

Otis James

**Jack the Hunchback: A Story
of Adventure on the Coast
of Maine**



James Otis

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Chapter I ADRIFT

Tom Pratt firmly believed he was the most unfortunate boy in Maine when, on a certain June morning, his father sent him to the beach for a load of seaweed.

Tom had never been in love with a farmer's life.

He fancied that in any other sphere of action he could succeed, if not better, certainly more easily, than by weeding turnips or hoeing corn on the not very productive farm.

But either planting or digging was preferable to loading a huge cart with the provokingly slippery weeds which his father insisted on gathering for compost each summer.

Therefore, when the patient oxen, after much goading and an unusual amount of noise from their impatient driver, stood knee-deep in the surf contentedly chewing their cud and enjoying the cool footbath, Tom, instead of beginning his work, sat at the forward part of the cart gazing seaward, thinking, perhaps, how pleasant must be a sailor's life while the ocean was calm and smiling as on this particular day.

So deeply engrossed was he in idleness that his father's stern command from the hillside a short distance away, "to 'tend to his work an' stop moonin'," passed unheeded, and the same ox-goad he had been using might have been applied to his own body but for the fact that just as Farmer Pratt came within striking distance a tiny speck on the water attracted his attention.

"It looks to me as if that might be a lapstreak boat out there, Tommy. Can you see anybody in her?"

"I reckon that's what it is, father, an' she must be adrift."

Farmer Pratt mounted the cart and scrutinized the approaching object until there could no longer be any question as to what it was, when Tom said gleefully, —

"It must be a ship's boat, an' if she hasn't got a crew aboard, we'll make a bigger haul than we could by cartin' seaweed for a week."

"Yes, them kind cost more'n a dory," the farmer replied dreamily, as he mentally calculated the amount of money for which she might be sold. "I reckon we'll take her into Portland an' get a tidy —"

"I can see a feller's head!" Tom interrupted, "an' it shets off our chance of sellin' her."

That the boat had an occupant was evident.

A closely shaven crown appeared above the stem as if its owner had but just awakened, and was peering out to see where his voyage was about to end.

Nearer and nearer the little craft drifted until she was dancing on the shore line of the surf, and the figure in the bow gazed as intently landward as the farmer and his son did seaward.

"It's a boy, father, an' he ain't as big as me!" Tom cried. "Well, that beats anything I ever saw!"

This last remark probably referred to the general appearance of the young voyager.

He was an odd-looking little fellow, with a head which seemed unusually small because the hair was closely cropped, and a bent, misshapen body several sizes too large for the thin legs which barely raised it above the gunwales. The face was by no means beautiful, but the expression of anxiety and fear caused it to appeal directly to Tom's heart, if not to his father's.

Farmer Pratt was not pleased at thus learning that the boat had an occupant.

Empty, she would have been a source of profit; but although there was apparently no one save the deformed lad aboard, he could make no legal claim upon her.

The craft was there, however, and would speedily be overturned unless he waded out into the surf at the risk of a rheumatic attack, to pull her inshore.

Although decidedly averse to performing any charitable deed, he did this without very much grumbling, and Tom was a most willing assistant.

That which had come out of the east on this bright June morning was a ship's lifeboat about eighteen feet long, and with the name "Atlanta" painted on the gunwales.

She was a much more valuable craft than Mr. Pratt had ever seen ashore on Scarborough beach, and yet he failed to calculate her value immediately, because as the bow grated on the sand the misshapen boy, from whose white lips not a word had escaped during all this time, suddenly lifted what at first appeared to be a bundle of cloth.

This act in itself would not have caused any surprise, but at the same moment a familiar noise was heard from beneath the coverings.

Farmer Pratt stepped back quickly in genuine alarm and wiped his face with the sleeve of his shirt as he exclaimed, —

"Well, this beats anything I ever seen!"

"It's a baby, father!" Tom cried, starting forward to take the burden from the crooked little sailor's arms; but the latter retreated as if afraid the child was to be carried away, and the farmer replied testily, —

"Of course it's a baby. Haven't I heard you cry often enough to know that?"

"But how did it come here?"

"That's what beats me"; and then, as if suddenly realizing that the apparent mystery might be readily solved, he asked the stranger, "Where did you come from, sonny?"

"From Savannah."

"Sho! Why, that's way down in Georgy. You didn't sail them many miles in this 'ere little boat?"

"No, sir. We broke adrift from Captain Littlefield's ship yesterday when she blowed up, an' the baby's awful hungry."

"Ship blowed up, eh? Whereabouts was she?"

"Out there"; and the boy pointed eastward in an undecided manner, as if not exactly certain where he had come from.

"What made her blow up?" Tom asked curiously.

"I don't know. There was an awful splosion like more'n a hundred bunches of firecrackers, an' the captain put Louis an' me in the lifeboat to wait till his wife got some things from the cabin. While all the sailors was runnin' 'round wild like, we got adrift. I hollered an' hollered, but nobody saw us." Then he added in a lower tone, "Louis cried last night for somethin' to eat, an' he must be pretty hungry now."

"Well, well, well!" and as the thought of whether he would be paid for the trouble of pulling the boat ashore came into the farmer's mind, he said quickly, "'Cordin' to that you don't own this boat?"

"She belongs to the ship."

"An' seein's how the vessel ain't anywhere near, I reckon I've as much right to this craft as anybody else. Where do you count on goin'?"

"If we could only get back to New York I'm sure I would be able to find the captain's house."

"It's a powerful long ways from here, sonny; but I'll see that you are put in a comfortable place till somethin' can be done. What's your name?"

"John W. Dudley; but everybody calls me Jack, an' this is Louis Littlefield," the boy replied as he removed the coverings, exposing to view a child about two years old.

Master Tom was delighted with the appearance of the little pink and white stranger, who was dressed in cambric and lace, with a thin gold chain around his neck, and would have shaken hands with him then and there if Jack had not stepped quickly back as he said, —

"He's afraid of folks he don't know, an' if you get him to cryin' I'll have a worse time than last night. What he wants is somethin' to eat."

"Take 'em right up to the house, Tommy, an' tell mother to give them breakfast. When I get the boat hauled around (for I've got every reason to consider her mine), I'll carry both out to Thornton's."

Jack clambered from the craft, disdaining Tom's assistance, and, taking the child in his arms, much as a small cat might carry a very large kitten, stood waiting for his guide to lead the way.

Farmer Pratt's son was in no especial hurry to reach home, for while escorting the strangers he certainly could not be expected to shovel seaweed, and Jack said as Tom walked leisurely over the hot sand, —

"If you don't go faster, the baby'll begin to cry, for he's pretty near starved."

"Why not let him walk? He's big enough; his legs are twice as large as Mrs. Libby's baby, an' he went alone a good while ago."

"I'd rather carry him," Jack replied; and then he refused to enter into any conversation until they were at the foot of the narrow, shady lane leading to the house, when he asked, "Who's Mr. Thornton?"

"He keeps the poor farm, an' father's goin' to take you out there."

"What for? We want to go to New York."

"Well, you see I don't reckon you'll get as far as that without a slat of money, an' father wants to put you fellers where you'll be took care of for a while."

Jack stopped suddenly, allowed the baby to slip from his arms under the shade of an apple-tree whose blossoms filled the air with perfume, as he said angrily, —

"Louis sha'n't be taken to the poorhouse! I'll walk my feet off before anybody but his mother shall get him."

"You couldn't go as far as New York, an' if he's so hungry you'd better let him have some bread an' milk."

"How long before your father'll be back?"

"It'll take him a couple of hours to carry the boat down to the Neck, an' that's the only place where she can lie without gettin' stove."

"Then we'll go into your house long enough to feed the baby, an' I'll leave before he comes."

"All right," and Tom took up the line of march once more. "I don't know as I blame you, for Thornton's ain't the nicest place that ever was, an' I'd rather haul seaweed for a month than stay there one night."

Jack looked wistfully at the little farmhouse with its beds of old maid's pinks and bachelor's buttons in front of the muslin-curtained windows, thinking, perhaps, that shelter should be given him there rather than among the town's paupers; but he made no remark, and a few moments later they were standing in the cool kitchen while Tom explained to his mother under what circumstances he had made the acquaintance of the strangers.

Mrs. Pratt was quite as economical as her husband; but the baby face touched her heart fully as much as did the fact that the boat in which the children had drifted ashore would amply repay any outlay in the way of food and shelter.

She accepted the statement made by Tom, that the children were to be sent to Thornton's, because the town provided such an asylum, and there was no good reason, in her mind at least, why it should not be utilized in a case like this.

Thus, with the pleasing knowledge that her involuntary guests would remain but a short time and cost her nothing, she set out a plentiful supply of fresh milk and sweet home-made bread, as she said, —

"Fill yourselves right full, children, for it will rest you to eat, and after you've had a nice ride, Mrs. Thornton will give you a chance to sleep."

Jack looked up quickly as if about to make an angry reply, and then, as little Louis went toward the table eagerly, he checked himself, devoting all his attention to the child by waiting until the latter had finished before he partook of as much as a spoonful.

Then he ate rapidly, and after emptying two bowls of milk, asked, —

"May I put some of the bread in my pocket?"

"Certainly, child; but it won't be needed, for there is plenty to eat at Thornton's, and most likely in a few days the selectmen will find some way to send word to the baby's relatives."

Jack put three slices of bread in his pocket before replying, and then, as with an effort he lifted Louis in his arms, said, —

"We're not goin' to the poor farm, ma'am. We are bound to get to New York, an' thank you for the bread an' milk."

Just at that moment Mrs. Pratt was intent on carrying the dishes from the table to the pantry, therefore she did not see the deformed boy leave the house quickly, Tom following close behind.

Jack heard her call after him to wait until Mr. Pratt should return; but he shook his head decidedly, and trudged out from the green-carpeted lane to the dusty road, bent only on saving his little charge from the ignominy of the poorhouse.

"Say, hold on for father!" Tom cried. "You can't walk even so far as Saco, an' where'll you sleep to-night?"

"I'd rather stay in the woods, an' so had Louis," Jack replied; and then in reply to the child's fretful cries, he added, "Don't fuss; I'll find your mother."

"But how can you do it if the ship has blown up?" Tom asked, quickening his steps to keep pace with the deformed boy. "Perhaps mother'll let you sleep in my bed to-night, an' you won't have to go out to the poor farm."

"And then again she mightn't, so I guess we won't risk it."

"Have you got any money?"

"Not a cent."

Tom halted irresolutely for a moment, and then his charitable impulses gained the mastery.

"Here's half of what I've got, an' I wish it was more."

Involuntarily Jack extended his hand for the gift.

Four marbles were dropped into it, and then Tom turned and ran like a deer as if afraid he might regret his generosity.

The dusty road wound its way among the fields like a yellow ribbon on a green cloth, offering no shelter from the burning rays of the sun, and stretching out in a dreary length.

The hunchback plodded steadily on with his heavy burden, and as he walked the good people in the neighboring city of Portland were reading in their morning papers the following item: —

A SINGULAR EXPLOSION

The ship "Atlanta" anchored inside the breakwater just before midnight, and her master reports a remarkable accident.

The "Atlanta" loaded at Savannah last week with cotton wing to baffling winds she was eighty miles off Wood Island yesterday afternoon when an explosion occurred which blew off the main hatch, and was followed by dense volumes of what appeared to be smoke.

Believing the ship to be on fire, Capt. Littlefield's first thought was of his wife and child, who were on board. The lifeboat was lowered, and in her were placed the captain's son and the cabin boy, a hunchback.

Before Mrs. Littlefield could be gotten over the side, the sailors reported no fire in the hold, and the vapor supposed to be smoke was probably the gases arising from the turpentine stored in porous barrels of red oak.

In the excitement no particular attention was paid to the children for some time, since the boat was believed to be firmly secured, and the consternation of the captain can be imagined when it was discovered that the craft had gone adrift.

The ship stood off and on several hours without discovering any signs of the missing ones, and was then headed for this harbor.

As a matter of course the captain will be obliged to proceed on his voyage without delay; but Mrs. Littlefield is to remain in town several days hoping to receive some news of her child, and it is believed that the revenue cutter "Cushing" will cruise along the shore until the boat is found.

It is understood that a liberal reward will be offered for any information which may be given regarding the whereabouts of the children, and until that has been done the editors of this paper will thankfully receive tidings of the missing ones in case they have been seen or sighted.

It is particularly desirable that masters of vessels should keep a sharp lookout for a drifting boat.

Chapter II

AT AUNT NANCY'S

Jack toiled manfully on, running until his breath came in such short gasps that he was forced to walk slowly, and then pressing forward once more as if expecting Farmer Pratt was in full pursuit, urged to rapid travelling by the fear that little Louis would be taken to the poor farm.

Up the long, steep hill, past the railroad station, until three roads stretched out before him: one straight ahead, another to the right, and the third to the left.

He believed there was no time for hesitation.

The one leading toward the south was the most inviting because of the trees scattered here and there along its edges, and into this he turned, going directly away from the city where Louis's mother awaited tidings of her darling.

The child grew fretful because of the heat and the dust, and the little hunchback heeded not his own fatigue in the effort to quiet him.

On he went, literally staggering under his heavy burden, until the yellow road seemed to mellow into a mist which danced and fell, and rose and danced again before his eyes until further progress was wellnigh impossible.

They had arrived at a tiny stream, the banks of which were fringed with alders, and overhead a wooden bridge afforded a most pleasing shelter from the sun's burning rays.

Wiping the perspiration from his face, Jack looked back.

No one was in sight.

If Farmer Pratt had come in pursuit he might have mistaken the road, or turned homeward again some time previous, believing the boat not of sufficient value to warrant the journey which, if successful, would only end at the poorhouse.

"Here's where we're goin' to stop, Louis," Jack said, lowering the child to the ground. "It'll be cool among these bushes, and if we turn into the fields a bit no one can see us from the road."

Then Jack took off his shoes and stockings, holding them on one arm as he raised the child with the other, and, wading through the shallow water, made his way among the bushes a distance of forty or fifty feet to where the leafy screen would prevent passing travellers from seeing them.

"I tell you what, the water feels good around a fellow's feet. I'm goin' to give you the same kind of a dose, an' then you'll be ready to go to sleep."

Louis, sitting on the grass at the edge of the stream, offered no objection to the plan, and Jack soon made him ready for the partial bath.

As the child's feet touched the water he laughed with glee, and Jack's fatigue was forgotten in his delight at having been able to afford this pleasure.

After a few moments of such sport the misshapen guardian wiped the pink feet carefully with his handkerchief, replaced the shoes and stockings, took from his pocket the bread which was crumbled into many fragments, moistened them in the brook, and fed his charge until the latter's eyes closed in slumber.

Not before he had arranged a screen of leaves in such a manner that the sun would be prevented from looking in upon the sleeping child did Jack think of himself and then he too indulged in the much-needed rest.

The hours passed until the sun began to sink in the west.

The birds came out from among the leaves and peeped down curiously at the sleeping children, while a colony of frogs leaped upon a moss-covered log, croaking in chorus their surprise at these unfamiliar visitors.

One venerable fellow seemed to think this a most fitting opportunity to read his sons a homily on the sin of running away, and after the lengthy lesson was concluded he plunged into the water with a hoarse note of disapprobation, making such a splash that Jack leaped to his feet thoroughly awake and decidedly frightened.

The hasty departure of the other frogs explained the cause of the disturbance, and he laughed to himself as he said, —

"I reckon my hump frightened them as much as they did me."

He made a hurried toilet, bathed Louis's face with his wet handkerchief until the little fellow awoke, and then continued what was at the same time a flight and a journey.

"We've got to run the risk that somebody else will try to send us to the poor farm," he said when they had trudged along the dusty road until the child became fretful again. "At the next nice-lookin' house we come to I'm goin' to ask the folks if they'll let me do chores enough to pay for our lodging."

Fully half an hour passed before they were where this plan could be carried into effect, and then Jack halted in front of a small white cottage which stood at the head of an arm of the sea, partially hidden by the trees.

"Here's where we've got to try our luck," the boy said as he surveyed the house intently, and almost as he spoke a tiny woman with tiny ringlets either side her wrinkled face appeared in the doorway, starting back as if in alarm on seeing the newcomers.

"Goodness me!" she exclaimed as she suddenly observed Jack staring intently at her. "Why don't you come out of the sun? That child will be burned brown as an Injun if you stand there long."

Jack pressed Louis closer to him as he stepped forward a few paces, and asked hesitatingly, —

"Please, ma'am, if you'll let us stay here to-night I'll do up all the chores as slick as a pin."

The little woman's surprise deepened almost into bewilderment as she glanced first at Louis, who had by this time clambered down from his guardian's arms, and then at Jack's boots, which were covered thickly with dust.

"Oh, I'll brush myself before I come in," the boy said quickly, believing her hesitation was caused by the dirt on his garments, "an' we won't be a mite of trouble."

The mistress of the cottage took Louis by the hand and led him, with Jack following close behind, into the wide, cool hall, the floor of which was covered with rugs woven with representations of impossible animals in all the colors of the rainbow.

"Now tell me where you came from, and why it is necessary to ask for a home?"

Jack hesitated an instant.

The fear that she too might insist on sending Louis to the poor farm caused him to question whether he had better tell the whole truth, but another look at the kindly face decided him.

He related his story with more detail than he had to Farmer Pratt, and when he concluded the little woman said in a motherly tone, —

"You poor children! If the ship exploded there's no one for you to go home to, and what *will* become of such a helpless pair?"

"I can't tell I'm sure, ma'am; but I know we ain't helpless"; and Jack spoke very decidedly now. "I'm big an' can work, so I'll take care of Louis till we find his father."

"But if the ship was blown all to pieces?" the little woman continued.

"That don't make any difference," Jack interrupted. "We're goin' right to his house in New York some time, no matter how far it is."

"But it's a terribly long distance, and you children will surely be sun-struck before you get even to Boston!" Then she added quickly, "Here I am forgetting that you must be hungry! Come straight away into the kitchen while I see what there is in the cupboard, for Aunt Nancy Curtis never lets any one, much less children, want for food very long in her house."

"Are you Aunt Nancy?" Jack asked.

"I'm aunt to everybody in the neighborhood, which ain't many, and two or three more nephews won't make any difference. Set right up to the table, and after you've had a glass of cool milk, a piece of chicken and some cake I baked to put away for the summer boarders, we'll see what can be done."

Jack was disposed to be just a trifle jealous of Louis's evident admiration for this quaint little Aunt Nancy. He had already taken her by the hand, and, in his baby fashion, was telling some story which no one, probably not even himself, could understand.

"You are a dear little boy," the old lady said as she led him into the kitchen; "but neither you nor Jack here is any more calculated to walk to New York than I am to go to China this minute."

"If you'll let me have a brush I'll get some of this dust off," Jack said as he glanced at the well-scoured floor and then at his shoes. "I'm not fit to go anywhere till I look more decent."

"Here's a whisk-broom. Be careful not to break the handle, and don't throw it on the ground when you're done," Aunt Nancy said as she handed the brush to Jack. "There's the pump, and here's a towel and piece of soap, so scrub yourself as much as you please, for boys never can be too clean. I'll comb the baby's hair while you're gone, and then we'll have supper."

Louis made not the slightest protest when his misshapen little guardian left him alone with Aunt Nancy. He had evidently decided that she was a woman who could be trusted, and had travelled so much during the day that even a journey to the pump was more than he cared to undertake.

Jack brushed and scrubbed, and rubbed his face with the towel, after holding his head under the pump, until the skin glowed red, but cleanly.

When he entered the kitchen again where the little woman and Louis were seated cosily at the table, he was presentable even to Aunt Nancy, in whose eyes the least particle of dirt was an abomination.

He took the vacant chair by Louis's side, and was considerably surprised, because it was something so unusual in his experience, to see the little woman clasp her withered hands and invoke a blessing upon "the strangers within her gates," when she had thanked her Father for all his bounties.

"I went to meetin' once down in Savannah," Jack said; "but I didn't know folks had 'em right in their houses."

Aunt Nancy looked at him with astonishment, and replied gravely, —

"My child, it is never possible to give too much praise for all we are permitted to enjoy, and one needn't wait until he is in church before speaking to our Father."

Jack did not exactly understand what she meant, but he knew from the expression on the wrinkled face that it was perfectly correct, and at once proceeded to give his undivided attention to the food which had been put upon his plate with a liberal hand.

How thoroughly enjoyable was that meal in the roomy old kitchen, through which the summer breezes wafted perfume from the honeysuckles, and the bees sang at the open windows while intent on the honey harvest!

When the children's hunger was appeased, it seemed as if half their troubles had suddenly vanished.

Louis crowed and talked after his own peculiar fashion; Jack told stories of life on board the "Atlanta," and Aunt Nancy appeared to enjoy this "visiting" quite as much as did her guests.

The housework was to be done, however, and could not be neglected, deeply interested though the little woman was in the yarns Jack spun, therefore she said as she began to collect the soiled dishes, —

"Now if you will take care of the baby I'll have the kitchen cleaned in a twinkling, and then we'll go out under the big oak-tree where I love to sit when the sun is painting the clouds in the west with red and gold."

"Louis can take care of himself if we put him on the floor," Jack replied, "and I will dry the dishes for you; I've done it lots of times on the 'Atlanta.'"

The little woman could not refuse this proffered aid, although she looked very much as if she fancied the work would not be done exactly to her satisfaction, and after glancing at Jack's hands to make certain they were perfectly clean, she began operations.

Much to her surprise, the deformed boy was very apt at such tasks, and Aunt Nancy said as she looked over her spectacles at him while he carefully dried one of her best China cups, —

"Well I declare! If you ain't the first boy I ever saw who was fit to live with an old maid like me. You are handier than half the girls I have here when the summer boarders come, and if you could only milk a cow we should get along famously."

"It wouldn't take me long to learn," Jack said quickly; for he was eager to assist the little lady as much as possible, having decided in his own mind that this would be a very pleasant abiding place for himself and Louis until the weather should be cooler, when the tramp to New York could be continued with less discomfort. "If you'd show me how once I'm sure I'd soon find out, and —"

"It won't do any harm to try at all events," Aunt Nancy replied thoughtfully; "but the cow hasn't come home yet, and there's plenty of time."

When the dishes were washed and set carefully away in the cupboard, the little woman explaining to her assistant where each particular article of crockery belonged, Jack began to sweep the already painfully clean floor. Aunt Nancy wiped with a damp towel imaginary specks of dirt from the furniture, and Louis, as if realizing the importance of winning the affections of his hostess, laid his head on the rag rug and closed his eyes in slumber before the work of putting the kitchen to rights was finished.

"Dear little baby! I suppose he's all tired out," Aunt Nancy said as she took him in her arms, leaving to Jack the important duty of folding one of her best damask tablecloths, a task which, under other circumstances, she would not have trusted to her most intimate friend. "I'm not very handy with children, but it seems as if I ought to be able to undress this one."

"Of course you can. All there is to do is unbutton the things an' pull them off."

Aunt Nancy was by no means as awkward at such work as she would have her guest believe.

In a few moments she had undressed Louis without awakening him, and clothed him for the night in one of her bedgowns, which, as a matter of course, was much too long, but so strongly scented with lavender that Jack felt positive the child could not fail to sleep sweetly and soundly.

Then laying him in the centre of a rest-inviting bed which was covered with the most intricate of patchwork quilts, in a room on the ground-floor that overlooked the lane and the big oak-tree, they left him with a smile on his lips, as if the angels had already begun to weave dream-pictures for him.

Aunt Nancy led the way out through the "fore-room," and, that Jack might see the beauties it contained, she opened one of the shutters, allowing the rays of the setting sun to fall upon the pictures of two of the dead and gone Curtis family, an impossible naval engagement colored in the most gorgeous style, two vases filled with alum-encrusted grasses, and a huge crockery rooster with unbending feathers of every hue.

This last-named ornament particularly attracted Jack's attention, and during fully five minutes he stood gazing at it in silent admiration, but without daring to ask if he could take the brilliantly painted bird in his hands.

"Handsome, isn't it?" Aunt Nancy asked, turning her head slowly from side to side while she critically viewed the combination of colors much as if she had never seen them before.

"Its perfectly splendid!"

"I'm glad you like it. I think a great deal of him; too much to allow a live rooster on the place crowing around when he can't. It was presented to me in my girlhood days by a young gentleman whom every one thought was destined to be an ornament in the world; but —"

Aunt Nancy paused. Her thoughts had gone trooping down the dusty avenues of the past, and after waiting fully a moment Jack asked, —

"Where is the young gentleman now?"

"I don't know," was the reply sandwiched between two sobs, and then Aunt Nancy became her old self once more.

She closed the shutters carefully, waved her apron in the air to frighten away any overbold dust specks, and the two went out on the long, velvety lane that the little woman might admire the glories of the setting sun.

Chapter III

LEARNING TO MILK

A low bench painted green and fastened against the trunk of the old oak, that there might be no possibility of its being overturned, was the place where Aunt Nancy told Jack she spent the pleasant summer evenings.

"Except where there are caterpillars around," she added, "and then I carry the rocking-chair to the stone doorstep. If you could kill caterpillars, Jack, you would be doing the greatest possible favor, for they certainly make my life wretched at times, although I don't know why a person should be afraid of anything God has made."

"Oh, I can kill 'em," Jack replied confidently. "Bring on your caterpillars when you want 'em killed, an' I'll fix the job. There ain't any trouble about that."

"But I don't want to bring them on," Aunt Nancy said, hesitatingly. "I never like to touch the little crawling things, and you will have to do that part of the work."

"I'll see to it," Jack replied, and believing she would be free in the future from the pests which interfered with her twilight pleasures, Aunt Nancy's face took on an expression of complete satisfaction.

"Now let's talk about yourself and the baby," she said. "You must not attempt to walk to New York while this hot weather lasts, and it would cost a power of money to go there on the cars."

"I know it," Jack replied with a sigh, "but so long as there isn't a cent between us, I guess we'll have to foot it."

"I've been thinking why you shouldn't stay here a spell. You make yourself so handy about the house that I sha'n't mind the extra trouble with the baby, and there are times while the summer boarders are here when I do need a boy very badly."

"That's just what I'd like," and Jack spoke emphatically. "If you'll let us stay two or three weeks I'll pay my way in work, an' see that Louis don't bother you."

"I believe that will be the best way out of it. The summer boarders are to come in two or three weeks. Before then I'll write to my brother Abner, in Binghamton, who'll be sure to know about Capt. Littlefield, and perhaps he can make some arrangement for your passage."

"Where's Binghamton?" Jack asked in perplexity.

"Why, it's in York State. I ain't certain how near to the big city, but of course it can't be very far away. Abner's a master hand at readin', so if he don't happen to know Capt. Littlefield as a friend, he'd be sure to have heard of him. When he was home here he was acquainted with everybody for fifty miles around. He could tell you who each man married, how many children they had, and kept the run of everything that happened in the neighborhood. I used to say Abner minded other people's business better than his own, and that *was* his fault," she added with a sigh. "But we all of us have our faults, and it's never right to speak about those of another before we have fairly weighed our own. He's the one, though, to find the baby's father, so you needn't have any further trouble regarding it; but wait till we get a letter from him."

Jack was not as confident as Aunt Nancy appeared to be that this "brother Abner" would know all the people in New York; but he was more than content to remain where he was for a certain length of time in the hope of being able to reach the city in some less laborious way than by walking.

Then Aunt Nancy told him about herself, and of the farm which had belonged to her father, but descended to her at his death, because Abner was unwilling to spend his time on land so unproductive that the severest labor failed to bring forth a remunerative crop.

"It isn't very good, I'll admit," she said reflectively; "but by taking a few summer boarders I've been able to make both ends meet, and that's all an old maid like me ought to expect."

"Have you always lived alone?"

"It's nigh on to twelve years since father died, and, excepting in the summer, I've had neither child nor chick here. An old woman ain't pleasant company at the best, and if Abner's daughters don't like to visit their aunt, I can't say I blame them."

"Well I do!" Jack said decidedly. "I think you're the nicest old lady I ever saw, and I'd be willin' to stay here all the time if I could."

Aunt Nancy was not accustomed to flattery; but it must be admitted, from the expression on her wrinkled face, that it was far from unpleasant, and by way of reward she patted Jack on the head almost affectionately.

"Perhaps you won't think so after a while," she said with a smile; and then as Jack was about to make protestations, she added, "it's time to go after the cow, and then I'll give you the first lesson in milking."

The farm was not so large that it required many moments to reach the pasture, for the old lady had only to walk to the rear of the barn where the crumple-horned cow was standing at the end of a narrow lane awaiting her coming.

As the animal stepped carefully over the bars after they had been let down, Jack could not help thinking she was just such a cow as one would fancy should belong to Aunt Nancy.

She walked in a dainty manner, acting almost as if trying not to bring any unnecessary amount of dirt into the barnyard, and behaving in every way as one would say her mistress might under similar circumstances.

"While I go for the milking pail you pull some clover from under the trees, for she always expects a lunch while being milked," Aunt Nancy said; and in a few moments Jack had gathered such a feast as caused the sedate animal to toss her head in disapprobation at the unusually large amount she was expected to devour after having been cropping pasture grass all day.

With a pail which had been scoured until it shone like silver, and a tiny three-legged stool, white as the floor of her kitchen, the little woman returned.

Then with many a "Co, Bossy! So, Bossy!" as if the quiet-looking animal was expected to give way to the most violent demonstrations of wrath, Aunt Nancy placed the stool in the most advantageous position, and said, as she seated herself, —

"Now watch me a few minutes, and you'll see how easy it is after getting the knack."

Jack gazed intently at every movement, his eyes opened wide with astonishment as the streams of milk poured into the pail with a peculiar "swish," and before the creamy foam had fully covered the bottom he was quite positive it would be no difficult matter for him to perform the same operation.

"I can do it now, if you'll get up."

Aunt Nancy vacated the stool without hesitation, for milking seemed such a simple matter that there was no question in her mind but that it could be learned in one very short lesson, and Jack sat down.

The cow looked around at this change of attendants, but was too well-bred to express any great amount of surprise, and the hunchback took hold of what appeared like so many fat fingers.

Fancying that strength alone was necessary, he pulled most vigorously.

Not a drop of milk came; but he accomplished something, for the animal tossed her head impatiently.

Jack pulled harder the second time, and then, as Aunt Nancy screamed loudly, the cow started at full speed for the other side of the yard, facing about there at the boy whom she believed was tormenting her wilfully, while she shook her head in a menacing manner.

Fortunately the milk-pail was not overturned; but in preventing such a catastrophe, Jack rolled from the stool to the ground with no gentle force, terrified quite as much by Aunt Nancy's screams as by the sudden movement of old crumple-horn.

"Why, what's the matter?" he asked, as he scrambled to his feet, looking first at his hostess, and then at the frightened animal.

"I ought to have known a boy couldn't milk," Aunt Nancy said impatiently and almost angrily. "It seems as if they have a faculty of hurting dumb beasts."

"But I didn't mean to," Jack said apologetically. "I worked just as you did, and pulled a good deal harder, but yet the milk wouldn't come."

Aunt Nancy made no reply.

Taking up the pail and stool she walked across the yard, trying to soothe the cow in the peculiar language she had used when beginning the task; and Jack, understanding that he had hurt the feelings of both his hostess and her pet, followed contritely, as he said coaxingly, —

"Please let me try it once more. I am certain I can do it if you'll give me another chance."

It was not until Aunt Nancy had led the cow back to the pile of clover, and there stroked her head and ears until she was ready to resume the rudely interrupted feast, that any attention was paid to Jack's entreaties.

"I'll show you once more," she finally said, "and you must watch to see exactly how I move my fingers. It isn't the pulling that brings the milk, but the pressure of the hand."

This time Jack paid strict attention, and in a few moments began to fancy he had discovered what Aunt Nancy called the "knack."

But she would not relinquish her seat.

"Take hold with one hand while I stay here, and be careful not to hurt the poor creature."

Very tenderly Jack made the second attempt, and was so successful as to extract at least a dozen drops from the well-filled udder.

This was sufficient, however, to show him what should be done, even though he was at first unable to perform the task, and, thanks to Aunt Nancy's patience, and the gentleness of the animal, before the milking was brought to a close, he had so far mastered the lesson as to win from his teacher a limited amount of praise.

"I don't know as I should expect you to learn at once," she said; "but you are getting along so well that by to-morrow night I wouldn't be surprised if you could do it alone. Now I'll go and strain the milk, and you may split me a little kindling wood if you will. Somehow I have never been able to use an axe without danger of cutting my feet, and it's almost like tempting Providence to take one in my hands."

Jack did as he was bidden, and although the axe was decidedly rusty and very blunt, to say nothing of its being shaky in the helve, before she finished taking care of the milk he had such a pile of kindlings as would have cost her a week's labor to prepare.

"Well!" the little woman said as she came from the cool cellar and surveyed the fruits of his industry, "if you can't do anything else on a farm but that, it'll be a wonderful relief to me. An axe is such a dangerous instrument that I always tremble when I touch one."

Jack looked at the ancient tool (which could hardly have inflicted any injury unless one chanced to drop it on his toes) with a smile, but said nothing, and after Aunt Nancy had shown him how to fasten the woodshed door with a huge latch that any burglar over four feet tall could have raised, she led the way into the house.

The milking pail was to be washed, a solitary moth which had found its way into the kitchen was to be killed lest he should do some damage to the rag carpet, and Aunt Nancy lighted a candle with a solemn air.

"This is the last work of the day," she said, "and perhaps I attach too much importance to it, but I never allow myself to go to bed without making sure there's no one hidden in the house. We'll examine the upper part first, and after that has been done I will show you a chamber which you can have until the summer boarders come. Then we must make different arrangements, for the house is so small that I'm terribly put to it for room."

Jack followed the little woman up the back stairs, and each of the four apartments was subjected to the most rigid scrutiny, the boy holding the candle while Aunt Nancy not only peered under the beds and behind the bureaus, but even opened the tiniest closets in search of a supposed intruder.

"We are safe for another day," she said with a long-drawn sigh of relief, "and after looking through the fore-room once more I'll lock the doors."

There was such an air of responsibility about the little woman that Jack, not fully understanding what she expected to find, immediately conceived the idea that peaceful though this portion of the country appeared, it must be a very dangerous neighborhood, for his hostess could not have taken more precautions had it been known positively that a band of Indians were lurking in the vicinity.

Nothing more alarming than the moth was found, however, and after the window fastenings had been carefully examined, Aunt Nancy led the way back to the kitchen, where she once more surprised her guest by taking down the well-worn Bible.

In a thin, quavering voice she read therefrom a certain number of verses in which she seemed to find the greatest satisfaction, and then replaced the book reverentially on the stand appropriated to its keeping.

Then, to Jack's further surprise, she knelt by the side of the chair and began a simple but heartfelt prayer, while the boy nestled around uneasily, not certain whether it was proper for him to stand up, or follow her example, therefore he remained where he was.

When the evening devotions had been brought to a close, he felt decidedly uncomfortable in mind, but did not think it advisable to expose his ignorance by asking the little woman what he should have done.

"Now we'll go to bed," Aunt Nancy said as she arose to her feet with such a look of faith on her wrinkled face as reminded the boy of pictures he had seen.

Without a word he followed her upstairs to a small room directly over the kitchen, which, however contracted it might seem to others, was twice as large as he needed when compared with his quarters on board the "Atlanta."

Then, as if her aim was to astonish and bewilder him on this first evening, Aunt Nancy kissed him on both cheeks as she said "Good night," and left him to his own reflections.

Chapter IV

PURSUED

It was a long while before slumber visited Jack's eyelids on this first night spent at the farm.

To have found such a pleasant resting place after his experience at Farmer Pratt's, and when the best he had expected was to be allowed to remain until morning, was almost bewildering; at the same time the friendly manner in which the kindly faced old lady treated him made a deep impression on his heart.

During fully an hour he speculated as to how it would be possible for him to reach New York with Louis, and, not being able to arrive at any satisfactory conclusion, he decided that that matter at least could safely be left in Aunt Nancy's care.

Then, all anxiety as to the immediate future having been dissipated, he thought of various ways by which he could lighten the little woman's labors.

He laid plans for making himself so useful about the farm that she would be repaid for her care of Louis, and these ideas were in his mind when he crossed the border of dreamland, where, until nearly daybreak, he tried to milk diminutive cows, or struggled to carry enormous tin pails.

Despite his disagreeable dreams, the sleep was refreshing, and when the first glow of dawn appeared in the eastern sky he was aroused by the sound of Aunt Nancy's voice from the foot of the stairs.

Jack's first waking thought was a continuation of the last on the night previous, and, dressing hurriedly, he ran down to the kitchen to begin the labor which he intended should make him a desirable member of the family.

To his great disappointment the fire had been built, Louis dressed, and the morning's work well advanced when he entered the room.

"Why didn't you call me before?" he asked reproachfully. "I meant to have done all this while you were asleep; but I laid awake so long last night that it didn't seem possible for my eyes to open."

"I am accustomed to doing these things for myself," Aunt Nancy replied with a kindly smile, "and don't mind it one bit, especially when the kindlings have been prepared. I got up a little earlier than usual because I was afraid there might be some trouble about dressing the baby; but he's just as good a child as can be, and seems right well contented here."

"It would be funny if he wasn't," Jack replied as he took Louis in his arms for the morning greeting.

There was a shade of sorrow in his heart because the child evinced no desire to remain with him, but scrambled out of his arms at the first opportunity to toddle toward Aunt Nancy, who ceased her work of brushing imaginary dirt from the floor in order to kiss the little fellow as tenderly as a mother could have done.

"It seems as if he'd got all through with me," Jack said sorrowfully. "I believe he likes you the best now."

"Don't be jealous, my boy. It's only natural the child should cling to a woman when he can; but that doesn't signify he has lost any affection for you. It is time old crumple-horn was milked, and we'll take Louis with us so he won't get into mischief. I'm going to give you another lesson this morning."

Jack made a vain effort to repress the sigh which would persist in coming to his lips as the baby crowed with delight when the little woman lifted him in her arms, and taking the milking pail, he led the way out through the dewy grass to the barnyard, where the cow stood looking over the rails as if wondering why Aunt Nancy was so late.

Jack insisted that he could milk without any further instructions, and, after gathering an armful of the sweet-scented clover, he set boldly to work while Aunt Nancy and Louis watched him from the other side of the fence.

This time his efforts were crowned with success, and although he did not finish the task as quickly as the little woman could have done it, by the aid of a few hints from her he had drawn the last drop of milk into the pail before the cow began to show signs of impatience.

Then Aunt Nancy and Louis returned to the house while Jack drove the meek-eyed animal to the pasture, and when this was done he searched the shed for a rake.

He succeeded in finding one with not more than half the teeth missing, and began to scrape up the sticks and dried leaves from the lane, a work which was well calculated to yet further win the confidence of the neat little mistress of the farm.

When the morning meal was served, Jack had so far become accustomed to Aunt Nancy's ways that he bowed his head without being prompted, while she asked a blessing.

After breakfast was concluded the hunchback proceeded to put into execution the plan formed on the night previous.

"If you'll tell me what to do I'll go to work as soon as the lane is cleaned, an' that won't take a long while. I s'pose there's plenty to be done."

"Yes," Aunt Nancy replied with a sigh, "there's a great deal of work which a woman can't do; but I don't know as a boy like you would be able to get along any better than I."

"There won't be any harm in tryin'," Jack said manfully. "Tell me what it is you want."

"Well, the pasture fence is broken in several places, and I was thinking of getting Daniel Chick to come an' fix it; but perhaps you might patch the breaks up so's a cow couldn't get out."

"Of course I can. It ain't much of a job if you've got nails an' a hammer. I'll tackle it as soon as the lane is finished."

Aunt Nancy explained that the fence to which she referred bordered the road a short distance above the house, and Jack was so impatient to begin the labor that, contrary to his usual custom, he took a hurried leave of Louis.

An hour was sufficient in which to finish the self-imposed task on the lane, and then, with a very shaky hammer and a handful of rusty nails, he set out to repair the fence, leaving Louis playing in the kitchen with the gorgeous crockery rooster, while Aunt Nancy was busily engaged setting the house to rights generally.

The scene of Jack's first attempt at fence building was fully an eighth of a mile away, and in a clump of alder-bushes which shut off all view of the house.

It was by no means a simple task which he found before him.

The posts had so far decayed that an expert workman would have considered it necessary to replace them with new timbers; but since this was beyond his skill, he set about mending it after his own fashion.

It must not be supposed that Jack loved to work better than does any other boy; but he believed it was necessary for him to remain with Aunt Nancy until such time as he could find an opportunity of continuing the journey in some more rapid manner than by walking, and the desire to make himself useful about the farm was so great that labor ceased to be a hardship.

He had been engaged in this rather difficult task fully an hour, paying little or no attention to anything save the work in hand, when the rattle of wheels on the hard road attracted his notice.

Up to this time no person had passed in either direction, and it was from curiosity rather than any idea the approaching travellers might be connected with his fortunes, that he peered out from among the alder-bushes.

Immediately he drew back in alarm.

He had seen, coming directly toward him in a lumbering old wagon and hardly more than a hundred yards away, Farmer Pratt and his son Tom.

"They're huntin' for me!" he said to himself as he crept farther among the bushes to conceal himself from view, and a secure hiding place had hardly been gained when the travellers came to a full stop at the little brook which ran on the opposite side of the road, in order to give their horse some water.

As a matter of fact Farmer Pratt *was* in search of the two who had left his house so unceremoniously; but now he had no intention of taking them to the poorhouse.

Quite by accident a copy of a newspaper containing an account of the explosion on board the "Atlanta," and the information that Mrs. Littlefield would remain in Portland in the hope of gaining some information regarding her child, had come into his hands, and it did not require much study on his part to understand that in the greed to possess himself of the boat by ridding himself of the children, he had lost the opportunity of earning a valuable reward.

There was a stormy time in the Pratt household when this fact became known, and even Master Tom came in for more than his full share of the scolding because the children had been allowed to go away.

"It would have been as good as a hundred dollars in my pocket if I could have lugged them youngsters into town," the farmer repeated over and over again as he blamed first his wife and then his son for what was really his own fault. "I thought a boat worth twenty dollars would be a mighty big haul for one mornin', but here was a show of gettin' five times as much jest by holdin' them two over night, an' you had to let 'em slip through your fingers."

Farmer Pratt dwelt upon this unpleasant fact until he finally convinced himself that he would have acted the part of a good Samaritan had the opportunity not been denied him, and very early on this same morning he started out for the purpose of earning the reward by finding the castaways.

Jack, crouching among the bushes where he could distinguish the movements of those whom he considered his enemies, heard the farmer say, while the half-fed horse was quenching his thirst, —

"I reckon we've got a day's work before us, all on account of you an' your mother, for that hunchback couldn't have walked as far with the baby. Most likely he found some one who gave him a lift on the road. The chances are he's in Biddeford by this time, other folks have heard the whole story."

Tom made no reply, probably because he feared to say anything which might again call forth a flood of reproach, and his father added, —

"I reckon our best way will be to push right on to town instead of huntin' along the road as we've been doin'. Time is gettin' mighty short if we want to catch him before people know what has happened."

The farmer was so impatient to arrive at the city that the horse was urged on before his thirst was fully quenched, and as the noise of the wheels told that the briefly interrupted journey had been resumed, Jack crept cautiously out from among the bushes to where he could watch the movements of the travellers until they should have passed Aunt Nancy's farm.

As may be supposed, he was thoroughly alarmed.

That which he heard convinced him beyond a doubt the farmer was searching for him, and there was no question in his mind but that it was for the sole and only purpose of carrying him and Louis to the poor farm.

"I s'pose Aunt Nancy would up an' tell the whole story if they should ask her," he muttered, "an' then I'd have to come out an' go along with 'em, 'cause I wouldn't let that man carry Louis off alone."

The color came back to his cheeks, however, and the throbbing of his heart was lessened as he saw the wagon wheel past the lane without either of its occupants making any move toward calling at the house.

Most likely neither Aunt Nancy nor Louis were in the yard, and Farmer Pratt was so eager to reach the town where he believed the children to be, that, as he had intimated, there was no further stop to be made along the road.

But Jack's mind was far from being relieved even after the clumsy vehicle had passed out of sight, for he knew the farmer would return, failing to gain any information of those he was so anxious to find, and he might think it worth his while to call at Aunt Nancy's.

Jack had now lost all interest in his work, and seated himself near the fence trying to decide whether he would be warranted in leaving the temporary home he had found, to take refuge in flight.

This he might have done on the impulse of the moment but for the restraining thought that it would be in the highest degree dangerous to travel in either direction on the road, and to make his way through the fields and woods was a matter of impossibility, since he had no idea of the proper course to be pursued.

"I don't s'pose Aunt Nancy'd lie even to save us from goin' to the poor farm," he said aloud to himself; "but if she would, I'd hide out in the bushes with Louis till I was sure that man had got through huntin' after us, 'cause he can't keep this thing up all summer."

This was by far the best plan Jack could devise for the baby's safety, and yet it seemed hardly possible it would be carried into execution because of the probable unwillingness of Aunt Nancy to so much as equivocate.

After thinking the matter over fully twenty minutes without arriving at any other conclusion which promised the slightest hope of escape from his pursuers, he decided to boldly ask the little woman if she would promise, in case Mr. Pratt should call upon her, to say that she had seen neither of her guests.

"She can't any more'n get mad at it, an' if she won't agree then I'll take the risk of startin' off once more, but it's goin' to be pretty tough on both of us."

There was yet considerable work to be done in the way of fence building; but now Jack had no idea of continuing the labor.

He was so agitated that the shaky hammer lay unheeded on the ground where it had fallen when he first saw the travellers, and the nails were left to gather a yet thicker coat of rust as he made his way up through the line of bushes to approach the house from the rear, not daring to go boldly around by the road.

Chapter V

AN ENCOUNTER

Believing his only enemies were those whom he had seen driving up the road, Jack paid no attention to anything in front of him, save when it was absolutely necessary in order to guide his footsteps, but kept his eyes fixed upon the dusty highway.

Owing to the straggling line of bushes, he was forced to make a wide detour to reach the barn unseen by any travellers, and he had not traversed more than half the required distance when a loud cry from a clump of alders which bordered the duck pond caused him to come to a full stop.

"Hello, Hunchie! What are you doin' here?"

Jack looked up quickly in alarm, fancying the voice sounded like Tom Pratt's, and for an instant believed his pursuers had apparently continued their journey only for the purpose of taking him by surprise in the rear.

There was no person in sight, however, and during a few seconds he stood motionless, trying to decide whether it would be safest to run directly toward the farmhouse, or attempt to make his escape through the fields.

Then the question was repeated, and before Jack could have fled, had he been so disposed, three boys came out from among the alders, approaching very near as if to prevent flight on the part of the hunchback.

"Who are you?" one of the strangers asked, "an' where did you come from?"

"I'm Jack Dudley."

"Where do you live?"

"I'm stayin' over to Aunt Nancy Curtis's awhile," Jack replied hesitatingly, doubtful if it would be well to give these not over-friendly looking boys all the information they desired.

"What are you doin' there?" another of the party asked.

"Helpin' 'round at whatever she wants done till the summer boarders go away."

"Oh! So you're the hired man, are you?" the first boy said in a sneering tone.

"I ain't so very much of a man; but I reckon I can do her work, an' I mustn't fool 'round here, for I'm pretty busy this mornin'."

"You'll stay till we find out what right you've got to run across this field," the boy who had first spoken said decidedly. "We've always done Aunt Nancy's chores, an' you're makin' a big mistake by takin' our job away."

Jack looked once more toward the road to make certain Farmer Pratt and his son were not returning.

Then he glanced in the direction of the house, hoping Aunt Nancy might be in sight, for he understood from the tone and attitude of the strangers that they were bent on mischief.

Not a person could be seen, and he had no other alternative save to remain where he was until such time as the boys should be willing to let him pass.

Any attempt at flight could have been easily checked, since, owing to his deformity, he was not able to run as fast as others of his age.

Probably he felt just a trifle frightened; but he stood his ground boldly, determined not to let the strangers see a show of weakness, as he said, —

"I didn't come here to take any feller's job. Aunt Nancy gave me a chance to stay this summer, an' I jumped at it, 'cause there's no boy needs a home more'n I do jest now."

"Well, see here, Hunchie," the elder of the party replied in a threatening tone, "we don't know how much you need a home, nor we don't care; but there's one thing certain, you ain't goin' to stay 'round here this summer." "Us fellers can do all Aunt Nancy's chores an' a good deal more. The job

belongs to us. If you say you'll leave before night, it'll be all right, an' if not, we'll thump the life out of you."

"Perhaps that can't be done," Jack said calmly, with an assumption of courage which was far from natural.

"Last summer there was a feller come snoopin' 'round to help on the summer-boarder business, but he soon found it wasn't safe to steal jobs from them as lives here the whole year. We jest about killed him."

"Why didn't you stuff his skin an' set it up on the road here, so's other fellers would know enough not to stop?" Jack asked in a sarcastic tone as he stepped back a few paces toward a thicker clump of bushes, where it would be impossible for the strangers to make an attack from the rear. "You can't be any tougher than you look, an' I guess I'll be able to keep on livin' till summer's over, even if I do stay."

"Does that mean you ain't goin' to leave?" And the boy advanced threateningly with clinched fists until he stood within a few inches of the deformed lad, who now understood that a fight was inevitable.

"It's pretty nigh the size of it," Jack replied; and despite all efforts, his voice trembled slightly, for he knew full well it would be impossible to hold his own against three bullies. "But before beginnin' the row I want you to understand one thing: if I don't work for somebody, I've got to live out of doors, for I haven't a cent. I ain't sayin' but the three of you can lick me, of course, but you'll have to do it every day in the week before I'll leave this farm."

Perhaps the bully was a trifle ashamed for threatening one so much smaller than himself, and deformed, for, instead of immediately striking a blow as at first had seemed to be his purpose, he drew back a few paces to hold a whispered consultation with his companions, after which he said, —

"Look here, Hunchie, we're willin' to give you a show, but won't allow no fellers 'round takin' away money we could earn as well as not. Aunt Nancy's always hired us to do her chores when the city folks was here, till she got that feller last year, an' then the old fool said she'd never pay us another cent jest 'cause we didn't jump spry enough to please her. Now we're goin' to show that it's got to be us or nobody. We're willin' to wait till to-morrow night if you say you'll go then. There's plenty of jobs up Old Orchard way, so there ain't any need of your feedin' on wind."

"Why don't you go there?"

"'Cause we don't want to. This is where we live, an' anything that's to be done 'round here belongs to us. Now cross your throat that you'll leave before to-morrow night, an' we won't say another word."

"I'll go an' see what Aunt Nancy thinks about it," Jack replied, not with any intention of obeying these peremptory demands, but in order to escape from what was a very awkward predicament.

"You won't do anything of the kind! Promise before leavin' this place or we'll thump you!"

"Then thump away, for I won't go," Jack replied determinedly as he backed still farther into the bushes and prepared to defend himself as best he might against such an overwhelming force, although knowing there was no question but that he would receive a severe whipping.

"Give it to him, Bill!" the boys in the rear cried. "You can polish him off with one hand, so there's no need of our chippin' in."

Bill did not wait for further encouragement.

Jack's defence was necessarily very slight, and before he was able to strike a blow in his own behalf, Bill had him on the ground, pounding him unmercifully, while his companions viewed the scene with evident satisfaction.

Jack made no outcry: first, because he feared that by bringing Aunt Nancy on the scene the fact of Louis's being at the farm would be made known; and, secondly, he fancied Farmer Pratt might be near enough to hear his appeals for help.

Therefore he submitted to the cruel and uncalled-for punishment without a word, although every blow caused severe pain, and when Bill had pummelled him for fully five minutes the other boys interrupted by saying, —

"Come, let up on him! That's enough for the first, an' if he ain't out of town by to-morrow we'll give him another dose. Let's cool him off in the pond."

Jack struggled in vain against this last indignity. It was a simple matter for the three boys to lift and throw him half a dozen feet from the bank into the muddy water.

There was no danger the little fellow would be drowned, for the duck pond was not more than two feet deep, and as his assailants ran hurriedly away he scrambled out, presenting a sorry sight as he stood on the firm ground once more with mud and water dripping from his face and every angle of his garments.

Jack was as sore in mind as he was in body; but even while making his way toward the house he did not neglect any precautions which might prevent his being seen by Farmer Pratt.

He skirted around through the straggling line of alders until he reached the rear of the barn, and then, coming across crumple-horn's yard, he was confronted by Aunt Nancy, who had just emerged from the shed.

"For mercy's sake!" the little woman screamed, raising her hands in dismay as she surveyed the woe-begone Jack, who looked more like a misshapen pillar of mud than a boy. "Where *have* you been, and what *have* you done to yourself? It *is* strange that boys *will* be forever mussing in the dirt. I thought I'd had some bad ones here, but you beat anything I ever saw! Why, you must have been rolling in the pond to get yourself in such a condition."

"Yes, ma'am, I have," Jack replied meekly as he again tried to brush the mud from his face, but only succeeded in grinding it in more deeply.

"What's the matter with your nose? It's bleeding!" Aunt Nancy screamed in her excitement; while Louis, who was sitting on the grass near the broad doorstep, crowed and laughed as if fancying she was talking to him.

"Three fellers out there tried to make me promise I'd go away before to-morrow night, an' when I wouldn't, they gave me an awful poundin'. Then the fun was wound up by throwin' me in the pond."

"Three boys!" and Aunt Nancy's tone was an angry one. "I'll venture to say William Dean was among the party; and if he thinks he's going to drive off every decent child in the neighborhood, he is mistaken. I'd do my chores alone, and wait on the city folks too, before he should come here again!"

Then Aunt Nancy peered in every direction as if fancying the evil-doers might yet be in the vicinity where she could punish them immediately, while Jack stood silent, if not quite motionless, wiping the mixture of blood and mud from his face in a most disconsolate manner.

Aunt Nancy's anger vanished, however, as she turned again toward the cripple.

All her sympathies were aroused, but not to such an extent as to smother her cleanly instincts.

"Did they hurt you very much?" she asked solicitously.

"They wasn't any too careful about hittin'," Jack replied with a feeble attempt at a smile, to show that his injuries were not really serious. "If there hadn't been more than one, I'd have hurt him some before he got me into the pond."

"I wish you had flogged every single member of that party in the most severe — No, I don't either, for it wouldn't be right, Jack. We are told when anybody smites us on one cheek, we must turn the other also; but it's terrible hard work to do right sometimes. I'm glad you didn't strike them, though I *do* wish they could be punished."

Again Aunt Nancy showed signs of giving way to anger, and one could see that a severe conflict was going on in her mind as she tried to obey the injunctions of the Book she read so often.

As if to turn her attention from vengeful thoughts, she immediately made preparations for dressing Jack's wounds.

"If you can stand a little more water," she said, "we'll try to get you into something like a decent condition."

"I reckon I can stand almost anything after the dose I've had," Jack replied grimly; and Aunt Nancy led him under the pump, stationing him directly beneath the spout as she said, —

"Now I'll wash the mud off; but if the water feels too cold let me know, and we'll heat it."

"I'll take it as long as you can keep the handle goin'," Jack replied as he bent his head and involuntarily drew a long breath preparatory to receiving the expected shock.

Aunt Nancy could pump a long while when it was for the purpose of removing dirt; and during the next five minutes she deluged Jack with the cold spring water until he stood in the centre of a miniature pond, no longer covered with mud, but dripping tiny streams from every portion of his face and garments.

Sitting on the grass near by, Louis clapped his hands and laughed with glee at what he probably thought a comical spectacle designed for his own especial amusement.

It was not until Jack had been, as he expressed it, "so well rinsed it was time to wring him out," that either he or Aunt Nancy remembered the very important fact that he had no clothes to replace those which were so thoroughly soaked.

"Now what *are* we going to do?" Aunt Nancy asked in dismay, as she surveyed the dripping boy, who left little rivers of water behind him whenever he moved. "You haven't got a second shirt to your back, and I can't let you remain in these wet clothes."

"I might go out to the barn an' lay 'round there till they dried," Jack suggested.

"Mercy on us, child, you'd get your death of cold! Wait right here while I go into the attic and see if there isn't something you can wear for a few hours. Don't step across the threshold."

This last admonition was unnecessary.

Short a time as Jack had known Aunt Nancy, he was reasonably well acquainted with her cleanly habits, and to have stepped on that floor, which was as white as boards can be, while in his present condition, would have been to incur the little woman's most serious displeasure.

He was also forced to remain at a respectful distance from Louis, who laughed and crowed as if begging to be taken, and while moving farther away he whispered, —

"It wouldn't do at all to touch you when I'm so wet, old fellow, but I'll lug you around as much as you want as soon as I'm dried off. After Aunt Nancy comes back, I'm goin' to talk with her about Farmer Pratt, an' see if she'll agree to say we ain't here in case he calls. You an' I'll be in a pretty hard box if she don't promise to tell a lie for us."

Chapter VI

A MENTAL STRUGGLE

When Aunt Nancy returned from the attic, she had a miscellaneous collection of cast-off garments sufficient to have clothed a dozen boys like Jack, providing they had been willing to wear female apparel.

"I thought there might be some of father's things upstairs," she said, examining once more each piece; "but I've given them away. You won't care if you have to put on a dress for a little while, will you? Here are some old ones of mine, and it will be a great deal better to use them than to stand around in wet clothes."

Jack was not at all anxious to masquerade as a girl, and would have preferred to "dry off," as he expressed it, in the barn; but, fearing lest he should offend the old lady at a time when he was about to ask a very great favor, he made no protest.

Aunt Nancy selected from the assortment two skirts, a pair of well-worn cloth shoes, and a shawl, saying as she handed them to the boy, —

"Now you can go out in the barn and put these on. Then we'll hang your clothes on the line, where they'll dry in a little while. In the mean time I'll find some sticking plaster for your face, and a piece of brown paper to put over your eye to prevent it from growing black."

Jack walked away as if he were about to perform a very disagreeable task, and by the time Aunt Nancy had carried the superfluous wardrobe upstairs and procured such things as she thought would be necessary in the treatment of the boy's wounds, he emerged from the barn looking decidedly shamefaced.

He knew he presented a most comical appearance, and expected to be greeted with an outburst of laughter; but Aunt Nancy saw nothing to provoke mirth in what had been done to prevent a cold, and, in the most matter-of-fact manner, began to treat the bruises on his face.

A piece of court plaster fully half as large as Jack's hand was placed over the scratch on his right cheek, another upon a small cut just in front of his left ear, while a quantity of brown paper thoroughly saturated with vinegar covered his eye and a goodly portion of his forehead.

This last was tied on with a handkerchief knotted in such a manner as to allow the two ends to stick straight up like the ears of a deformed rabbit.

During this operation Louis laughed in glee. It was to him the jolliest kind of sport to see his guardian thus transformed into a girl, and even Aunt Nancy herself could not repress a smile when she gazed at the woe-begone looking boy who appeared to have just come from some desperate conflict.

"I s'pose I look pretty rough, don't I?" Jack asked with a faint attempt at a smile. "I feel like as if I'd been broke all to pieces an' then patched up ag'in."

"It isn't as bad as it might be," Aunt Nancy replied guardedly; "but out here where we don't see any one it doesn't make much difference, and to run around this way a few hours is better than being sick for a week."

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