Baum Lyman Frank

Annabel

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Annabel

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Содержание

CHAPTER I 5
CHAPTER II 9
CHAPTER III 13
CHAPTER IV 17
Конец ознакомительного фрагмента. 20

Suzanne Metcalf
Annabel / A Novel for Young Folks

CHAPTER I
WILL MEETS WITH A REBUKE

"Here are your vegetables, Nora," said Will Carden, as he scraped his feet upon the mat before the kitchen door of the "big house."

"Come in, Masther Willyum," called the cook, in her cheery voice.

So the boy obeyed the summons and pushed open the screen door, setting his basket upon the white table at Nora's side.

"Oo, misery! but them pays is illegant," she said, breaking open a green pod and eating the fresh, delicious contents. "Why, Masther Willyum, the bloom is on 'em yet."

"I picked them myself, Nora," the boy answered, with a pleased laugh, "and only a little while ago, at that. And you'll find the tomatoes and the celery just as nice, I'm sure."

"They can't be bate," responded the cook, emptying the basket and handing it to him. "Sure, I don't know whatever we'd do widout yez to bring us the grans stuff, Masther Willyum."

"I wish," said he, hesitatingly, "you wouldn't call me 'master,' Nora. Call me Will, as everyone else does. I'm not old enough to have a handle to my name, and I'm not much account in the world, – yet."

Nora's round, good natured face turned grave, and she looked at the boy with a thoughtful air.

"I used to know the Cardens," she said, "when they didn't have to raise vegetables to earn a living."

Will flushed, and his eyes fell.

"Never mind that, Nora," he answered, gently. "We've got to judge people by what they are, not by what they have been. Good bye!" and he caught up his basket and hastily retreated, taking care, however, to close the screen door properly behind him, for he knew the cook's horror of flies.

"Poor boy!" sighed Nora, as she resumed her work. "It ain't his fault, at all at all, that the Cardens has come down in the wurruld. But down they is purty close to the bottom, an' it ain't loikly as they'll pick up ag'in in a hurry."

Meantime the vegetable boy, whistling softly to himself, passed along the walk that led from the back of the big house past the stables and so on to the gate opening into the lane. The grounds of the Williams mansion were spacious and well kept, the lawns being like velvet and the flower beds filled with artistic clusters of rare blooming plants. A broad macadamed driveway, edged with curbs of dressed stone, curved gracefully from the carriage porch to the stables, crossing the lawn like a huge scroll.

At one side of this a group of children played upon the grass – two boys and three girls – while the nurse who was supposed to have charge of the smallest girl, as yet scarcely more than a baby, sat upon a comfortable bench engaged in reading a book.

As Will passed, one of the little girls lay flat upon the ground, sobbing most dismally, her golden head resting upon her outstretched arms. The boy hesitated an instant, and then put down his basket and crossed the lawn to where the child lay, all neglected by her companions.

"What's wrong, Gladie?" he asked, sitting on the grass beside her.

"Oh, Will," she answered, turning to him a tear-stained face, "m – my d – d – dolly's all bwoke, an' Ted says she'll h – h – have t' go to a h – h – hospital, an' Ma'Weeze an' Wedgy says they'll m –

m – make a f – fun'ral an' put dolly in the c – cold gwound, an' make her dead!" and the full horror of the recital flooding her sensitive little heart, Gladys burst into a new flood of tears.

Will laughed.

"Don't you worry about it, Gladie," he said, in a comforting tone. "We'll fix dolly all right, in less than a jiffy. Where is she, and where's she broke?"

Hope crept into the little face, begot of a rare confidence in the big boy beside her. Gladys rolled over upon the grass, uncovering a French doll of the jointed variety, dressed in very elaborate but soiled and bedraggled clothes and having a grimy face and a mass of tangled hair. It must have been a pretty toy when new, but the doll had never won Gladys' whole heart so long as it remained immaculate and respectable. In its present disreputable condition it had become her dearest treasure, and when she handed the toy to Will Carden and showed him where one leg was missing from the knee down, a fresh outburst of grief convulsed her.

"Her l – leg is all b – bwoke!" she cried.

"That's bad," said Will, examining the doll carefully. "But we'll play I'm the doctor, come to make her well. Where's the other piece, Gladie?"

The child hastily searched for her pocket, from which, when at last the opening was found, she drew forth the severed leg. By this time the other children had discovered Will's presence and with a wild whoop of greeting they raced to his side and squatted around him on the lawn, curiously watching to see how he would mend the doll. Theodore was about Will's own age, but much shorter and inclined to stoutness. His face habitually wore a serious expression and he was very quiet and stolid of demeanor. Reginald, the other boy, was only nine, but his nature was so reckless and mischievous that he was the life of the whole family and his mother could always tell where the children were playing by listening for the sound of Reginald's shrill and merry voice.

Mary Louise was fourteen – a dark haired, blue eyed maiden whose sweet face caused strangers to look more than once as she passed them by. To be sure she was very slender – so slight of frame that Reginald had named her "Skinny" as a mark of his brotherly affection; but the girl was so dainty in her ways and so graceful in every movement that it was a wonder even her careless younger brother should not have recognized the fact that her "skinny" form was a promise of great beauty in the years to come.

Then there was Annabel, the "odd one" of the Williams family, with a round, freckled face, a pug nose, tawny red hair and a wide mouth that was always smiling. Annabel was twelve, the favored comrade of her brothers and sisters, the despair of her lady mother because of her ugliness of feature, and the pet of Nora, the cook, because she was what that shrewd domestic considered "the right stuff." Annabel, in spite of her bright and joyous nature, was shy with strangers, and at times appeared almost as reserved as her brother Theodore, which often led to her being misunderstood. But Will Carden was no stranger to the Williams children, being indeed a school-mate, and as they flocked around him this bright Saturday morning they showered questions and greetings upon their friend in a somewhat bewildering manner.

The boy had only one thought in mind, just then: to comfort little Gladys by making her dolly "as good as new." So whistling softly, in his accustomed fashion, he drew out his pocket knife and began fishing in the hole of the doll's leg for the elastic cord that had parted and allowed her lower joint to fall off. Gladys watched this operation with wide, staring eyes; the others with more moderate interest; and presently Will caught the end of the cord, drew it out, and made a big knot in the end so it could not snap back again and disappear. Then, in the severed portion, he found the other end of the broken elastic, and when these two ends had been firmly knotted together the joints of the leg snapped firmly into place and the successful operation was completed.

"Hooray!" yelled Reginald, "it's all right now, Gladie. We'll postpone the funeral till another smash-up."

The little one's face was wreathed with smiles. She hugged the restored doll fondly to her bosom and wiped away the last tears that lingered on her cheeks. The callous nurse looked over at the group, yawned, and resumed her reading.

"Can you make a kite fly, Will?" asked Theodore, in his quiet tones.

"Don't know, Ted," replied Will. "What seems wrong with the thing?"

At once they all moved over to the center of the lawn, where a big kite lay with tangled cord and frazzled tail face downward upon the grass.

"It keeps ducking, and won't go up," explained Reginald, eagerly.

"The tail seems too long," said Mary Louise.

"Or else the cord isn't fastened in the right place," added Theodore. "We've been working at it all morning; but it won't fly."

"Guess it's a ground-kite," remarked Annabel, demurely. "It slides on the grass all right."

Will gave it a careful examination.

"Looks to me as if the brace-strings were wrong," said he, resuming his low whistle, which was an indication that he was much interested in the problem. "They don't balance the kite right, you see. There, that's better," he continued, after changing the position of the cords; "let's try it now. I'll hold it, Ted, and you run."

Theodore at once took the cord, which Will had swiftly untangled and rolled into a ball, and stood prepared to run when the kite was released. Next moment he was off, and the kite, now properly balanced, rose gracefully into the air and pulled strong against the cord, which Theodore paid out until the big kite was so high and distant that it looked no bigger than your hand.

Ted could manage the kite now while standing still, and the other children all rushed to his side, with their eyes fastened upon the red speck in the sky.

"Thank you, Will," said Theodore.

"That's all right," answered Will, indifferently; "all it needed was a little fixing. You could have done it yourself, if you'd only thought about it. How's the sick kitten, Annabel?"

"Fine," said the girl. "The medicine you gave me made it well right away."

"Oho!" cried Reginald, joyfully, "he gave Annabel medicine to cure a sick kitten!"

"I'll give you some for a sick puppy, Reggie," said Will, grinning.

The kite-flyers were now standing in a group near a large bed of roses at the side of the house, and none of them, so intent were they upon their sport, had noticed that Mrs. Williams had come upon the lawn with a dainty basket and a pair of shears to gather flowers. So her voice, close beside them, presently startled the children and moved the inattentive nurse to spring up and hide her book.

"Isn't that the vegetable boy?" asked the lady, in a cold tone.

Will swung around and pulled off his cap with a polite bow.

"Yes, ma'am," said he.

"Then run away, please," she continued, stooping to clip a rose with her shears.

"Run away?" he repeated, not quite able to understand.

"Yes!" said she, sharply. "I don't care to have my children play with the vegetable boy."

The scorn conveyed by the cold, emphatic tones brought a sudden flush of red to Will's cheeks and brow.

"Good bye," he said to his companions, and marched proudly across the lawn to where his basket lay. Nor did he pause to look back until he had passed out of the grounds and the back gate closed behind him with a click.

Then a wild chorus of protest arose from the children.

"Why did you do that?" demanded Theodore of his mother.

"He's as good as we are," objected Annabel.

"It wasn't right to hurt his feelings," said Mary Louise, quietly; "he can't help being a vegetable boy."

"Silence, all of you!" returned Mrs. Williams, sternly. "And understand, once for all, that I won't have you mixing with every low character in the town. If you haven't any respect for yourselves you must respect your father's wealth and position – and me."

There was an ominous silence for a moment. Then said little Gladys:

"Will's a dood boy; an' he fixted my dolly's leg."

"Fanny! take that rebellious child into the house this minute," commanded the great lady, pointing a terrible finger at her youngest offspring.

"I don't want to," wailed Gladys, resisting the nurse with futile determination.

"Oh, yes you will, dear," said Mary Louise, softly, as she bent down to the little one. "You must obey mamma, you know. Come, – I'll go with you."

"I'll go with Ma'-Weeze," said the child, pouting and giving her mother a reproachful glance as she toddled away led by her big sister, with the nurse following close behind.

"A nice, obedient lot of children you are, I must say!" remarked Mrs. Williams, continuing to gather the flowers. "And a credit, also, to your station in life. I sometimes despair of bringing you up properly."

There was a moment's silence during which the children glanced half fearfully at each other; then in order to relieve the embarrassment of the situation Annabel cried:

"Come on, boys; let's go play."

They started at once to cross the lawn, glad to escape the presence of their mother in her present mood.

"Understand!" called Mrs. Williams, looking after them; "if that boy stops to play with you again I'll have Peter put him out of the yard."

But they paid no attention to this threat, nor made any reply; and the poor woman sighed and turned to her flowers, thinking that she had but done her duty.

CHAPTER II
THE DOCTOR TELLS THE TRUTH

Meantime Will Carden walked slowly up the lane, his basket on his arm and his hands thrust deep into his pockets. Once out of sight of the Williams' grounds his proud bearing relaxed, and great tears welled in his gray eyes. The scornful words uttered by Mrs. Williams had struck him like a blow and crushed and humiliated him beyond measure. Yet he could not at first realize the full meaning of his rebuff; it was only after he found time to think, that he appreciated what she had really meant by the words. Her children were rich, and he was poor. There was a gulf between them, and the fine lady did not wish her children to play with the vegetable boy. That was all; and it was simple enough, to be sure. But it brought to Will's heart a bitterness such as he had never known in all his brief lifetime.

He liked the Williams boys and girls. They had always been good comrades, and not one of them had ever hinted that there was any difference in their positions. But of course they did not know, as their mother did, how far beneath them was the poor "vegetable boy."

Will glanced down at the worn and clumsy shoes upon his feet. The leather was the same color as the earth upon the path, for he worked in the garden with them, and couldn't have kept them clean and polished had he so wished. His trousers were too short; he knew that well enough, but hadn't cared about it until then. And they were patched in places, too, because his mother had an old-fashioned idea that patches were more respectable than rags, while Will knew well enough that both were evidences of a poverty that could not be concealed. He didn't wear a coat in summer, but his gray shirt, although of coarse material, was clean and above reproach, and lots of the village boys wore the same sort of a cheap straw hat as the one perched upon his own head.

The Williams children didn't wear such hats, though. Will tried to think what they did wear; but he had never noticed particularly, although it was easy to remember that the boys' clothes were of fine cloths and velvets, and he had heard Flo speak of the pretty puffs and tucks in the Williams girls' dresses. Yes, they were rich – very rich, everyone said – and no one knew so well as Will how very poor and needy the Cardens were. Perhaps it was quite right in Mrs. Williams not to want her children to associate with him. But oh! how hard his rejection was to bear.

Bingham wasn't a very big town. Formerly it had been merely a headquarters for the surrounding farmers, who had brought there their grain to be shipped on the railroad and then purchased their supplies at the stores before going back home again. But now the place was noted for its great steel mills, where the famous Williams Drop Forge Steel was made and shipped to all parts of the world. Three hundred workmen were employed in the low brick buildings that stood on the edge of the town to the north, close to the railway tracks; and most of these workmen lived in pretty new cottages that had been built on grounds adjoining the mills, and which were owned and rented to them by Chester D. Williams, the sole proprietor of the steel works.

The old town, with its humble but comfortable dwellings, lay scattered to the south of the "Main Street," whereon in a double row stood the "stores" of Bingham, all very prosperous because of the increased trade the steel mills had brought to the town.

The great Williams mansion, built only a half dozen years before, stood upon a knoll at the east end of the main street, and the natural beauties of the well-wooded grounds had been added to by planting many rare shrubs and beds of beautiful flowers. It was not only the show place of Bingham but the only really handsome house in town, and the natives looked upon it with much pride and reverence.

The cottage occupied by the Cardens stood upon the extreme south edge of the village, and with it were two acres of excellent land, where Will and Egbert, assisted at times by their mother and little Florence, raised the vegetables on which their living depended. Egbert was a deaf-mute and his

right arm was shrivelled and almost useless, all these afflictions being the result of an illness in his babyhood. But it was surprising how much work he could do in the garden, in the way of weeding and watering and even spading; so he was a great help to the family and contributed much toward the general support. Egbert was two years older than Will, who was now fifteen, and Florence – or "Flo," as everybody called her – was a yellow haired, sunny natured little elf of ten.

Fortunately, the family living did not depend altogether upon the garden; for Mr. Jordan, the secretary at the steel works and at one time John Carden's best friend, had boarded with the family for eight years – ever since the day when Will's father so mysteriously disappeared, only to be reported dead a month later, and the family fortunes were swept away in one breath.

Mr. Jordan occupied the best room in the cottage, and paid his board regularly every Saturday night. He was a silent, reserved man, about fifty years of age, who seldom spoke to Mrs. Carden and never addressed the children. After supper his custom was to take a long walk down the country lane, returning by a roundabout way to shut himself in his room, whence he only emerged in time for breakfast. After that meal, which he ate alone, he would take a little lunch basket and stalk solemnly away to the mills, there to direct the clerical work that came under his supervision.

Mr. Jordan was a man greatly respected, but little liked. He had no friends, no companions whatever, and seemed to enjoy the clock-like regularity and solitude in which he lived.

It was toward this humble home that Will Carden, after being dismissed by Mrs. Williams, directed his steps on that bright Saturday forenoon. He tried hard to bear up under the humiliation he had suffered; but there was no one near to see him and for a few minutes he gave way to the tears that would force themselves into his eyes, and let them flow unrestrained. Yet he kept on his way, with bent head and stooping shoulders, a very different boy from the merry, light hearted youth who had carried the heavy basket to the big house only an hour ago.

Suddenly, to the eyes blurred with tears, a huge, dark form loomed up in the road just ahead of him. Will hastily wiped away the unmanly drops and tried to whistle. Someone was coming, and whoever it was must not know he had been guilty of crying. Also he shifted his path to the edge of the road; but the other did the same, and the boy stopped abruptly with the knowledge that he had been purposely halted.

Then he glanced timidly up and saw a round, bearded face and two shrewd but kindly eyes that were looking at him from beneath a slouched felt hat.

"Hello, Doctor," he said, letting his dismal whistle die away, and starting to pass round the stalwart form before him.

But Dr. Meigs laid a heavy hand on the boy's shoulder, and made him face round again.

"What's up, Will?"

The voice was big and full, yet gentle as it was commanding.

"Noth'n, Doctor."

"Look here; you're telling whoppers, young man. Lift up your head."

Will obeyed.

"You've been crying."

"Something got in my eye," said the boy.

"To be sure. Tears. What's it all about, Will? And, mind you, no lying! Your father's son should speak the truth boldly and fearlessly."

"Why, Doctor," was the halting answer, "it's nothing that amounts to shucks. I stopped a minute to fly a kite with the Williams children, up at the big house, and Mrs. Williams came out and said she didn't – " There was a catch in his voice, but he quickly controlled it: "didn't want me to play with them. That's all – * * * * Well, I'll be going, Doctor."

"Halt!" cried Doctor Meigs, sternly, and Will could see he was frowning in that awful way he had when anything especially interested him. "Stand up, William! Throw back those shoulders – chest out – that's the way. That's how your father used to stand, my boy."

"Did he?" asked Will, brightening up.

"Straight as an arrow. And looked everyone square in the eye, and spoke the truth, as an honest man should."

"Then why," enquired Will, half scared at his own boldness, "did my father run away, Doctor Meigs?"

"Run away!" roared the doctor, in a terrible voice. "Who told you that? You've been listening to those lying tales of the scandal-mongers."

"Didn't he?" timidly asked the boy.

"Not by a jugfull!" declared the doctor, emphatically. "John Carden would no more run away than he would do a dishonest action. And he was true as steel."

Will stood straight enough now, and his gray eyes glistened with joy and pride. Whatever statement old Doctor Meigs made he believed implicitly. The doctor had known Will since the day he was born – which was longer than Will could remember the doctor; but there had never been an hour of that time when the physician had not been the staunch friend of all the Carden family, and stood by them loyally in spite of their reverses and final poverty. He always called at least once a week to see Egbert, whose bad arm sometimes pained him, and to have a quiet chat with Mrs. Carden; and if either Will or Flo chanced to be ailing the doctor was prompt with his remedies. But no bill had ever been presented for such services.

"I wish you'd tell me about my father," said Will, wistfully. "Mother never says much about him, you know."

"Her heart is broken, my boy," murmured the doctor, laying a caressing hand upon Will's shoulder; "but it's because she has lost her husband and friend, not because she has for a moment doubted his memory. Do you see those big buildings over there?" pointing to the distant steel works; "well, before they were built, another and more modest building stood in their place, where your father first discovered the secret process that has since made Chester Williams a rich and famous man. Did you know that? But John Carden made himself poor with his experiments, and Mr. Jordan loaned him money to carry on the tests until your father was deeply in his debt. There was but one way out, to go to England and interest the great steel manufacturers of that country in the new process, which John Carden knew to be very valuable. In order to save money, your father sailed in a second-class ship that foundered at sea and drowned him and all on board; and because he told only Mr. Jordan and myself of the object of his trip abroad, the story got around that he had run away, having failed in business, and thus cruelly deserted his family. Jordan is a reserved man, and never talks to anybody, but I've nailed the lie wherever I've heard it. Well, after your father's death it was found that he had transferred his secret process to Mr. Jordan, in return for the money he owed him; and Jordan turned the secret over to Williams, who has established that great factory to produce the wonderful quality of steel your father invented. It is said that Mr. Jordan gets a royalty on all the steel the Williams mills turn out, and if that is so, and I have no reason to doubt it, he is a wealthy man by this time, and is profiting a hundred-fold for the money he loaned John Carden. So the debt is cleared, and your family owes no man a penny. As for Jordan, I don't like the man, myself; he's too silent and stealthy to suit me; but I must say he's done the square thing by your mother in boarding with her right along, and so helping her to support her children."

"It helps a lot," said Will, thoughtfully.

"And now, my boy, you've got the whole story about your father, and got it square and fair. Every time you see the Williams mills you ought to be proud to remember that it was John Carden's genius that made them possible, and that has enabled Chester D. Williams to amass a fortune. As for Mrs. Williams, who was once as poor as yourself, I believe, and is now a bit too proud of the money her husband has made, don't you pay any attention to her. If she doesn't want you to play with her children, don't you mind, Will. Remember that the Cardens have lived in Bingham for three generations – long before the Williamses were ever heard of – and there isn't a thing in their history

they need be ashamed of. Poverty's no crime, young man; and when you're a little older poverty won't bother you, for you'll carve out a fine fortune for yourself, unless I'm very much mistaken."

Will looked into the big, whiskered face with grateful eyes. Dr. Meigs had not only comforted him, but made him proud of his family and of himself.

"Thank you, Doctor," he said. "I guess I'll go, now."

"Put out your tongue!" commanded the doctor.

Will obeyed, meekly.

"You're right as a trivet. Run along, now, and weed that garden. And say – take half a peck of peas over to old Mrs. Johnson. I almost forgot about it. Here's a quarter to pay for them. Tell her a friend sent them around. I believe it was old Nelson, but I can't remember now."

Then the doctor picked up the little case in which he carried medicines and strode away down the road, the end of his stout cane ringing on the hard earth at every step.

CHAPTER III
MR. JORDAN BECOMES MYSTERIOUS

Little Flo heard Will's merry whistle as he drew near, and gave, a sigh of relief. It was dreary work weeding the radishes in the hot sun, without a soul to talk to. Egbert was fixing slender poles in the ground for the young beans to climb; but Egbert didn't count much as a companion, because he could neither talk nor hear, although he was wonderfully quick to understand signs, or even a movement of the lips; so the child was glad her brother Will had returned.

He only paused to toss his basket into the open door of the barn, and then came straight to the radish bed.

"Working, sis?" he cried, cheerily.

"Mother said I must weed 'til noon," she answered. "She's baking, so she can't help."

"Well, how does it go?" he asked, kneeling down to assist in the labor.

"Oh, I don't mind," she said, in a voice that sounded less indifferent than the words. "Poor folks have to work, I s'pose; but Saturday ought to be a holiday – oughtn't it, Will?"

"Sure enough. Where do you want to go?"

"Mabel Allen's got a new set of dishes for her birthday, and she said if I'd come over we'd have tea. And Annabel Williams told me to stop in and see Gladys's doll's new clothes."

Will's face hardened, and his whistle died away. He plucked at the weeds savagely for a time, and then said:

"Look here, Flo; you run on and have tea with Mabel. I'll 'tend to the weedin'. But I wouldn't go to the big house, if I were you."

"Why not?" asked Flo, in surprise.

Will thought a minute – just long enough to restrain the angry words that rose to his lips. Then he said:

"We're poor, Flo, and the Williams family is rich, and they give themselves airs. I don't know as I blame 'em any for that; but the Cardens are as good as the Williamses, even if we haven't money, and I don't like to have them patronize us, that's all."

The girl looked puzzled.

"Annabel's always been nice to me, and I like her. I like Gladys, too. Why, Will, I thought all the Williams children were your friends!"

"So they are," answered Will. "The children don't put on airs, sis; it's Mrs. Williams that don't like them to play with poor kids, like us. So I wish you wouldn't go there. When you see them in school, it's all right to be friendly; but they never come over here, so don't let's go there."

"All right, Will," she answered, with a sigh for she longed to visit the beautiful grounds and rooms at the big house. "But, do you think you can spare me?"

"Easy," said Will.

"But mother said – "

"I'll fix it with mother. You run along and have a good time."

Will did a lot of work in the garden that day, and all the time he was thinking deeply of what he had heard from Doctor Meigs. It never occurred to him to doubt a word of the story of his father's misfortunes and death.

At supper that night he cast many stealthy looks at Mr. Jordan, who sat wholly unconscious of the scrutiny and as silent as ever. Indeed, this peculiar gentleman was well worthy of examination, aside from the fact that he had been a friend to John Carden in the old days.

Mr. Jordan – his name was Ezra, but few were aware of that – was fully six feet in height, but wonderfully thin and gaunt of frame. His lean face was close-shaven, and his head was bald save for a

fringe of locks above the ears. These were carefully brushed upward and plastered close to his shiny skull. But his eyebrows were thick and bushy, and sprinkled with gray, so that they gave him a rather fierce expression. Over his eyes he constantly wore big, gold-rimmed spectacles, which magnified the sight of those looking toward them; so that Mr. Jordan's eyes became unnaturally large and glaring, and apt to disturb one's composure and render it an uncomfortable thing to stare at him for long.

That glance of Mr. Jordan's spectacles used to fill Will and Flo with awe, when they were younger; but Will had found chances to get a side view of the man's face, and beneath the spectacles noted that the eyes were really small and watery, and of a mild blue color; so that now the spectacles were less horrible.

One peculiarity of the man was that he walked rigidly upright – "as stiff as a ramrod," Will declared – and on his evening strolls he never used a cane; but stalked away as slowly as a ghost, with his hands clasped behind his back and his spectacles staring straight ahead. He always wore a long frock coat of black and a rusty silk hat, which added to his tallness and made him quite remarkable.

No one could remember when Mr. Jordan had not lived in Bingham; yet he had no relatives nor even intimate friends. While not reputed wealthy, he was considered "a man of means," and everyone bowed respectfully but gravely to him as he passed by. At the mills he was called "the Automaton" by the younger clerks, because he performed all duties with absolute punctuality and unvarying deliberation.

No one knew why Chester D. Williams had given Mr. Jordan such full control of the steel works, but his word was law in the offices, and even the proprietor assumed a different air whenever he addressed his secretary. As to the man's capability, that could not be doubted. Under his supervision no detail of the business was neglected and the concern ran like clock-work.

The Carden children were of course accustomed to the presence of their boarder. Perhaps Egbert might retain a vivid recollection of the days when his father was alive, and Mr. Jordan was unknown to the parlor bedroom or the seat at the head of the table; but to Will those times were very hazy, and to Flo it seemed as if the boarder had always been there, grim and silent from the first, but now scarcely noticed save by tired-faced Mrs. Carden, whose daily duty it was to make Mr. Jordan comfortable in return for the weekly five dollars that was so important an item to the little household.

On this Saturday evening, when supper was over, Will sat upon a box at the entrance to the tumble-down shed that was called by courtesy a "barn," and watched the boarder start out for his regular evening walk.

Mr. Jordan never neglected this exercise, no matter what the weather might be. People in Bingham had long since decided that he walked for the benefit of his health, as a relief from the close confinement at the office during the day; and it amused the gossips that the man's habits were so regular that neither wind nor snow, frost nor blizzard had never yet induced him to vary his daily programme by staying in doors.

And he always walked in the same direction, turning down the lane to the left of the cottage and following it a full half mile to a grove of great oak and maple trees; through this to the Danville turnpike; along the turnpike to Holmes' Cross Roads; back to the village, and through the village to the Carden house, where he hung up his hat and went directly to his room for the night. A fine walk – four miles at the least – and an evidence of the man's perfect health and remarkable physical endurance, when his age and lean body were taken into consideration.

"Mr. Jordan is as tough as hickory," the people declared; but as his life was so absolutely regular he was never an object of curiosity to his neighbors, who took but a casual interest in him. Perhaps, had he ever varied his programme, even for a day, the act would have occasioned great excitement in Bingham; but he never did.

Tonight Will looked after him thoughtfully, and followed with his eyes Mr. Jordan's upright form as it moved slowly down the lane toward the distant grove. He wished he might speak with the silent man about his father. If Mr. Jordan had loaned John Carden money and stood by him during all

his dark days of experimenting, as the doctor had said, he must have been a good and faithful friend, thought the boy. Perhaps he wouldn't mind telling Will something more of those old days.

Impelled by this idea, the boy arose and started across lots to overtake the solitary walker. When he came to the lane, Mr. Jordan had not yet reached the grove, but was pacing the road with calm and precise steps, no one an inch longer or shorter than another.

Something about the rigid, unemotional form caused Will to hesitate. He had never spoken much with Mr. Jordan, and suddenly he became abashed at his own temerity. Yet it was always hard for Will to abandon any plan he had once formed. He did not go back; but he slackened his pace, trying to think of the best way to approach the self-absorbed man ahead of him. And so, while he trailed along the lane with halting footsteps, Mr. Jordan came to the edge of the grove and entered it.

The path through the grove curved from left to right, and back again, passing around the big trees that had been spared the axe on account of some whim of their owner, who was none other than Mr. Jordan himself. Lumber men had often tried to buy this bit of fine timber; but the owner refused all offers.

"It will keep," was his unvarying reply. And it had "kept" for many years.

When Will reached the edge of the trees the man was out of sight around the bend; so the boy, encouraged to hasten, pressed quickly along until the turn in the road was reached, when he stopped in great surprise.

For Mr. Jordan had halted in the center of the grove – really a most unexpected thing for him to do – and, turned half around, was staring fixedly at a large oak that grew a few paces from the road.

Now was the time for Will to join him and open the conversation. He realized his opportunity, and was mustering up the necessary courage to advance, when Mr. Jordan walked straight to the oak tree, cast a hasty, half suspicious glance around him, and then passed one hand swiftly up and down the shaggy bark of the trunk at a point about on a level with his own head.

Will, shrinking back so as to be nearly hidden by a clump of bushes, stared open mouthed at this amazing sight, and while he stared Mr. Jordan returned to the road, faced ahead, and marched as stiffly and deliberately as ever upon his way.

The incident had not occupied more than a minute's time, but it was strange enough to deprive Will of any desire to overtake or speak with the man he had unwittingly spied upon. He let Mr. Jordan continue his walk, and turning back made his own way leisurely home.

The next morning, when he came to think it all over, he decided that Mr. Jordan's action in the grove was not nearly so remarkable as he had considered it in the dim light of the preceding evening. Doubtless the owner of those splendid trees had seen some hole in the bark of this oak, or had fancied it damaged in some way, and so had felt of the trunk to reassure himself. Anyone might have done the same thing, and for a dozen different reasons.

Yet why did the man glance around in that curious half-frightened way, as if fearful of being seen, if he was merely about to do an ordinary thing? It was the flash of that single look that had made Will uneasy; that rendered him uneasy every time he thought about it. But he could not explain why. If there was any one person in Bingham who was in no way mysterious that person was Mr. Jordan.

Sunday was a bright, delightful day, and soon after the late breakfast was over the Carden children, dressed in their best, started for the Sunday-school service, which was held before the regular church services began. Egbert and Will walked on either side of little Flo, and the three were as merry and wholesome a group of young folks as one could wish to see. Egbert was not a bit ill-natured or morose on account of his infirmities, but always wore a smile upon his cheerful face. And the village children liked him, as was easily seen by their pleasant nods when the three Cardens joined the group at the church door.

The Williams children were there, too, and while Gladys grabbed Flo's hand and drew her aside with eager whispers, the others formed a circle around Will and Egbert and tried to make the former

feel that they were as friendly as ever, in spite of their mother's banishment of the "vegetable boy" the day before.

"Mother was a little bit nervous yesterday," said Mary Louise, in her sweet and sympathetic way. "You mustn't mind it, Will."

"Of course I won't," he answered, promptly.

"Mother," said the saucy Annabel, in a reflective tone of voice, "is a reg'lar *caution* when she gets nervous; and she's nervous most of the time."

"Mrs. Williams was quite right," said Will; "and it was lucky she sent me home, for I'd an awful lot of work to do, and that kite made me forget all about it."

The bell rang just then, calling them in; but Reginald whispered to Will: "You're a brick!" and Theodore shyly took his friend's hand and pressed it within his own as they entered the doorway.

All this did much to warm Will Carden's heart and restore to him his self-respect, which had been a little shattered by Mrs. Williams' contemptuous treatment.

However disdainful of poverty some of the grown folks may be, children, if they are the right sort, are more apt to judge a comrade by his quality and merit, than by the amount of his worldly possessions. And Will decided the Williams children were "the right sort."

CHAPTER IV
MEIGS, MUSHROOMS AND MONEY

"Will," said Dr. Meigs, as he stopped one afternoon to lean over the garden fence, "how are things going?"

"Pretty well, Doctor," answered the boy, cheerfully.

"Are you getting ahead, and laying by something for the winter months, when the vegetables won't grow?"

"Were getting ahead *some*," said Will, becoming grave; "but it's always a struggle for us in the winter, you know. I guess I'll try to get a job in the steel works in October. I'm pretty husky, for my age, and I ought to be able to earn fair wages."

"Humph!" growled the doctor, frowning upon the young fellow fiercely. "You think you've had schooling enough, do you?"

"Oh, no! But mother needs help. She's getting more tired and pale looking every day; and Egbert can't do much with his bad arm. So it's a case of force, Doctor. I've just *got* to dig in and do something."

"That's true," replied the big doctor. "But you're going to be more than a mere laboring man when you grow up, Will Carden, and I don't mean to let you get into those beastly mills. They'd sap your young strength in no time, and make you an old man before your years would warrant it. No; we'll think of something else. Read that!"

He thrust a small book into the boy's hand and immediately marched away down the road.

Will looked at the book wonderingly. It was a treatise on mushroom culture; something he had never heard of before. But he spent his leisure during the next few days reading it carefully and the author told how a great deal of money could be made by raising mushrooms on a small plot of ground, under proper conditions and with intelligent care.

When again he saw Doctor Meigs Will said to him:

"Here's your book, Doctor. It's interesting, all right; but I can't see how I could possibly do anything at that business."

"Why not?" enquired the doctor, seating himself calmly by Will's side, with the evident intention of arguing the question.

"In the first place," said Will, "I've got no way to raise mushrooms. They need a warm spot of earth, to do well; and a rich soil, and plenty of shade."

"Good!" said the doctor, nodding approval. "I see you've paid some attention to the matter. Well, that old barn of yours is just the place."

"The barn!"

"Surely. I've just been examining it. It never was anything more than a shed, without even a floor; and for a long time, while Deacon Wilder owned this place, horses and cattle were kept there. The soil in that barn is two feet thick and very rich. It'll grow mushrooms like sixty!"

"But it's cold in the barn, in winter. The boards are falling off in places, and – "

"We'll patch it up," said the doctor, with decision; "and we'll put a heater in it – one of these regular green-house boilers, with hot-water pipes running under the surface of the ground, so as to keep the soil always warm. Firewood doesn't cost much in this part of the country."

Will smiled at such cheerful optimism.

"And when you've raised the things," he said, "what are you going to do with them? The Bingham people wouldn't buy ten cents' worth of mushrooms in ten years."

The doctor snorted contemptuously.

"The Bingham people! Do you think I'm a fool, Will Carden?"

"Who then?"

"Why, it's only twenty-two miles to the city. There are four trains every day. In the city are a thousand customers longing to buy mushrooms, in season and out, and willing to pay big prices for them, too."

Will whistled, thoughtfully.

"It's a bigger thing than I expected," he acknowledged. "But, Doctor, it's out of the question. I wouldn't dare risk our little savings in this experiment, and aside from what's put by for the winter, I haven't enough money to buy the spawn to start with; or patch up the barn; or buy the water heater; or even market the stuff when it's grown."

"Who said anything about your spending money?" demanded the doctor, roughly. "All I want of you, sir, is to hire out to me to raise mushrooms. I'm going into the business."

"You!"

"Yes, me. Confound it, Will Carden, do you think I've no ambition, just because I'm a country doctor? My daughter, that married the wholesale grocer in the city has three children already, and they've got to be looked after."

"Can't the wholesale grocer do that?" asked Will, with twinkling eyes.

"I've a right to leave a fortune to my own grandchildren if I want to," growled the doctor; "and it's none of your business, anyway, young fellow. The question is, will you hire out to me? You and Egbert; I want the two of you. The wages will be small, but they'll be sure – even if I have to collect some bills to pay them. And I'll furnish all the capital needed to fix up the barn and start things going."

Will fairly gasped with astonishment.

"Do you really mean it, Doctor," he asked.

"I usually mean what I say," was the gruff retort. "Now, then, answer me! And, by hookey, if you refuse I'll charge you two dollars for this consultation! Doctors can't waste their time for nothing."

"If you mean it, Doctor, of course I'll hire out to you; and so will Egbert."

"It won't interfere with your schooling, you know. You'll have to get up early mornings, and perhaps some cold nights you won't get much sleep, with tending the fires; but there'll be plenty of time for you to go to school, and poor Egbert can study his deaf-and-dumb lessons in the shed as well as anywhere else, while you're away."

It must be mentioned here that Egbert had failed to learn to read and write at the village school, and through the doctor's influence was now receiving lessons by correspondence from a prominent deaf-mute academy in New York, by means of which his progress had lately become marked and rapid.

"All right, Doctor. It's a bargain," announced Will, in a subdued voice, but with a new sparkle in his eyes. "Give me that book again. I'll have to study it, I guess. When shall we begin?"

"The first of August," said Doctor Meigs, seriously. "It's a vacation month, and you'll have a lot to do getting things in shape. I'll have Joe Higgins fix the barn up. He owes me a big bill, and that's the only way I'll ever get my pay. And Joe's a pretty fair carpenter. Now, about wages. They've got to be small to start with. I'll give you and Egbert ten dollars a month each."

"Ten dollars!"

"That'll make twenty for the two of you. It's small, but it's all I can afford at first. But, to make up for that, I'll give you, Will, a working interest in the business."

"What's that?" asked the boy.

"Why, after all expenses are paid, including your wages, we'll divide the profits."

Will looked into the kindly eyes, and his own dimmed.

"Doctor," said he, "you're the best friend a fellow ever had. But it's too much. I won't take it."

"How do you know there's going to be any profit?" demanded the doctor, sternly. "And if there is, who'll make it? Don't you be a confounded idiot, Will Carden, and bother me when I'm trying to drive a bargain. I know what I'm doing, and those grandchildren have got to be provided for."

"Suppose we fail?" questioned Will, half fearfully.

"Bosh! We can't fail. I've talked with that wholesale grocer son-in-law of mine, and he agrees to find customers for all the toad-stools we can raise. So it's up to you, old fellow, to sprout the mushrooms and then the thing's settled."

"I'll do the best I can, Doctor."

"Then it's all agreed, and I'll draw up the papers for you to sign."

"Papers!"

"Of course. This is an important business, and it's got to be ship-shape, and in writing, so there'll be no backing out. Suppose that wholesale grocer goes bankrupt – what's to become of my grandchildren?"

Then he picked up his medicine case and stalked away, leaving the boy thoroughly bewildered by the propositions he had advanced.

He told Egbert about it, for all of the Carden family were familiar with the sign language, and the deaf-mute at once became greatly interested, and eagerly agreed to undertake his share of the work. Also he told his mother, and the poor woman sat down and cried softly, afterward wiping away the tears with a corner of her apron. She was really tired with all the house work, and the prospect of twenty dollars a month added to their income seemed like a fortune to her. But she said:

"I'm afraid the doctor can't afford it, Will."

"Afford it!" he exclaimed; "why, mother, I wouldn't think of taking the wages unless I felt sure of making a profit. He seems mighty certain about it, and if work will help to win out, we'll do it, sure as shootin'!"

Конец ознакомительного фрагмента.