBOATING	182
18.	A THANKSGIVING TRAGEDY	193
19.	THE END OF THE HOUSE PARTY	202



## CHAPTER I

# AN UNPREMEDITATED FOLLY



Steve Tolman had done a wrong thing and he knew it.

While his father, mother, and sister Doris had been absent in New York for a week-end visit and Havens, the chauffeur, was ill at the hospital, the boy had taken the big six-cylinder car from the garage without anybody's permission and carried a crowd of his friends to Torrington to a football game. And that was not the worst of it, either. At the foot of the long hill leading into the village the mighty leviathan so unceremoniously borrowed had come to a halt, refusing to move another inch, and Stephen now sat helplessly in it, awaiting the aid his comrades had promised to send back from the town.

What an ignominious climax to what had promised to be a royal holiday! Steve scowled with chagrin and disappointment.

The catastrophe served him right. Unquestionably he should not have taken the car without asking. He had never run it all by himself before, although many times he had driven it when either his father or Havens had been at his elbow. It had gone all right then. What reason had he to suppose a mishap would befall him when they were not by? It was infernally hard luck!

Goodness only knew what was the matter with the thing. Probably something was smashed, something that might require

days or even weeks to repair, and would cost a lot of money. Here was a pretty dilemma!

How angry his father would be!

The family were going to use the automobile Saturday to take Doris back to Northampton for the opening of college and had planned to make quite a holiday of the trip. Now it would all have to be given up and everybody would blame him for the disappointment. A wretched hole he was in!

The boys had not given him much sympathy, either. They had been ready enough to egg him on into wrong-doing and had made of the adventure the jolliest lark imaginable; but the moment fun had been transformed into calamity they had deserted him with incredible speed, climbing out of the spacious tonneau and trooping jauntily off on foot to see the town. It was easy enough for them to wash their hands of the affair and leave him to the solitude of the roadside; the automobile was not theirs and when they got home they would not be confronted by irate parents.

How persuasively, reflected Stephen, they had urged him on.

“Oh, be a sport, Steve!” Jack Curtis had coaxed. “Who’s going to be the wiser if you do take the car? Anyhow, you have run it before, haven’t you? I don’t believe your father will mind.”

“Take a chance, Stevie,” his chum, Bud Taylor, pleaded. “What’s the good of being such a boob? Do you think if my father had a car and it was standing idle in the garage when a bunch of kids needed it to go to a school game I would hesitate? You bet I wouldn’t!”

“It isn’t likely your Dad would balk at your using the car if he knew the circumstances,” piped another boy. “We have got that match to play off, and now that the electric cars are held up by the strike how are we to get to Torrington? Don’t be a ninny, Steve.”

Thus they had ridiculed, cajoled, and wheedled Steve until his conscience had been overpowered and, yielding to their arguments, he had set forth for the adjoining village with the triumphant throng of tempters. At first all had gone well. The fourteen miles had slipped past with such smoothness and rapidity that Stephen, proudly enthroned at the wheel, had almost forgotten that any shadow rested on the hilarity of the day. He had been dubbed a good fellow, a true sport, a benefactor to the school—every complimentary pseudonym imaginable—and had glowed with pleasure beneath the avalanche of flattery. As the big car with its rollicking occupants had spun along the highway, many a passer-by had caught the merry mood of the cheering group and waved a smiling salutation in response to their shouts.

In the meanwhile, exhilarated by the novelty of the escape, Steve had increased the speed until the red car fairly shot over the level macadam, its blurred outlines lost in the scarlet of the autumn foliage. Then suddenly when the last half-mile was reached and Torrington village, the goal of the pilgrimage, was in sight, quite without warning the panting monster had stopped and all attempts to urge it farther were of no avail. There it stood, its motionless engine sending out odors of hot varnish and little shimmering waves of heat.

Immediately a hush had descended upon the boisterous company. There was a momentary pause, followed by a clamor of advice. When, however, it became evident that there was no prospect of restoring the disabled machine to action, one after another of the frightened schoolboys had dropped out over the sides of the car and after loitering an instant or two with a sort of shamefaced indecision, at the suggestion of Bud Taylor they had all set out for the town.

“Tough luck, old chap!” Bud had called over his shoulder. “Mighty tough luck! Wish we had time to wait and see what’s queered the thing; but the game is called at two-thirty, you know, and we have only about time to make it. We’ll try and hunt up a garage and send somebody back to help you. So long!”

And away they had trooped without so much as a backward glance, leaving Stephen alone on the country road, worried, mortified, and resentful. There was no excuse for their heartless conduct, he fumed indignantly. They were not all on the eleven. Five of the team had come over in Tim Barclay’s Ford, so that several of the fellows Steve had brought were merely to be spectators of the game. At least Bud Taylor, his especial crony, was not playing. He might have remained behind. How selfish people were, and what a fleeting thing was popularity! Why, half an hour ago he had been the idol of the crowd! Then Bud had shouted: “Come ahead, kids, let’s hoof it to Torrington!” and in the twinkling of an eye the tide had turned, the mob had shifted its allegiance and gone tagging off at the heels of a new leader. They did not mean to have their pleasure spoiled, not they!

Scornfully Stephen watched them mount the hill, their crimson sweaters making a zigzag line of color in the sunshine; even their laughter, care-free as if nothing had happened, floated back to him on the still air, demonstrating how little concern they felt for him and his refractory automobile. Well might they proceed light-heartedly to the village, spend their money on sodas and ice-cream cones, and shout themselves hoarse at the game. No thought of future punishment marred their enjoyment and the program was precisely the one he had outlined for himself before Fate had intervened and raised a prohibitory hand.

The fun he had missed was, however, of scant consequence now. All he asked was to get the car safely back to his father’s

garage before the family returned from New York on the afternoon train. Now that his excitement had cooled into sober second thought, he marveled that he had been led into committing such a monstrous offense. He must have been mad. Often he had begged to do the very thing he had done and his father had always refused to let him, insisting that an expensive touring car was no toy for a boy of his age. Perhaps there had been some truth in the assertion, too, he now admitted. Yet were he to hang for it, he could not see why he had not run the car exactly as his elders were wont to do. Of course he had had a pretty big crowd aboard and the heavy load might have strained the machinery; and possibly—just possibly—he had speeded a bit. He certainly had made phenomenally good time for he did not want the fellows to think he was afraid to let out the engine.

Well, whatever the matter was, the harm was done now and he was in a most unenviable plight. No doubt it would cost a small fortune to get the automobile into shape again, more money than he had in the world; certainly far more than he had in his pocket at the present moment. What was he to do? Even suppose the boys did remember to send back help (they probably wouldn't—but suppose they did) how was he to pay a machinist? As he pictured himself being towed to a garage and the car being left there, he felt an uncomfortable sensation in his throat. He certainly was in for it now.

It would be ignominious to charge the repairs to his father but that would be the only course left him. Fortunately Mr. Tolman, who was a railroad official, was well known in the locality and therefore there would be no trouble about obtaining credit; but to ask his father to pay the bills for this escapade was anything but a manly and honorable way out and Steve

wished with all his heart he had never been persuaded into the wretched affair. If there were only some escape possible, some alternative from being obliged to confess his wrongdoing! But to hope to conceal or make good the disaster was futile. And even if he could cover up what had happened, how contemptible it would be! He detested doing anything underhanded. Only sneaks and cowards resorted to subterfuge and although he had been called many names in his life these two had not been among them.

No, he should make a clean breast of what he had done and bear the consequences, and once out of his miserable plight he would take care never again to be a party to such an adventure. He had learned his lesson.

So absorbed was he in framing these worthy resolutions that he did not notice a tiny moving speck that appeared above the crest of the hill and now came whirling toward him. In fact the dusty truck and its yet more dusty driver were beside him before he heeded either one. Then the newcomer came to a stop and he heard a pleasant voice:

“What’s the matter, sonny?”

Stephen glanced up, trying bravely to return his questioner’s smile.

The man who addressed him was white-haired, ruddy, and muscular, and he wore brown denim overalls stained with oil and grease; but although he was middle-aged there was a boyish friendliness in his face and in the frank blue eyes that peered out from under his shaggy brows.

“What’s the trouble with your machine?” he repeated.

“I don’t know,” returned Stephen. “If I did, you bet I wouldn’t be sitting here.”

The workman laughed.



“YOU’VE GOT YOUR ENGINE NICELY WARMED UP,  
YOUNGSTER,” HE OBSERVED CASUALLY.

“Suppose you let me have a look at it,” said he, climbing off the seat on which he was perched.

“I wish you would.”

“It is a pretty fine car, isn’t it?” observed the man, as he approached it. “Is it yours?”

“My father’s.”

“He lets you use it, eh?”

Stephen did not answer.

“Some fathers ain’t that generous,” went on the man as he began to examine the silent monster. “If I had an outfit like this, I ain’t so sure I’d trust it to a chap of your size. Still, if you have your license, I suppose you must know how to run it.”

A shiver passed through Stephen’s body. A license! What if the stranger should ask to see it?

There was a heavy fine, he now remembered, for driving a car unless one were in possession of this precious paper, although what the penalty was he could not at the instant recall; he had entirely forgotten there were any such legal details. Fearfully he eyed the mechanic.

The man, however, did not pursue the subject but instead appeared engrossed in carefully inspecting the automobile inside and out. As he poked about, now here, now there, Stephen watched him with constantly increasing nervousness; and after the investigation had proceeded for some little time and no satisfactory result had been reached, the boy’s heart sank. Something very serious must be the matter if the trouble were so hard to locate, he reasoned. In imagination he heard his father’s indignant reprimands and saw the Northampton trip shrivel into nothingness.

The workman in the meantime remained silent, offering no comment to relieve his anxiety. What he was thinking

under the shabby visor cap pulled so low over his brows it was impossible to fathom. His hand was now unscrewing the top of the gasoline tank.

“You’ve got your engine nicely warmed up, youngster,” observed he casually. “Maybe ‘twas just as well you did come to a stop. You must have covered the ground at a pretty good clip.”

There certainly was something very disconcerting about the stranger’s conversation and again Stephen looked at him with suspicion.

“Oh, I don’t know,” he mumbled, trying to assume an off-hand air. “Perhaps we did come along fairly fast.”

“You weren’t alone then.”

“N—o,” was the uncomfortable reply. “The fellows who sent you back from the village were with me.”

For the first time the workman evinced surprise.

“Nobody sent me,” he retorted. “I just thought as I was going by that you looked as if you were up against it, and as I happen to know something about engines I pulled up to give you a helping hand. The fix you are in isn’t serious, though.” He smiled broadly as if something amused him.

“What is the matter with the car?” demanded the boy desperately, in a voice that trembled with eagerness and anxiety and defied all efforts to remain under his control.

“Why, son, nothing is wrong with your car. You’ve got no gasoline, that’s all.”

“Gasoline!” repeated the lad blankly.

“Sure! You couldn’t have had much aboard when you started, I guess. It managed to bring you as far as this, however, and here you came to a stop. The up-grade of the hill tipped the little gas you did have back in the tank so it would not run out, you see. Fill her up again and she’ll sprint along as nicely as ever.”

The relief that came with the information almost bowled Steve over.

For a moment he could not speak; then when he had caught his breath he exclaimed excitedly:

“How can I get some gasoline?”

His rescuer laughed at the fevered question.

“Why, I happen to have a can of it here on my truck,” he drawled, “and I can let you have part of it if you are so minded.”

“Oh, I don’t want to take yours,” objected the boy.

“Nonsense! Why not? I am going right past a garage on my way back and can get plenty more. We’ll tip enough of mine into your tank to carry you home. It won’t take a minute.”

The suggestion was like water to the thirsty.

“All right!” cried Stephen. “If you will let me pay for it I shall be mightily obliged to you. I’m mightily obliged anyway.”

“Pshaw! I’ve done nothing,” protested the person in the oily jumper. “What are we in the world for if not to do one another a good turn when we can?”

As he spoke he extricated from his conglomerate load of lumber, tools, and boxes a battered can, the contents of which he began to transfer into Stephen’s empty tank.

“There!” ejaculated he presently, as he screwed the metal top on. “That isn’t all she’ll hold, but it will at least get you home. You are going right back, aren’t you?”

The boy glanced quickly at the speaker.

“Yes.”

“That’s right. I would if I were in your place,” urged the man.

Furtively Stephen scrutinized the countenance opposite but although the words had contained a mingled caution and rebuke there was not the slightest trace of interest in the face

of the speaker, who was imperturbably wiping off the moist nickel cap with a handful of waste from his pocket.

“Yes,” he repeated half-absently, “I take it that amount of gas will just about carry you back to Coventry; it won’t allow for any detours, to be sure, but if you follow the straight road it ought to fetch you up there all right.”

Stephen started and again an interrogation rose to his lips. Who was this mysterious mechanic and why should he assume with such certainty that Coventry was the abiding place of the car? He longed to ask but a fear of lengthening the interview prevented him from doing so. If he began to ask questions might not the stranger assume the same privilege and wheel upon him with some embarrassing inquiry? No, the sooner he was clear of this wizard in the brown overalls the better. But for the sake of his peace of mind he should like to know whether the man really knew who he was or whether his comments were simply matters of chance. There certainly was something very uncanny and uncomfortable about it all, something that led him to feel that the person in the jumper was fully acquainted with his escapade, disapproved of it, and meant to prevent him from prolonging it. Yet as he took a peep into the kindly blue eyes which he did not trust himself to meet directly he wondered if this assumption were not created by a guilty conscience rather than by fact. Certainly there was nothing accusatory in the other’s bearing. His face was frankness itself. In books criminals were always fearing that people suspected them, reflected Steve. The man knew nothing about him at all. It was absurd to think he did.

Nevertheless the boy was eager to be gone from the presence of those searching blue eyes and therefore he climbed into his car, murmuring hurriedly:

“You’ve been corking to help me out!”

The workman held up a protesting hand.

“Don’t think of it again,” he answered. “I was glad to do it. Good luck to you!”

With nervous hands Stephen started the engine and, backing the automobile about, headed it homeward. Now that danger was past his desire to reach Coventry before his father should arrive drove every other thought from his mind, and soon the mysterious hero of the brown jumper was forgotten. Although he made wonderfully good time back over the road it seemed hours before he turned in at his own gate and brought the throbbing motor to rest in the garage. A sigh of thankfulness welled up within him. The great red leviathan that had caused him such anguish of spirit stood there in the stillness as peacefully as if it had never stirred from the spot it occupied. If only it had remained there, how glad the boy would have been.

He ventured to look toward the windows fronting the avenue. No one was in sight, it was true; but to flatter himself that he had been unobserved was ridiculous for he saw by the clock that his father, mother, and Doris must already have reached home. Doubtless they were in the house now and fully acquainted with what he had done. If they had not missed the car from the garage they would at least have seen it whirl into the driveway with him at the wheel. Any moment his father might appear at his shoulder. To delay was useless. He had had his fun and now in manly fashion he must face the music and pay for it. How he dreaded the coming storm!

Once, twice he braced himself, then moved reluctantly toward the house, climbed the steps, and let himself in at the front door. He could hardly expect any one would come to greet him under the circumstances. An ominous silence pervaded the

great dim hall but after the glare of the white ribbon of road on which his eyes had been so intently fixed he found the darkness cool and tranquilizing. At first he could scarcely see; then as he gradually became accustomed to the faint light he espied on the silver card tray a telegram addressed to himself and with a quiver of apprehension tore it open. Telegrams were not such a common occurrence in his life that he had ceased to regard them with misgiving.

The message on which his gaze rested, however, contained no ill tidings. On the contrary it merely announced that the family had been detained in New York longer than they had expected and would not return until noon to-morrow. He would have almost another day, therefore, before he would be forced to make confession to his father! The respite was a welcome one and with it his tenseness relaxed. He even gained courage on the strength of his steadier nerves to creep into the kitchen and confront Mary, the cook, whom he knew must have seen him shoot into the driveway and who, having been years in the home, would not hesitate to lecture him roundly for his conduct. But Mary was not there and neither was Julia, the waitress. In the absence of the head of the house the two had evidently ascended to the third story there to forget in sleep the cares of daily life. Stephen smiled at the discovery. It was a coincidence. Unquestionably Fate was with him. It helped his self-respect to feel that at least the servants were in ignorance of what he had done. Nobody knew—nobody at all!

With an interval of rest and a dash of cold water upon his face gradually the act he had committed began to sink back into normal perspective and loom less gigantic in his memory. After all was it such a dreadful thing, he asked himself. Of course he should not have done it and he fully intended to confess his

fault and accept the blame. But was the folly so terrible? He owned that he regretted it and admitted that he was somewhat troubled over the probable consequences, and every time he awoke in the night a dread of the morrow came upon him. In the morning he rushed off to school, found the team had won the game, and came home feeling even more justified than before. Why, if he had not taken the car, the school might have forfeited that victory!

All the afternoon as he sat quietly at his books he tried to keep this consideration uppermost in his mind. Then at dinner time there was a stir in the hall and he knew the moment he feared had arrived. The family were back again! Slowly he stole down over the heavily carpeted stairs. Yes, there they were, just coming in at the door, laughing and chatting gaily with Julia, who had let them in. The next instant his mother had espied him on the landing and had called a greeting.

There was a smile on her face that reproached him for having yielded to the temptation to deceive her even for a second.

“Such a delightful trip as we have had, Steve!” she called. “We wished a dozen times that you were with us. But some vacation you shall have a holiday in New York with your father to pay for what you have missed this time. You shall not be cheated out of all the fun, dear boy!”

“Everything been all right here, son?” inquired his father from the foot of the stairs.

“Yes, Dad.”

“Havens has not showed up yet, I suppose.”

The boy flushed.

“No, sir.”

“It seems to take him an interminable time to have his tonsils out. If he does not appear pretty soon I shall have to

get another man to run the car. We can't be left high and dry like this," fretted the elder man irritably. "Suppose I knew nothing about it, where would we be? I wished to-day you were old enough to have a license and could have come to the station to meet us. I believe with a little more instruction you could manage that automobile all right. Not that I should let you go racing over the country with a lot of boys. But you might be very useful in taking your mother and sister about and helping when we were in a fix like this. I think you would enjoy doing it, too."

"I—I'm—sure I should," replied the lad, avoiding his father's eye and studying the toe of his shoe intently. It passed through his mind as he stood there that now was the moment for confession. He had only to say,

*"I had the car out yesterday,"* and the dreaded ordeal would be over. But somehow he could not utter the words. Instead he descended from the landing and followed the others into the library where the conversation immediately shifted to other topics. In the jumble of narrative his chance to speak was swallowed up nor during the next few days did any suitable opportunity occur for him to make his belated confession. When Mr. Tolman was not at meetings of the railroad board he was at his office or occupied with important affairs, and by and by so many events had intervened that to go back into the past seemed to Stephen idle sentimentality. At length he had lulled his conscience into deciding that in view of the conditions it was quite unnecessary to acquaint his father and mother with his wrong-doing at all. He was safely out of the entanglement and was it not just as well to accept his escape with gratitude and let sleeping dogs lie? All the punishments in the world could not change anything now. What would be the use of telling?

## CHAPTER II

# A MEETING WITH AN OLD FRIEND

**T**he day of the excursion to Northampton was one of those clear mornings when a light frost turned the maples to vermilion and in a single night transformed the ripening summer foliage to the splendor of autumn. The Tolman family were in the highest spirits; it was not often that Mr. Tolman could be persuaded to leave his business and steal away for a week-end and when he did it was always a cause for great rejoicing. Doris, elated at the prospect of rejoining her college friends, was also in the happiest frame of mind and tripped up and down stairs, collecting her forgotten possessions and jamming them into her already bulging suitcase.

As for Steve, the prickings of conscience that had at first tormented him and made him shrink from being left alone with his father had quite vanished. He had argued himself into a state of mental tranquility where further punishment for his misdemeanor seemed superfluous. After his hairbreadth escape from disaster there was no danger, he argued, of his repeating the experiment, and was not this the very lesson all punishments sought to instill? If he had achieved this result without bothering his father about the details, why so much the better. Did not the old adage say that "experience is the best teacher"? Certainly in this case the maxim held true.

Having thus excused his under-handedness and stifled the protests of his better nature he felt, or tried to feel, entirely at peace with the world; and as he now sauntered out to greet the new day he did it as jauntily as if he had nothing to conceal. Already the car was at the door with the luggage aboard and its engine humming invitingly. As the boy listened to the sound he could not but rejoice that the purring monster could tell no tales. How disconcerting it would be should the scarlet devil suddenly shout aloud: "Well, Steve, don't you hope we do not get stalled to-day the way we did going to Torrington?" Mercifully there was no danger of that. The engine might puff and purr and snort but at least it could not talk, and his secret was quite safe. This reflection lighted his face with courage and when the family came out to join him no one would have suspected that the slender boy waiting on the doorstep harbored a thought of anything but anticipation in the prospect of the coming holiday.

"Is everything in, Steve?" asked his father, approaching with Doris's remaining grip.

"I think so, Dad," was the reply. "It certainly seems as if I had piled in almost a dozen suitcases."

"Nonsense, Stevie," pouted Doris. "There were only four."

"Five, Miss Sophomore!" contradicted her brother. "Five! That one Dad is bringing makes the fifth, and I would be willing to bet that it is yours."

"That's where you are wrong, Smartie," the girl laughed good-humoredly, making a mischievous grimace at him from beneath the brim of her saucy little toque of blue velvet. "I am not guilty of the extra suitcase. It's mother's."

"Your mother's!" ejaculated Mr. Tolman incredulously. "Mercy on us! I never knew your mother to be starting out on a short trip with such an array of gowns." Then turning toward

his wife, he added in bantering fashion: "Aren't you getting a little frivolous, my dear? If it were Doris now—"

"But it isn't this time!" interrupted the young lady triumphantly.

Her mother exchanged a glance with her and they both laughed.

"No, Henry, I am the one to blame," Mrs. Tolman admitted. "You see, if I am to keep pace with my big son and daughter I must look my best; so I have not only brought the extra suitcase but I am going to be tremendously fussy as to where it is put."

"I do believe Mater's brought all her jewels with her!" Steve declared wickedly. "Well, she shall have her sunbursts, tiaras, and things where she can keep her eye on them every moment. Suppose I put them down here at your feet, Mother."

Without further ado, he started to lift the basket suitcase into the car.

"Don't tip it up, son. Don't tip it up!" cautioned his mother.

"Your mother is afraid of knocking some of the pearls or emeralds out of their setting," chuckled Mr. Tolman. "Go easy, Steve!"

A general laugh arose as the offending piece of baggage was stowed away out of sight. An instant later wraps and rugs were bundled in, everybody was cosily tucked up, and Mr. Tolman placed his hands on the wheel.

"Now we're off, Dad!" cried Stephen, as he sprang in beside his father. Mr. Tolman needed no second bidding.

There was a whir, a leap forward, and the automobile glided down the long avenue and out into the highway.

Steve, studying the road map, was too much interested in tracing out the route they were to follow to notice that after the car had spun along smoothly for several miles its speed

lessened, and it was not until it came to a complete standstill that he aroused himself from his preoccupation sufficiently to see that his father was bending forward over the starter.

“What’s wrong, Henry?” inquired his wife from the back seat.

“I can’t imagine,” was the impatient reply. “Had I not left the tank with gasoline in it, I should say it was empty; but of course that cannot be the case, for I always keep enough in it to carry us to the garage. Otherwise we should be stalled at our own doorstep and not able to get anywhere.”

Climbing out, he began to unscrew the metal top of the tank while Stephen watched him in consternation.

The boy did not need to hear the result of the investigation for already the wretched truth flashed upon him. The tank was empty; of course it was! He knew that without being told. Had not the workman who had replenished it Wednesday said quite plainly that there was only enough gas in it to get him home to Coventry? He should have remembered to stop at the garage and take on an extra supply on the way back as his father always did. How stupid he had been! In his haste to get home he had forgotten every other consideration and the present dilemma was the result of his thoughtlessness. Yet how could he have stopped at the Coventry garage even had he thought of it? All the men there knew him and his father, and if he had gone there or had even driven through the center of the town somebody would have been sure to see him and mention the incident. Why, it was to avoid this very danger that he had returned by the less frequented way.

The man in the brown jeans had certainly calculated to a nicety when he measured out that gasoline. He had not meant him to do any more riding that day; that was apparent. What business was it of his, anyway, and why was he so solicitous as