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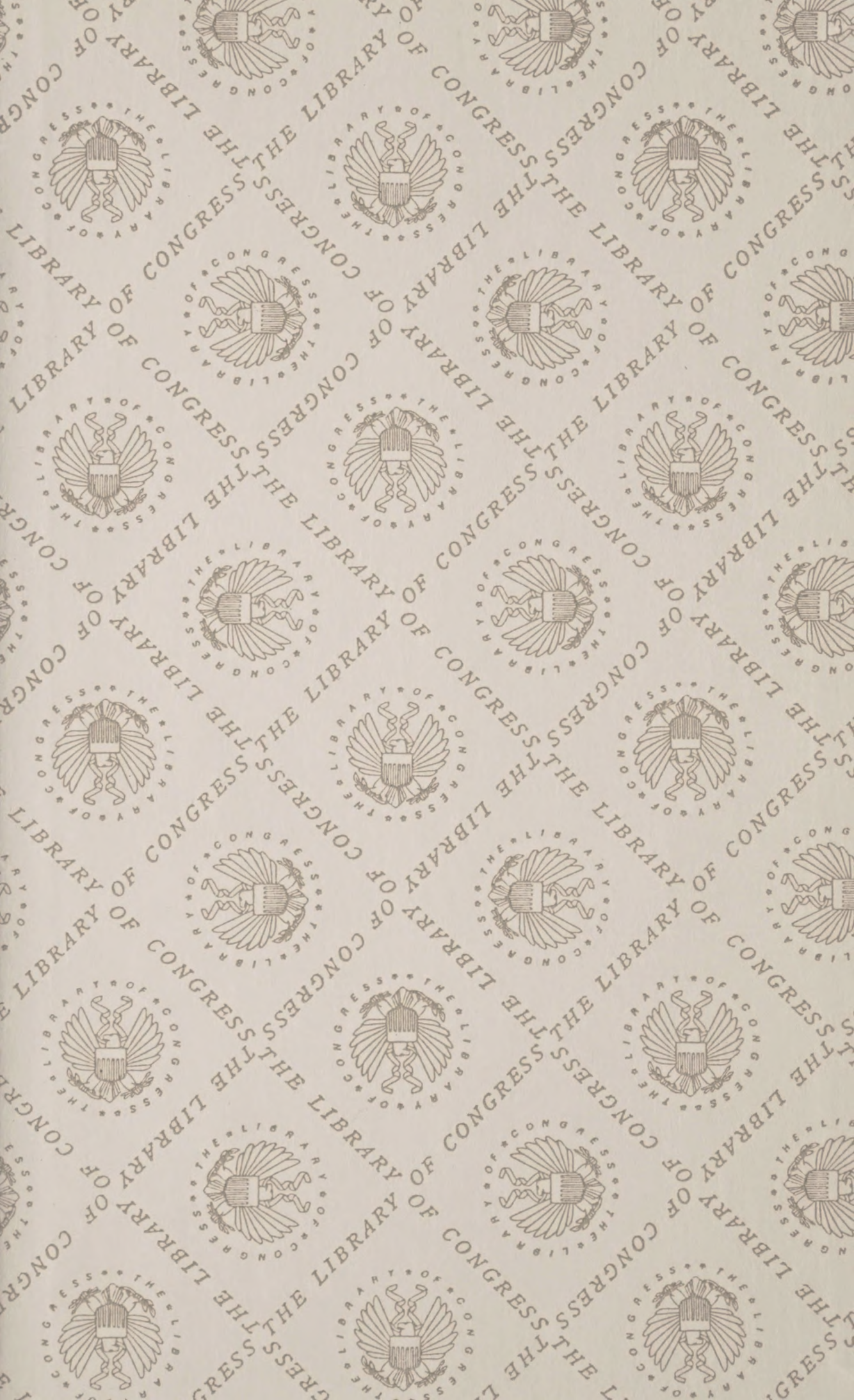
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Annabel

Annabel

A Novel for Young Folk

BY

SUZANNE METCALF

Illustrated by Joseph Pierre Nuyttens

The Reilly & Britton Co.
Chicago

ANNABEL

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Annabel

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 grand 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. Goodbye!" 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.

"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 schoolmate, 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 pocketknife 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 stand-

ing 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 before 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 shriveled and almost useless, all these afflic-

tions 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. Some one 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 Dr. 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," inquired 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 as 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 com-

forted 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 till 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 of 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 clockwork.

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 ever yet induced him to vary his daily program by staying indoors.

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 curios-

ity to his neighbors, who took but a casual interest in him. Perhaps, had he ever varied his program, even for a day, the act would have occasioned great excitement in Bingham; but he never did.

To-night 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 star-

ing 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?"

"We're 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. 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?" inquired 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 greenhouse 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," an-

nounced 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 toadstools 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 whole-

sale 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, afterwards 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'! ''

Which proved that he had caught some of the doctor's own enthusiasm.

For a week the boy heard nothing more about

the partnership, but at the end of that time a load of lumber arrived from the Bingham lumberyard, and soon after Joe Higgins, the carpenter, walked up to the barn with his basket of tools, and with a nod to Will took off his coat and started to work.

Next day came the doctor with a big, legal-looking document for Will to sign, which he first read in a solemn voice from beginning to end. It set forth clearly the terms of their contract, and after the boy had signed his name under the doctor's he began to feel the magnitude of the undertaking, and the responsibility put upon his young shoulders. Doctor Meigs also brought more literature treating of mushroom culture, which he advised Will to study carefully.

Joe Higgins worked three weeks repairing the barn. He not only made it what he called "air-tight," but in the east end he partitioned off a room, and built a floor to it, and then put an outside window and door in, making it very cozy and comfortable. This was to be the "office," where the heater was also to be placed, so that it would warm the room as well

as supply hot water to the pipes extending under the ground in all directions throughout the interior of the big barn.

The room was hardly completed before the heater arrived from the city, with men to set it up and arrange the system of pipes. Will dug all the trenches for the pipes to lie in, and then with Egbert's help covered them over again. Also, the two boys devoted days to another important work, which was the placing of straw all around the outside edge of the barn, and covering it with a bank of earth that reached well up onto the boarding. This was to keep the frost from getting inside.

The wisdom of the doctor in starting this work in August was now apparent, for the entire month was consumed in getting the barn in shape and spading up the rich soil ready to receive the mushroom spawn.

Early in September the industry was started, and in a few days thereafter small mushrooms, that looked like buttons, thrust their heads above the earth within the warm, damp barn, and speedily grew to a size that permitted them to be marketed.

The doctor carried the first picking home with him, and Will took the next lot to the big house and sold them to the astonished and delighted Nora, who placed an order for a pound of them every week. But soon the crop began to mature very fast, and by the doctor's orders Will packed them in paper boxes holding a pound each, and afterward arranged the boxes in a neat crate, which he shipped by express to the wholesale grocer in the city whose children their grandfather was so greatly interested in. The doctor supplied the boxes and crates, and on the former was printed: "Carden & Co.'s Fresh Mushrooms. Warranted Wholesome and Delicious." And below followed several recipes for cooking mushrooms, printed for the benefit of those who were unaccustomed to preparing them. Nora furnished some of the recipes, and old Mrs. Meigs the rest, so Will felt sure they would be successful.

For two or three weeks Carden & Co. shipped a crate of mushrooms daily to the city. Then something went wrong; the crop failed suddenly, and the spawn was discovered to be dead and useless. The doctor helped Will to inves-

tigate the cause of the trouble, and afterward to overcome it; and then fresh spawn was planted and the mushrooms began to grow again.

The wholesale grocer wrote that he was much annoyed by this delay. The demand for mushrooms in the city was much greater than the supply, and his customers were disappointed when they didn't get them.

"We've been selling too cheap," declared the doctor. "This is a good time to raise the price. We'll get fifty cents a pound, hereafter."

It seemed a large price to Will, for now the mushrooms grew with scarcely any care, and he found he was able to attend school and also look after the work very easily. It was not until cold weather crept on that the task became at all arduous; but the frosty nights obliged the two boys to watch the fires carefully, and finally Will and Egbert moved their bed to the little room at the end of the barn and slept there comfortably during the remainder of the winter, so they could "attend to business properly."

The wholesale grocer son-in-law sent all the money received for the sale of the mushrooms to the doctor, so Will did not know exactly how the business was coming along, for he had no idea how much money the doctor had spent in preparation. But the monthly wages were paid to the boys with great regularity, and on the first day of January the doctor declared the first dividend, paying Will forty-three dollars as his share of the profits up to date.

There was no prouder boy in Bingham than Will Carden when he realized he was engaged in a successful business venture. He had already started a bank account, for the family needs did not require all the money the two boys earned as wages, and Will declared that this forty-three dollars should never be touched unless absolutely necessary, as it was to remain in the bank as the foundation of his fortune. We will know later who it was that suggested this idea to him.

"Better than working in the mills, isn't it?" said the doctor triumphantly, while for once he allowed a smile to spread over his round, whiskered face.

"Indeed it is," answered the grateful boy. "And I owe everything to you, Doctor."

"Nonsense!" returned the doctor, beginning to frown; "you owe it all to your own industry, and to the fact that my poor grandchildren need looking after."

CHAPTER V

WILL BECOMES A HERO

It was during this winter, his sixteenth year, when Will entered upon the footing of a successful "business man," that two important adventures befell him.

The first was on one cold Saturday in November just before the snow fell. The gray sky warned the boy that a storm was likely to set in, and as he needed more firewood for the heater he resolved to go into the grove and pick up all the dead branches which the wind had blown from the trees, and to put them in piles so that Nick Wells, the carter, could come for them on Monday morning. So he put some luncheon in his basket and, telling his mother he would not be home for supper, hastened away to the grove, leaving Egbert to care for the fire in the "office."

There was plenty of dead wood lying around the grove, and Will worked steadily piling it up until evening approached and it grew dusk.

He was just about to stop work and return home when he heard a sound of footsteps approaching, and stood silent a little way from the path to watch Mr. Jordan pass by on his regular evening walk, which he permitted nothing to interrupt.

To Will's astonishment the man stopped abruptly in the middle of the grove and gazed earnestly at an oak tree. Then, exactly as he had done on that other evening when Will had watched him, he walked up to the tree and passed his hand hurriedly up and down the rough bark, returning almost immediately to the path to continue on his way.

This repetition of the same curious action Will had before noticed filled the boy with surprise, and puzzled him greatly. What possible object could Mr. Jordan have in feeling of the bark of an oak tree situated in the center of a deserted grove, where few people ever passed?

But while he pondered the matter, darkness fell upon the grove, and he was obliged to hasten home to relieve Egbert.

It snowed a little during the night, and all day Sunday a thin white mantle lay upon the

frozen ground. Mr. Jordan took his usual evening walk, and Will looked after him thoughtfully, wondering if he made a regular practice of stopping to feel the bark of the oak tree. But he made no attempt to follow his mother's boarder, as the boy would have considered it a mean trick to spy upon the man, however peculiar he might be.

Yet early on Monday morning, when he drove over to the grove with Nick Wells to load the wood he had piled up, Will could not resist the temptation to go to the tree and see if Mr. Jordan had indeed stopped there the evening before. Yes, there were the tracks of his boots, clearly outlined in the snow. Will knew exactly the way he had walked to the tree, cast that furtive glance over his shoulder, and then passed his hand up and down the bark.

But why? That was the question; and surely it might well puzzle older heads than that of Will Carden.

The other adventure referred to had a distinct bearing upon the boy's future life, and made him the village hero for many months to come.

Christmas week arrived with weather sharp and cold, although wonderfully brisk and exhilarating. One of the chief pleasures of the young folks of Bingham in winter was to skate upon Marshall's pond, a broad stretch of deep water lying just west of the town, and not far from the Williams homestead. This pond was fed by a small brook that wound for miles through the country, and here the Bingham iceman harvested his supply each winter, often cutting holes in the ice which, when lightly frozen over, made dangerous places for the skaters, who did well to avoid them.

The day following Christmas a large crowd of youngsters assembled at the pond for skating, many of the boys and girls being anxious to try the new skates Santa Claus had brought them. The Williams children were all there except little Gladys, and Will Carden came over also, for he was an expert skater and had decided that an afternoon's sport would do him good.

It was a merry throng, indeed, and Will was gliding along over the ice with Mary Louise when a sharp scream reached his ears and he

saw the children scattering from one spot like a flock of frightened sheep.

Will dropped Mary Louise's hand and sped as quickly as possible toward the place. He had known in an instant that an accident had occurred, and as he drew near he saw that the ice had broken. Then a small arm came into view above the surface, its fingers clutching wildly for support before it again disappeared.

Without hesitation Will flew toward the hole. The ice cracked and gave way as he reached the edge, and immediately he plunged into the water, where he kept his wits and began reaching in every direction for the drowning form he had noted.

From those standing at a safe distance a cry of horror arose; but it quickly changed to a shout of joy as Will Carden rose to the surface and caught at the edge of the ice for support, for in one arm he held Annabel Williams' almost lifeless form.

"Shove us a rail, you fellows!" he called, wisely refraining from trying to draw himself up by the flimsy edge of ice he clutched.

The boys were quick to understand what he

wanted, and a score of willing hands tore the rails from a fence that came down to the shore of the pond, and slid them along the ice so that they reached across the hole and both ends rested on a firm foundation. Will seized the first one that came within reach, and then a couple of the boys crept out upon the rails and caught hold of Annabel, drawing her from the icy water and carrying her safely to land. Others assisted Will and although he was dripping wet and his teeth chattered with cold, as soon as he reached safe ice he shook off the supporting hands of his friends and walked over to the unconscious girl.

"Give me all the shawls and wraps you can spare!" he cried, and as they were eagerly offered he wrapped them around Annabel and then lifted her in his arms and started at his best pace for the Williams house, which was fortunately the nearest in the village to the pond.

Other boys offered to help him, but Will shook his head and plunged on, the curious crowd following at his heels, while one or two

volunteered to run ahead and warn the family of the accident.

Mary Louise paced at Will's side, sobbing bitterly.

"It's all right; don't cry," he said to her. "I can feel Annabel stirring in my arms, and I'm sure she's alive."

As they reached the gate that marked the entrance to the grounds a stout little man bounded down the path toward them, bare-headed and with a look of fear in his protruding eyes.

"Give her to me! Give me my child!" he said; and Will placed his burden at once in the father's arms and turned away. For he was shivering in every bone of his body, and knew he ought to get home and change his own clothes as soon as possible.

Mr. Williams carried Annabel into the house, issuing as he went a string of commands.

"Jane, prepare a hot water bath; Fanny, send Peter for the doctor; Nora, bring me some towels and warm flannels," and so on until all the servants were running about upon their various errands.

He carried the girl to her room, and tore or cut away her clothing, plunging her as quickly as possible into a warm bath. She was quite conscious now, and kept saying: "I'm all right, papa! I'm all right."

But the man grimly insisted on carrying out his plans, and after the bath rolled her in warm flannels and tucked his child snugly into bed.

"Mrs. Williams' compliments, sir," said the servant; "and she begs to know how is the little girl."

"Tell Mrs. Williams not to disturb herself," he answered, gruffly; but Annabel herself called a more satisfactory message, for she said:

"I'm all right, tell mamma."

Nora, blubbering with joy and thankfulness, for Annabel was her especial pet, brought in a bowl of hot lemonade, which Mr. Williams forced the convalescent to drink. And then Doctor Meigs arrived, and after a glance around the room and a brief examination of his patient, nodded his shaggy head in approval.

"She'll come along nicely, sir," he said; "thanks to your prompt and intelligent meth-

ods. But it was a close call for the little one. Who pulled her out? ''

"I haven't heard," replied the great man, looking up with sudden interest. "But I'll find out at once, for whoever it was most certainly saved her life."

"It was Will Carden," said Theodore, who had entered unobserved, and stood just behind them.

"I might have suspected that," remarked the doctor, dryly, but there was a tone of pride in his deep voice that he could not disguise.

"Carden?" said Mr. Williams, reflectively; "Carden? I wonder if he is any relation to John Carden, who — "

"Just his son, sir," interrupted Doctor Meigs calmly. "The son of that John Carden who discovered the process of making steel which your mills are now using."

"I know; I know!" said Mr. Williams hastily. Then he bent down and kissed Annabel's white brow.

"I like Will," she whispered.

"Try to sleep, my darling," he answered,

gently. "Fanny will sit by you; and, if you want me, send at once."

Then he stood up, cast another loving glance at his daughter, and followed by the doctor left the room.

Few strangers would have supposed Chester D. Williams to be a successful business man, if they judged him superficially by his appearance. Unlike his lady wife, he assumed no airs or mannerisms that might distinguish him from any other man you came across. His clothes, although made by an excellent tailor, were carelessly worn, and had not his wife kept careful watch of him he would have continued to wear one necktie until its edges were disgracefully frayed. In build the man was not very prepossessing, being below medium height and inclined to stoutness, while his beardless face was round and red and only his kindly eyes redeemed his features from being exceptionally plain.

Yet in the big outside world people liked Chester Williams and respected his ability. No one knew better how to obtain a favorable contract for steel, or fulfilled it more exactly

to the letter of the agreement. In mechanical industries he was acknowledged a great man, and was known to have accumulated an immense fortune. Here in Bingham, where he was seldom seen, for his business in the city claimed a large share of his time, the owner of the steel mills was an absolute autocrat, and his word was law to the simple villagers. Yet he had never abused their trust and confidence in him.

"Step in here a moment, doctor," he said, pushing open the door to his study. So Doctor Meigs followed him in and sat down.

"I am very grateful for my child's rescue," began Mr. Williams, with a slight tremor in his voice. "Tell me, Doctor Meigs, what sort of boy is this Will Carden who proved himself so brave this afternoon?"

"I can't say," replied the doctor, a merry twinkle in his eye. "That is, with modesty. For Will is my partner."

"A doctor!"

"No; a mushroom grower."

Mr. Williams seemed puzzled, but waited to hear more.

"You'd better see the boy yourself," continued the doctor. "He's proud, you'll find; and he's very poor."

"Poor?"

"Yes. His father lost all his money in experimenting with that steel process; and then he started for London and was lost at sea. Therefore, the family is dependent mostly upon the industry of this boy."

"I see."

For a moment the mill owner remained lost in thought. Then he asked:

"How did Jordan get the control of John Carden's secret process?"

"I never knew the particulars," replied Doctor Meigs; "but Mr. Jordan has told me that he loaned Mr. Carden money to carry on his experiments."

"Bosh! Jordan never had a dollar in his life until after I made the deal with him and started these mills. He was nothing but an humble clerk in the bank here."

"I remember," said the doctor, regarding the other man with a blank expression.

"But at the time I made my arrangements

with Jordan he showed me a paper signed by John Carden which transferred all his interest in the secret process, together with the formula itself, to Ezra Jordan, in consideration of the sum of ten thousand dollars."

"Ten thousand dollars!" ejaculated the doctor.

"Which Jordan never owned," said Williams, slapping his knee emphatically. "When I inquired at the bank, the cashier told me that Jordan had never had any money except his salary, and it is certain he had not embezzled a dollar while in the employ of the bank. But it was none of my business, after all. Only, Jordan drove such a hard bargain with me for the use of his process that I'm paying him a fortune every year, in royalties, and he runs the works himself, so as to be sure I don't rob him. The paper executed by John Carden seems genuine, and the only thing that puzzles me is why he transferred such a valuable secret, just as it was proven a success, to a man he could not possibly have borrowed money from, because the man never had it to lend."

"You astonish me," said Doctor Meigs, with

evident sincerity. "I've never been able to understand Mr. Jordan, myself. He is a very reserved individual, and I knew that he was quite intimate with John Carden, before the latter left Bingham on his fatal journey. But that there was anything wrong or at all suspicious in Jordan's dealings with his old friend, I have never even dreamed."

"There may be nothing wrong at all," returned Mr. Williams. "But in that case the inventor of the best steel process in the world was a fool."

Doctor Meigs made no reply, but rose to take his leave; and after showing the physician to the door Mr. Williams turned into the sitting room, where the lamps had been lighted. All the children were there but Annabel, who was reported to have fallen asleep, and it was good to observe how eagerly they clustered about their father's knee, and how fond they seemed to be of him.

Mrs. Williams presently sent word that she was "so upset by Annabel's careless accident" that she would dine alone in her own room, and the children greeted this announce-

ment with a whoop of delight that made their father frown and turn more red than usual, with shamed chagrin. They trooped into the dining room happy and content, and as soon as they were seated, began to chatter of Will Carden.

"Do you know him?" asked the father.

"Know Will Carden! Well, I guess we do!" replied boisterous Reginald.

"We all like Will," said Mary Louise, in her gentle voice; "and if he had not been so prompt to rescue Annabel I am sure she would have been drowned, for everyone else was too frightened to move. But Will didn't wait a minute. He plunged right in after her."

"He is a brave boy," said Mr. Williams.

"And he can do lots of things," remarked Theodore, slowly.

"He fixted my dolly's leg!" shouted Gladys, anxious to testify in her friend's behalf.

"Yes, and mamma sent him about his business, and wouldn't let him play with us," added Reggie, in a grieved tone.

"Why?" asked the father.

"Oh, because he's a vegetable boy, and poor. She said we'd got to respect your position in society," replied Reginald, with a grin.

"She scolded me awfully," declared Gladys, nodding her head sagely.

"Hush, my daughter," said Mr. Williams, with unaccustomed severity. "You must not criticise mamma's actions, for she loves you all and tries to act for your best good. But it's nothing against Will Carden to be a vegetable boy, you know. How old is he?"

"About sixteen, I think," said Mary Louise.

"Well, when I was his age," continued Mr. Williams, "I was shovelling coal in a smelting furnace."

"That isn't as respectable as being a vegetable boy, is it?" asked Theodore, gravely.

"Both callings are respectable, if they enable one to earn an honest livelihood," returned his father, with a smile. "There is no disgrace at all in poverty. The only thing that hopelessly condemns a person is laziness or idle inaction."

"But mother——" began Reginald.

"Mother sometimes forgets how very poor

we ourselves used to be," interrupted Mr. Williams, looking earnestly into the circle of eager faces; "and I am very glad she *can* forget it. I'll talk to her, however, about your friend Will Carden, and I've no doubt when she learns how brave he has been she will at once withdraw her objections to his playing with you."

"Thank you, papa," said Mary Louise, reaching out to take his hand in her slim white one.

"You 're all right, daddy, and we love you!" exclaimed Reggie, earnestly.

The great mill owner flushed with pleasure, and his eyes grew bright and moist.

"But," observed Gladys, her mouth full of bread and butter, "mamma scolds me lots o' times."

"Hush!" commanded her father, sternly; and a cloud came over his face and drove the joy from his eyes.

CHAPTER VI

A BOY AND A MILLIONAIRE

Will Carden, little the worse for his ducking of the day before, sat in his little "office" at the end of the barn, his feet braced against the heater, his chair tipped backward, and his eyes fastened upon an open letter he held in both hands.

He had read it a dozen times since Peter, the coachman up at the big house, had brought it to him, and he was now reading it once more.

It was very brief, simply saying: "Please call at my office at your convenience." But it was signed "Chester D. Williams," in big, bold script, and that signature, Will reflected, would be good for thousands of dollars — even hundreds of thousands — if signed to a check.

While the boy was thus engaged, the door burst open and Doctor Meigs entered, stamping the snow from his feet and shaking it from his shoulders as a shaggy Newfoundland dog shakes off the rain. It had been snowing for

an hour, and the big flakes were falling slowly and softly, as if they had a mission to fulfill and plenty of time to accomplish it.

"Hello, Doctor," said Will, cheerily. "Read that."

Doctor Meigs took the letter, sat down, and read it carefully. Then he looked up.

"How's your throat?" he asked.

"All right," said Will.

"Sore, any?"

"Not a bit."

"Feel chills creeping up your back?"

"No."

"Head hot?"

"Why, I'm all right, Doctor."

"Put out your tongue!"

Will obeyed, just as he had done ever since he could remember.

"H — m! Strange — very strange," muttered the doctor.

"What's strange?" asked the boy.

"That you're fool enough to jump into ice-water, and clever enough to beat the doctor out of his just dues afterward."

Will laughed.

"How's Annabel?" he asked.

"As good as ever. Why did you pull her out so quick, you young rascal? Don't you know Chester D. Williams is rich enough to pay a big doctor's bill?"

"I was afraid at first," answered the boy, reflectively, "that I hadn't pulled Nan out quick enough. It was a close call, and no mistake."

"Well, your reward is at hand. The whole town is praising you, and calling you a hero. And the great man himself has sent for you."

Will shifted uneasily in his chair.

"You know, Doctor, it wasn't anything at all," he said.

"Of course not. One girl, more or less, in the world doesn't make much difference."

"I don't mean that. Annabel's a brick, and worth jumping into twenty ponds for. But anyone could have done the same as I did."

"To be sure. How are the toadstools coming?"

Will knew the doctor was in a good humor when he called their product "toadstools."

If he was at all worried he spoke of them as "mushrooms."

"Pretty good. But what does Mr. Williams want to see me about?" he inquired.

"Wants to give you ten dollars for saving his daughter's life, perhaps."

Will straightened up.

"I won't go," he said.

The doctor grinned.

"Throwing away good money, eh? We'll have to raise the price of toadstools again, to even up. But, seriously, I advise you to go to Mr. Williams, as he requests you to. He isn't half a bad fellow. His only fault is that he makes more money than any one man is entitled to."

"You don't really think he'll — he'll want to pay me anything, do you?"

"No; he wants to thank you, as any gentleman would, for a brave, manly action."

For the first time Will grew embarrassed, and his face became as red as a June sunset.

"I'd rather not, you know," he said, undecidedly.

"It's the penalty of heroism," remarked the

doctor, with assumed carelessness. "Better go at once and have it over with."

"All right," said Will, with a sigh of resignation.

"I'm going back to town, and I'll walk with you."

So Will stopped at the house and sent Egbert to mind the fire, and then he tramped away to the village beside the burly form of his friend.

It was not as cold as it had been before it began to snow, and the boy enjoyed the walk. He liked to hear the soft crunching of the snow under his feet.

When he shyly entered the office at the steel works his face was as rosy as an apple, and he shook off the snow and wiped the moisture from his eyes and looked around him.

There were two long rows of desks in the main room, and at one corner, railed in to separate it from the others, was the secretary's office and desk. Will could see the bald head of Mr. Jordan held as rigidly upright as ever, and recognized the two side locks of hair that were plastered firmly to his skull.

Then Mr. Jordan turned slowly around and

saw him, and after calmly staring at the boy for a time he motioned to a clerk.

The young man approached Will and inquired his business.

"I want to see Mr. Williams," he answered.

"Mr. Jordan transacts all the business here," said the clerk stiffly.

"It isn't exactly business," replied the boy, and drew out the letter he had received.

At once the clerk became more obsequious, and begged Will to be seated. He watched the man, whom he knew to be the son of a local storekeeper, go to a glass door and rap upon it gently. Then he entered and closed the door carefully behind him, only to emerge the next moment and beckon Will to advance.

"Mr. Williams will see you at once, sir."

Will walked into the private office feeling queer and uncomfortable, and the clerk closed the door behind him.

Mr. Williams was sitting at his desk, but at once jumped up and met the boy with both hands extended in a cordial greeting.

"I'm glad to see you, Will Carden," he

said simply. "My little girl is very dear to me, and I owe you more than I can ever repay."

"Why, Nan's dear to me, too, Mr. Williams," replied the youth, feeling quite at ease again. "And I'm glad and grateful that I happened to be around just when she needed me. We're in the same class at high school, you know, and Annabel and I have always been chums."

"That's good," said the great man, nodding as if he understood. "I hope you will be better friends than ever, now. She wants to see you, and Mrs. Williams has asked me to send you up to the house, if you will go."

Will flushed with pleasure. To be invited to the big house by the very woman who had snubbed him a few months ago was indeed a triumph. He didn't suspect, of course, that Mr. Williams had kept his promise to the children, and "talked to" his wife with such energy that she was not likely soon again to banish one of their playmates because he chanced to be poor. Indeed, Mrs. Williams had no especial dislike for the "vegetable boy;" she merely regarded him as a member of a class to be avoided, and her sole objection to him

as a companion to her children was based upon a snobbish and vulgar assumption of superiority to those not blessed with money.

"I'll be glad to see Annabel again," said Will. "I hope she's none the worse for her accident."

"Just a slight cold, that's all. But sit down, please. I want a little talk with you about — yourself."

Will became uncomfortable again. But he sat down, as the great man requested.

"Tell me something of your life; of your family and your work; and let me know what your ambitions are," said Mr. Williams.

It was a little hard for Will to get started, but the man led him on by asking a few simple questions and soon he was telling all about Flo and Egbert, and how hard his mother was obliged to work, and of the mushroom business the doctor had started and all the other little details of his life.

Mr. Williams listened attentively, and when the boy mentioned the fact that Mr. Jordan had always boarded with them since his father had gone away, the millionaire seemed espe-

cially interested, asking various questions about his secretary's habits and mode of life which plainly showed he was unfamiliar with Mr. Jordan's private affairs.

"Do you remember your father?" he inquired.

"Not very well, sir," Will replied. "You see, I was very young when he went away, and he was accustomed to working so steadily night and day at his steel factory that he wasn't around the house very much. I've heard mother say he was so occupied with thoughts of his invention that he didn't pay a great deal of attention to us children, although his nature was kind and affectionate."

"Was Mr. Jordan with him much in those old days?"

"I can't remember about that. But mother has always said that Mr. Jordan was father's best friend, and for years he always came to our house on Sunday to dinner. He was a bank clerk, then; and that was before he boarded with us, you know."

"Is he kind to you now?"

"Mr. Jordan? Why, he's neither kind nor

unkind. But he pays his board regular, and in a way that's kindness, although he doesn't say a word to anyone. The boarder helps us to live, but it also wears out mother's strength, for she's very particular to cook the things he likes to eat, and to make him comfortable. I'm in hopes that the mushroom business will prosper, for then we can let our boarder go, and it will be much easier for mother."

"I, too, hope you will succeed. But if you don't, Will, or if you ever need help in any way, come straight to me. It would make me very happy to be of some use to you, you know."

"Thank you," said the boy. "I'll not forget."

The great mill owner was not at all a hard person to talk to. He seemed to understand "just as a boy would," Will afterward told Mrs. Carden. And when he left the office it was with the pleasant sensation that he had made a new friend — one that could be relied upon almost as much as old Dr. Meigs.

Mr. Jordan was staring at him fixedly as he walked out; but he said nothing about the visit, either then or afterward when he met Will at

supper. But once in a while he would turn his queer spectacled eyes upon the boy, as if he had just discovered a new interest in him.

CHAPTER VII

AN AFTERNOON CALL

Next afternoon Will put on his best clothes and walked up to the big house.

On the way he was undecided whether to go to the front door or the back one. Never before had he entered the place as a guest, and in the end he wisely compromised by advancing to the side entrance that he had observed was mostly used by the children.

Annabel saw him from the window and beckoned him in, her face all smiles of welcome, and that helped him to retain his composure.

"Come right in, sir," said Fanny, the maid who admitted him. "Miss Annabel's not allowed to go to the door yet."

"Hello, Will," said the girl, shyly slipping her hand in his. "I'm awful glad you've come, for everybody has gone out and left me today."

"Why, Nan, how white you look!" he ex-

claimed. "That water in the pond must have been pretty cold for you."

"No more than for you, Will," she replied. "But it wasn't the cold, you know; 'twas the awful fear of dying — of being drowned and lost under the ice," and she looked at him with big eyes into which a shade of fear crept at the very recollection of that dreadful moment.

"There, there, Nan," said he soothingly; "let's sit down and talk about something else," and he led her to a sofa, still holding her small white hand in his brown one.

The girl glanced at him gratefully. Will seemed to understand her even better than Mary Louise did; and he had a gentle way with her that was at once pleasant and comforting.

"Where did the folks go?" he asked, with well assumed cheerfulness.

"Out coasting. The hill back of Thompson's is just fine, now — as smooth as glass, Ted says. I'd like to be with them, for my sled's the swiftest of them all, but," with a sigh, "Doctor Meigs says I must stay in the house for three days. Isn't it dreadful, Will?"

"Oh, I don't know, Nan. He's usually right

"Hello, Will," said Annabel.

about these things; and it seems mighty pleasant in here," glancing around at the cozy room with its glowing fire in the grate.

"It's nice — now," she answered, sweetly, and Will looked at her with sudden interest. He had never before noticed how bright and fair Annabel's face was. The freckles didn't seem to mar it a bit, and the nose turned up just enough to make her expression jolly and spirited. And as for the hair, the red was almost pretty where the firelight fell upon it.

Will had paid no attention until now to girls' looks. A girl had seemed to be "just a girl" to him. And he, as well as her brothers and the other boys, had often teased Nan about her red hair and pug nose, without observing either of them very closely. But to-day he began to think all the fellows must have been blind, and that the girl's claim to beauty was greater than any of them had ever suspected.

Somehow, too, Annabel's accident and near approach to death seemed to have changed her. At any rate she was never the same to Will afterward. He couldn't well have explained how she was different, but the large blue eyes

had a new look in them, she was less romping and boisterous in her ways and gentler in her speech.

She sat quietly in her corner of the sofa, a demure and almost bashful look upon her pleasant face. But in her natural and simple way she entertained her boy friend so cleverly that he never suspected he was being entertained at all.

"Papa says you've been to see him, and that you two have become great friends," she remarked.

"Mr. Williams was surely very nice to me," he answered, with enthusiasm. "I'm sure your father's a good man, Annabel."

"The best in the world, Will. We're always happy when father's home. But that isn't very often, you know, he's so busy."

There was a pause, after that, which neither noticed.

"Nora says you grow those lovely mushrooms we've been having lately," she said. "Do you, Will?"

"Yes; didn't you know it? In the old barn.

Doctor Meigs and I are partners. Do you like mushrooms, Nan? ''

'' Very much; and so does papa.''

'' I'll bring you some to-morrow,'' he promised, greatly delighted to find something he could do for her.

'' That will be fine,'' she answered; '' because, if you bring them, we can have a talk, you know. And it's sort of dull, staying in the house all day. The others are out every minute of the time, for school begins again next Monday, and they want to have all the fun they can while vacation lasts.''

'' That's natural,'' said Will. '' It's too bad you have to stay in during vacation. Say, Annabel, do you like to read Indian stories? ''

'' I don't know; I've never read any.''

'' I've got a swell Indian book at home; one that the Doctor gave me on my birthday. It's all about Dick Onslow among the red-skins, and I call it a corker! ''

'' I'd like to read it,'' said Annabel, smiling at his enthusiasm.

'' Well, I'll bring it over,'' he agreed. '' Then when you're alone, you can read it.''

"Thank you," said the girl, dreamily.

Then came another pause. It didn't seem to them necessary to talk all the time; but finally Annabel gave a little start and began speaking of the school and their mutual friends in the village so that the time passed swiftly away and it began to grow dark before either of them noticed it.

But by and by Will chanced to remember that Egbert had been left to tend the fires alone, so he jumped up and said he must go. And Annabel made no attempt to keep him, but stood at the window and waved her hand in farewell as he passed down the walk.

Mrs. Williams had another of her bad headaches that day, so she did not join the family at the evening meal, a circumstance that filled the children with thoughtless delight.

Mr. Williams was with them, however, for whenever he could be in Bingham he loved to have his family about him, and all the little folks were very fond of him indeed.

"Will was here to-day," said Annabel; whereat there was an uproar from the others

because they had missed their favorite playmate. And Gladys added:

"I'se busted my top, so Will's got to make it fixed."

"He's coming again to-morrow," Annabel announced, "to bring me a book, and some mushrooms. Then he can fix the top, Gladys."

Mary Louise looked at her sister curiously, and even Ted smiled at the wave of red that dyed Nan's cheeks.

"Seems to me you're getting pretty thick, just because he dragged you out of the pond," cried Reggie, mischievously.

"Will's a fine fellow," said Mr. Williams, gravely, "and I hope he'll come often!"

"So does I!" declared Gladys; and then the conversation shifted to another subject, greatly to Annabel's relief.

Mary Louise was nearer Will's age than Annabel, being now fifteen and almost on the verge of young womanhood. And Annabel, although little more than a year her junior, had until now been considered merely a romping, careless girl, although it was true she was scarcely behind her sister in the high school classes. Big

Will Carden, taller at sixteen than Mr. Williams himself, and strong and manly in build, seemed so much older and more matured than Annabel that it was really absurd for Reginald to couple their names, even in a joking way.

Will came the next day, to find Annabel again alone; but presently little Gladys toddled in and brought her top to be mended, and when he had succeeded in making it spin, the little one nestled in his lap with a sigh of contentment.

"Will," she asked, after a moment of earnest thought, "is you Nan's beau?"

"Of course!" he replied, laughing gayly. "And yours, too, Gladie!"

That made the wee one smile with satisfaction, and it pleased Annabel also, although she hastened rather awkwardly to talk of Dick Onslow and declare she would enjoy reading of his adventures.

On Monday the holidays ended, and Mr. Williams regretfully returned to his office in the city, where most of his time was spent.

Annabel was by this time fully recovered, and went to school with the others; but Will walked home with her that afternoon, and the

next afternoon also, and this was enough to start all the older scholars plaguing them, as young folks will do in case of boy and girl friendships, and calling them " sweethearts." Will came every morning across lots to meet her.

Will merely laughed and replied good-naturedly to the taunts, and Annabel tossed her tawny head half in pride and half in defiance and told the other girls they were jealous. So it was not long before their comrades tired of teasing them and they were left to do as they pleased.

When spring came on and the weather grew warmer, Will Carden not only walked home from school with Annabel, but came every morning across lots to meet her at the corner of the street near the big house and accompany her to the school. Sometimes Mary Louise or Theodore joined them, but more often they were left to themselves, the boys growling that " Will wasn't half as much fun as he used to be," and the girls wondering what he could see in " that freckled-faced Nan Williams " to interest him so greatly.

But the truth was that the two had grown very congenial, and liked to be together. Annabel had learned all about Will's life and ambitions and understood him as no other companion had ever been able to do. He was sure of her sympathy whenever anything went wrong, and knew she would share his joy when he was "in luck."

It was Annabel who advised him to "make a nest egg" of the forty-three dollars which the doctor paid him in dividends the first of the year, and the girl planned shrewdly in many ways to encourage him and give him confidence in his future. In addition to this, she was more clever in her studies than Will, and often she was of great assistance to him in explaining the lessons when his slower mind failed to grasp the details.

It is not easy to explain how so much real wisdom came to lurk in Annabel's childish head; but people said she was more like her father than any of the other children. During the months that followed her rescue from the icy pond she grew more sedate in demeanor than before, and more considerate of her

brothers and sisters, so that they soon came to look upon her as their mentor, in a degree, and asked her advice about many of the little trials of their daily lives.

CHAPTER VIII

THE DAWN OF PROSPERITY

In April Mrs. Williams, whose health had been poor during all the winter, failed so rapidly that the doctor who came from the city to examine her declared she needed an European trip, with a residence abroad of at least a year, in Spain or Italy.

This idea was eagerly seconded by the lady herself, so Mr. Williams at once arranged for her to go. She at first proposed to take Gladys with her, but her husband, guided by Dr. Meigs' advice, demurred at this, telling her frankly that the child would be better off at home. She wept a little, fearing she would be lonely; but Mr. Williams was firm, and at length she started away with an immense quantity of baggage, a qualified nurse to care for her ailments, and her own maid. Her husband traveled with her to New York, saw her safely aboard her steamer, and then returned to Bingham quite cheerfully, for the poor lady had improved in

health and spirits since the day the trip was planned, and he had little doubt the residence abroad would tone up her nerves and restore her to a normal condition.

But, now that his children were without a mother to direct them, Mr. Williams came to the conclusion that it was his duty to spend more of his time at home, so he arranged to be in Bingham the best part of every week, and hired a representative to attend to the city office.

It was now that the father had, for the first time in years, full opportunity to study the disposition and character of each member of his family. They were all dear to him, so it is probable that he discovered many admirable qualities in each of his children; but it did not take him many days to decide that Annabel, especially, was growing into a very sensible and reliable little woman. Mary Louise was sweet and winning as a June rose, and he was very proud indeed of his fair and dainty daughter; but it was Annabel alone who seemed to be interested in him personally, and who questioned him so intelligently in regard to his daily cares

and worries, that he soon came to confide in her many of the business details that no one else, save perhaps Mr. Jordan, was in any way aware of.

This drew father and daughter closer together, so that they soon became good comrades and were very happy in one another's companionship.

One day she said to him: "Papa, I wish you 'd build another schoolhouse at the mill. The old one isn't big enough for all the children of the workmen, and so they're crowding us out of the village school. We have to hold some of the high school classes over Barnes' store, even now."

"Why, I'll look into the matter," he answered, rather surprised at a young girl taking an interest in such things. But on investigation he found she was right, and that another schoolhouse was greatly needed in the "new town," where his cottages stood. Moreover, the school funds of the county and township were exhausted; so one of the things Mr. Williams did that summer was to build a pretty new schoolhouse, which he named "Annabel

School," providing from his own resources for the hiring of proper teachers.

In the fall important changes occurred in the family at the big house. Mrs. Williams wrote that she was so much improved in health that she had decided to extend her residence abroad for some time longer; so the father, doubting his ability to properly direct the education of his growing daughters, decided to send Mary Louise and Annabel to a private academy in Washington for young ladies. This led to Theodore's begging to be sent to a military school, and his father, after considering the matter, consented. So on the first of September the family practically was broken up, all three of the older children departing for their new schools, while only Reginald and Gladys remained with their father at Bingham. And while these lively youngsters did not permit life at the big house to become very monotonous, Mr. Williams greatly missed the older ones from the family circle. But others missed them, too, and among these was Will Carden, who suddenly found a great blank in his daily existence, caused by the absence of his old

schoolfellows. Doubtless he missed the companionship of Annabel most of all, for she had been his confidant and most intimate friend.

On the very day of their departure Mary Louise and Annabel drove up in their little pony cart to say good-bye to Will, and now almost every week a little letter would come from Nan telling him of her school life and asking him about the happenings in Bingham, and especially how the mushroom business progressed.

This business industry of Will's prospered finely. In July Dr. Meigs gave him three hundred dollars as his share of the profits for six months, and the vegetable garden had also brought in an unusual amount of money; so, for the first time since the father of the family had been lost at sea, the Cardens found themselves in possession of a nice bank account, and were relieved of the little worries that always follow in the wake of poverty.

It was fall, however, before Will and his mother finally decided to tell Mr. Jordan that they would not keep a boarder any longer. He had been with them so long, and his assist-

ance had been so greatly appreciated in the past, that Mrs. Carden felt a natural hesitation in asking him to leave. So Will took the matter into his own hands, and one evening, when Mr. Jordan returned from his walk, the boy stopped him in the little hallway and asked him to step into the sitting room for a moment.

"Perhaps you've noticed," began Will, "that mother has been getting more pale and thin during the last two or three years. Doctor Meigs thinks it's because she works too hard around the house; and so do I. So we've decided not to keep a boarder any longer, but to let mother take it easy, and rest up."

Mr. Jordan's spectacled eyes had been fixed calmly upon the young man's face from the moment he began to speak. Now he gave a scarcely perceptible start, as if astonished at what he heard, and Will was quick to note it.

"We're very grateful, you know," he hastened to add, "for all your kindness in the days when we needed help. But my business is prospering pretty well, just now, and I'm laying by a little money; so we think it's best to relieve mother of all the work we can."

The man still stared at him, reading coolly and deliberately every line of the boy's expression.

"I'd like to thank you, also, for all your kindness to my father, in the old days," continued Will, after a considerable pause. "Doctor Meigs has told me how good you were to him, and how you loaned him money. And you've been a good friend to us ever since."

Still there was no reply. The man neither acknowledged nor denied that he was entitled to such thanks. He stood upright, facing Will as calmly as ever; yet for a brief moment his body swayed from side to side, and then, as if overcome by a powerful effort, it stiffened again and was still.

The boy had nothing more to add to his dismissal of the boarder, and expected that Mr. Jordan would either reply or go to his room. But for a time he did neither, and the silence and suspense were growing unbearable when at last the man spoke.

"I will retain my room," said he, "and take my meals in the town. You do not need

the room I occupy, and this plan will cause Mrs. Carden very little work."

Will was puzzled. Why a man of Mr. Jordan's means should care to remain in such a poor home was a mystery. He could get much better accommodations at the village hotel for about the same sum he paid Mrs. Carden, and he would be more independent there. But while he canvassed the matter in his mind Mr. Jordan suddenly moved away and with slow steps mounted the stairs to his room, thus terminating the interview.

When the boy reported to his mother the result of this conference, she said:

"He is so reserved in his nature that I think Mr. Jordan shrinks from any public place where he might come in contact with strangers. That is perhaps the reason he does not wish to give up his room. He is accustomed to it, and the man is a slave to habit. Well, let him keep it, Will, if he wishes to; for so long as he takes his meals elsewhere it will not, as he says, cause me much inconvenience. Did he say how much he was willing to pay for the use of the room?"

"No," replied Will, who was really disap-

pointed, for he had hoped to do away entirely with the restraint imposed upon the family circle by the man's presence.

Mr. Jordan now began to get his meals in town; but after supper he would take the same long walk he had always done, ending it at the door of the Carden cottage, when he retired to his room for the night. The question of room-rent he settled by handing Mrs. Carden two dollars and a half every Saturday; not a very munificent sum, but perhaps, after all, as much as such accommodation was worth.

And so the family accepted the man's presence with hopeless resignation.

"As a matter of fact," said Will to the doctor, "we can't get rid of him."

CHAPTER IX

MYSTERIES AND SUSPICIONS

Will had by this time mastered the secret of mushroom growing so thoroughly that both partners felt justified in expecting a regular net profit of a thousand dollars a year from it, which meant an income of five hundred dollars each.

"It relieves my mind wonderfully," remarked the doctor; "for now I'm quite sure my poor grandchildren will not go hungry. But, Will, the earning will never be any bigger. That's the extent of the possibilities in mushroom growing. Are you satisfied with the prospect?"

"Certainly I am, Doctor. It's just that much more than I ever expected to earn, at my age; and the beauty of it is, I can go to school at the same time."

"But when you've finished your school days, what then?"

"Why, I haven't thought much about that,"

confessed Will. "But I'll have a nice little nest egg by that time, and can go into business that will pay better. And Egbert can continue to raise the mushrooms, because it's one of the few things the poor fellow is fitted for."

"Very good," said the doctor.

"What business would you advise me to get into, Doctor?"

"Let's wait awhile, and see what happens. Keep busy, my boy; make every day of your life count, and the future will be sure to take care of itself."

That afternoon the good doctor met Mr. Williams, who stopped to converse with him.

"Do you remember our conversation in regard to Jordan's relations with John Carden, which we had about a year ago?" he asked.

"Yes," was the prompt answer.

"Well, the man's getting very hard to handle, and I'm afraid I shall have trouble with him. I wish I knew more about his dealings with Carden, and was sure about his right to control this process."

"What's the trouble?" inquired the doctor.

"Why, when I made my arrangement with

Jordan, some ten years ago, he agreed to place a detailed description of the secret process in my keeping, as an evidence of good faith and to protect me if anything happened to him. One of his conditions was that he should have the sole right to furnish me with a certain chemical that is required to be mixed with the molten iron in the furnaces, and which gives to our steel that remarkable resiliency, or elasticity, which is among its strongest features. The contract allowed Jordan to supply this chemical at regular market prices, and he has always furnished it promptly, ordering it shipped directly to him in unmarked packages from a manufacturing chemist in the east. One day last week we ran short of this material for the first time, and without saying anything to Jordan I went to our local drug store and obtained enough of the chemical the process calls for to complete the batch of steel we had in preparation. Well, the stuff didn't work, and the whole lot was ruined. Also the foreman declared the chemical I obtained was wholly unlike the chemical Mr. Jordan had always supplied, and that made me suspicious that

something was wrong. When Jordan delivered the new lot I took a sample of it to the city, and had it examined by competent chemists. It wasn't the stuff the written formula calls for, at all, so it is evident that Jordan had deceived me in this one important ingredient, which he called by a false name, and has given me a worthless document. It's a criminal act, and leaves me at the man's mercy. So long as I use the stuff he supplies me with, I turn out the finest steel in all the world; but without Jordan I couldn't manufacture a pound of it, for he alone knows the secret."

"This seems to be quite serious," said the doctor, gravely. "If Mr. Jordan is capable of sharp practice in one way, he may be in another."

"That's it. That is why I suspect the story about his loaning John Carden money, and getting the secret of the process in payment of the debt."

The doctor wrinkled his shaggy brows into a deep frown.

"It's all a mystery," he said. "I knew John Carden from his boyhood days up, and a

more level-headed fellow never lived. He had plenty of money when first he began to figure on a new way to make steel, for the Cardens had been well-to-do for three generations. But while I knew the man well, I was never so close to him or so intimate with him as Jordan was. The bank clerk used to sit night after night in the steel factory watching Carden with his experiments, and I believe it was that interest in his work that won Carden's heart."

"Quite likely," said Mr. Williams, nodding.

"There is no doubt that John Carden spent a tremendous lot of money on those experiments," continued the doctor; "and he told me himself, before he went away, that while he had finally perfected a process that was worth millions, he had spent every cent he possessed in doing it. Yet he made no mention of Mr. Jordan's having loaned him money, and it was only after Mr. Carden's death that I learned from the man's own lips that he had been obliged to take over the right to the process to cancel the debt."

"I don't believe a word of it," declared the manufacturer, positively. "But, tell me, why

did Mr. Carden go away just as he had perfected his invention? ''

'' Because he could find no one in America to invest in the business. The steel men were suspicious of the new invention, and refused to believe in it. So Carden started for England, with the idea of inducing some Birmingham capitalist to establish mills to turn out his product. Carden himself explained this to me, and asked me to keep an eye on his family during his absence.''

'' And he never reached England? ''

'' Never. He was booked on one of the regular steamships, but changed his mind at the last moment, for some reason, and shipped on a sailing vessel, which was wrecked in a heavy storm and all aboard lost.''

'' Did you know of this at the time? ''

'' Of what? ''

'' That Carden had gone on a sailing ship, instead of a regular line? ''

'' No. Now that you call my attention to it, I remember that the first news we had of his being on the vessel was when we learned that the ship was lost. Then Mr. Jordan, who was

terribly distressed, to do him justice, showed us a letter Carden had written him on the eve of sailing, thus proving him to have been aboard the fated ship."

"That is strange," mused Mr. Williams. "But it must be true after all, or John Carden would have been heard of many years ago."

"That is evident," returned the doctor. "He was too big a man to be suppressed for long, and he was so fond of his wife and children that he would be sure to take the first opportunity to communicate with them."

"You're sure no letter ever came?"

"I am positive."

"Who gets the Carden mail?"

"Why, I believe Mr. Jordan always calls for it at the post office, if there happens to be any, and takes it to the house when he goes to supper."

"Humph!" exclaimed Mr. Williams, and then the two men looked into one another's eyes with a gaze that was startled and not without a gleam of horror.

"We'll talk this over again, sir," said the doctor, abruptly. "Just now you've given me

a great deal to think about, and I need time to consider it properly."

"I understand," said the manufacturer, and with a handshake the two separated.

As the Christmas vacation drew near, Will Carden became eagerly impatient to welcome his absent comrades home again. It had been lonely in the school room without Theodore and Mary Louise and Annabel; but now they were all coming home for a two weeks' holiday, and the young fellow was looking forward to these days with glowing anticipations.

He had intended meeting his friends at the train, but the girls arrived earlier than they had been expected, so that Will was busily working in the yard when he chanced to look up and see a pony cart being driven at reckless speed down the road. It was a pleasant winter day, for a clear sun shone overhead and there had been no snowfall as yet, so the pony's hoofs pattered merrily over the hard road and soon brought his driver within hailing distance.

Of course Will ran eagerly to meet his visitor, and there in the cart sat a young lady so sedate and dignified that the sight almost took

his breath away. Four months had done much to change Annabel. She was dressed more becomingly than of old, and her skirts were longer. The freckles seemed to have entirely disappeared, leaving her face fair as a lily, except for the bloom lent the round cheeks by the brisk drive in the wind. Also, she seemed to Will's critical eyes to be slighter and taller than before, and her red hair, instead of falling in two braids over her shoulder, was now made into a neat knot at the back of her head.

These sudden blossomings of young girls are often subjects of wonder, and we cannot blame Will that he was amazed. But, nevertheless, here was Annabel again, and the boy smiled a welcome that gained a ready response, for the young lady sprang from the cart and clasped both his brown hands in an eager way that proved she was glad to see him. After all, when he looked into her eyes he could see the same Nan of old, and outward appearance didn't count for much.

"I've come here first of all," she said, "because I couldn't wait a minute. How big you've grown, Will!"

"Why, I didn't know it," he replied. "But you, Nan — why, you're a regular swell!"

"Fudge!" cried Nan, disdainfully; "you won't catch me getting swell — or swelled — I can tell you. But they call us 'young ladies' at school, and we get to be perfect sticks. Oh, but it's good to be back in Bingham, where everything's sweet and simple, and you can do as you please!"

"It's good to have you back, Nan," he said.

"Why, there's Flo!" she exclaimed. "Come here, dear, and kiss me this minute."

Flo, who had just come from the house, ran at once into Annabel's arms, and Will stood by and grinned with great delight, although something about the girl filled him with a strange embarrassment.

"Now, sir," said Annabel, "I'm ordered to bring you back home with me, and you're to stay to dinner and spend the evening."

"I'm not dressed, nor ready," protested Will.

"Then get ready at once; and while you're about it I'll drive Flo over to the grove. Jump in, dear."

Flo readily complied with this request, for it was a great treat to ride in the pony cart; so in a moment they were whirling up the lane as fast as the fat little pony could prance, and Will, pleased indeed to be invited to the big house, went in to dress himself carefully for the occasion.

By the time he was ready, and had kissed his mother good-bye, the cart was back again; so he took Flo's place beside Annabel and was driven slowly away.

They had a good many things to talk over, it seemed; all about Annabel's new boarding school and Will's old high school; and about their mutual friends in the village, and the new book Annabel had sent Will to read, and about the mushroom business, in which the girl was keenly interested, and a good many other subjects.

So the pony had time to get new breath into its pudgy body, while the cart moved leisurely up this road and down that lane until at last they turned into the grounds of the big house.

Will was warmly greeted by Theodore and Mary Louise, as well as the younger children,

and he first admired Ted's gray uniform, all covered with brass buttons, and then turned to gaze shyly at the slim, beautiful girl whom he hesitated, because she was "such a young lady," to address familiarly as Mary Louise.

Mr. Williams, too, was present, happy to have his children all beside him once more, and the great steel manufacturer was so jolly a companion, and entered so heartily into the amusements of the young folks, that not one of them felt any restraint in his presence, but grieved when he left them.

The big dinner which Nora had prepared for this occasion was one of the merriest functions the establishment had ever known, and Fanny, the waitress, and Thomas, the butler, afterwards compared notes and figured that the party had remained nearly two hours at the table — which was surely long enough to satisfy the most vigorous appetite. But only those just home from boarding-school know what it is to sit down to a good home dinner; and there was so much to talk about that they could not be eating every minute, either.

Following this evening, which Will long re-

membered, came two weeks of constant excitement, during which coasting and sleighing parties, dances in the evenings and an old-fashioned " hay-ride " to a neighboring town, kept the young folks of Bingham busy as bees. Will couldn't be present at all these gayeties, because the fires had to be kept going in the heater, and he insisted that Egbert should have a share in the season's fun. But Egbert was little inclined to social pleasures, from many of which his infirmities naturally barred him, so that Will participated in a good many of the amusements provided for the holidays.

There was no accident to mar this Christmas season, as there had been a year before, and the end of the vacation days brought regret to all. But it is true that pleasures are the more enjoyed when they are followed by periods of earnest work, and the two girls and Theodore returned to their schools with rosier cheeks and brighter eyes than they had brought home with them, while lurking in their hearts were many pleasant memories that could be called upon, during the months that followed, to lighten the tedium of study.

During a long walk which Annabel and Will took just before their parting, they agreed to exchange letters at least once a week, and afterward the contract was faithfully kept. Will wrote at length of all the gossip of the little village, and Nan related her experiences at school; so the letters were always bright and interesting to the recipients, although others might not have fully understood them.

CHAPTER X

BAITING THE TRAP

One day in the early spring Mr. Williams sent an invitation to Dr. Meigs to dine with him, and after the meal they sat together in the study conversing; for the two men had become fast friends, and seemed to understand one another excellently.

"A curious thing has happened lately," said the host, flicking the ash from his cigar with a thoughtful air, "and one of my objects in asking you over this evening is to tell you of it, and ask your advice."

The doctor nodded and settled himself in his chair to listen.

"It is now some ten years ago that my attention was attracted by a sample of steel of such remarkable quality that I at once became interested, and after a time I managed to trace it to Bingham, where it had been made by John Carden, in his old factory. But the maker had gone from the town, and was reported dead,

and on being referred to Mr. Jordan, at the bank, I learned that the process for making this wonderful product was now owned by him. I made Ezra Jordan a proposition for the exclusive use of the process, on a royalty basis, and having come to terms I proceeded to build these mills, and the houses for my workmen, and afterwards moved here with my family. All of this you already know. I confess that I have made a great deal of money since then, for certain manufacturers and machinists cannot do without my steel, which no other maker has been able to duplicate. I might mention, incidentally, that Jordan has also made a fortune out of his royalties.

"A while ago I confided to you my discovery that Jordan had deceived me in regard to the formula; but I didn't worry much about that, because I knew that as long as I made money for him he would cause me no trouble. Now, however, a more startling evidence of the man's treachery has come to my knowledge. The Italian government requires a large amount of high-class steel for use in their naval armament, and I submitted samples of

my product with the certainty that I would secure the order, which will amount to millions of dollars. Imagine, therefore, my chagrin at being informed that another sample of steel, even finer than mine, and with the same peculiar characteristics that can be produced in no other way than by the Carden process, has been submitted to them by an English firm, and at a lower price than I demanded. What do you think of that, Doctor Meigs?"

"I cannot account for it," was the reply, "unless some one in England has stumbled upon the same process."

"That is, of course, possible, but not at all probable. I am more inclined to think that Mr. Jordan has made another deal, this time with the English firm, and is drawing royalties from them as well as from me."

"I see. You accuse the man of competing against himself."

"In this case, yes. But whichever gets the contract will pay him his royalties, so he is safe. Otherwise he would not figure on our competing, for I sell no steel abroad, and our

duties prevent the English makers from sending it here."

"Do you know the name of the English firm?" asked the doctor.

"Yes; the Italian commissioner was frank enough in stating it. My rival is the Atlas Steel Company, of Birmingham."

"Why don't you interview Jordan, and have it out with him?"

"My idea exactly. That is just what I want to do. But that will be an important interview, my dear Doctor, and I want you to be present."

"Me?" said the doctor, surprised.

"Yes. I've got a notion in my head that Jordan has defrauded the Cardens, as well as me, and you must stand as the friend of the Cardens, in case we get the man to admit anything. It can't be possible, sir, that Jordan ever loaned John Carden money, for in those days he was poor. In that case why should we suppose that Carden, who was shrewd enough to become a successful inventor, would turn over all rights to his process to another man, leaving his family in utter poverty?"

"It doesn't seem reasonable," agreed the doctor.

"Let us take Jordan unawares, and accuse him of his villainy. Perhaps we may induce him to confess all, and then your presence as a witness would be valuable both to me and to the Carden family."

"Very well; when do you want me?"

"Call at the office at three, to-morrow afternoon. I'll have Jordan in, and we'll see how much can be scared out of him."

So the matter was arranged, although Dr. Meigs had his doubts about their success. Chester D. Williams was evidently a man who liked to face a difficulty without fear and bore his way to the bottom of it. And it really seemed that he had ample foundation for his suspicions of Mr. Jordan. But when the doctor thought it all over, and looked back upon Mr. Jordan's regular and modest life, and remembered how admirable his conduct had ever been in the eyes of all who knew him, he hesitated to believe the man guilty of such bold and audacious villainy as was suggested by Mr. Williams' recent discoveries.

Doubtless the man was by nature cold, and he might be heartless. It was within the bounds of possibility that he had robbed John Carden's family of all those immense royalties earned by the process. But to sell the same process to an English corporation was altogether too hazardous a scheme for any man to undertake: unless, indeed, his past success had made him reckless.

In any event, the doctor doubted that sufficient proof could be advanced to convict Mr. Jordan. The inventor was dead, and no one else could prove that Jordan had no right to the process. And without proof the case was hopeless.

Yet promptly at three o'clock Dr. Meigs called at the steel works and was admitted to Mr. Williams' private office.

The proprietor was engaged at his desk when his friend entered, and after a nod in the doctor's direction and a request that he be seated, he swung around and touched an electric button.

"Please ask Mr. Jordan to step here," he said to the boy who answered the bell.

Such promptness fairly startled the doctor, but in a moment he collected himself for the coming interview, acknowledging to himself that Mr. Williams was right. If a disagreeable duty was to be performed, the sooner it was over with, the better.

Mr. Jordan entered with his usual stiff and solemn air, and gave the doctor a brief nod of recognition. Then he paused before Mr. Williams' desk in a way that indicated rather than expressed an inquiry as to why he had been summoned.

The mill owner laid down his pen and looked his secretary square in the face.

"Mr. Jordan," said he, "we have lost that order of the Italian government."

"Why?" asked the other, a shade of disappointment in his harsh voice.

"Because the Atlas Steel Company of Birmingham, England, has offered the same steel as mine at a lower price."

"Impossible!" cried the man, startled for once out of his usual apathy.

"No, it is true," replied Mr. Williams, calmly. "The Atlas works is using the Car-

den process, and turning out a product even better than we are at Bingham."

Mr. Jordan's face was pale and haggard. He looked around with a hunted air, and then, seeing that both men were regarding him keenly, he controlled himself with an effort and wiped his brow with his handkerchief.

"How could they know of my — of the Carden process?" he asked, hoarsely.

"The answer is very simple," said Mr. Williams, with admirable composure; "you sold the secret, in order to obtain a royalty from them, as well as from me."

CHAPTER XI

ON THE WRONG TRAIL

For a moment Mr. Jordan made no reply. But he stared at his employer with eyes so full of horror that his sincerity was very evident.

"I sell the secret to others!" he exclaimed, at last. "Why, it would ruin me. Do you accuse me of being a fool, sir, as well as a scoundrel?"

"All scoundrels are fools," returned Mr. Williams, dryly. "But, if you have not sold the secret to the Englishmen, please explain to me where and how they got it."

Again the hunted, fearful look crossed the man's face, and again he made an evident struggle to appear calm.

"I cannot explain it, sir. But it need not affect our business to any serious extent. There is enough demand for our steel in America to keep our furnaces busy, without going abroad for orders."

He spoke mechanically, as if the problem was

not new to him and he had often considered the matter in much the same way as he now clearly expressed it. Yet the set, expressionless tones were habitual to him, as they are to all who are unaccustomed to speak at any length.

"That is not the point," said Mr. Williams, sternly. "We are confronted, for the first time, with competition, and by a firm active enough to oppose us in foreign markets. What will be the end of it? What will happen when they attempt to compete with us in our home markets?"

"They must pay duty, and we can always meet their price," said Mr. Jordan, his voice sounding a bit defiant.

"The royalties I am obliged to pay you on my product, more than offset the duties," retorted the manufacturer. "Indeed, your demands force me to exact so high a price that our customers are already complaining. The secret is a secret no longer, it seems. Then why should I continue to pay you royalties?"

"If you choose to discontinue our arrangement, sir, I can dispose of the process to oth-

ers. The firm of Thomson Brothers & Hayden stands ready —''

"Bah!" exclaimed Mr. Williams, slamming the desk with his fist in momentary scorn. "You know very well I cannot abandon my present product. It would render this expensive plant of no further value.''

Mr. Jordan bowed, with deference.

"I am willing to fulfill our contract in the future, as in the past, on the exact terms it stipulates. I have no doubt the mills will continue to prosper. Anything more, sir?''

He half turned, as if to go.

"Yes,'' snapped the proprietor, who began to realize he had accomplished nothing by this interview.

Mr. Jordan waited, and for a time his employer remained silent, staring curiously at the impenetrable face of his secretary. Then he asked:

"How did you come to own this process, anyway? Why does it not belong to the heirs of the man who discovered it?''

Mr. Jordan poised his gaunt form more

erectly than ever, and his glittering spectacles were directed full upon the other's face.

"I believe I have already explained that. John Carden transferred to me his right to the discovery in consideration of money which he owed me and could not pay."

"You loaned him money?"

"Yes."

"Where did you get it?"

"Sir, that is not your affair."

"You never earned a dollar more than a bare living until I began to pay you royalties on the process. On the other hand, I have evidence that Carden loaned *you* money."

The man shrank back.

"You are becoming offensive, Mr. Williams, in your remarks, and I beg to remind you we are not alone," he said, not without dignity.

"I am interested in this matter myself, sir," said Dr. Meigs, now speaking for the first time. "You know that I am a friend of the Carden family, even as I have always been your friend, Mr. Jordan. Therefore it would please me to be able to disentangle this mystery and have all doubts removed from my mind. You have

told me, as you have told Mr. Williams, that John Carden owed you ten thousand dollars when he went away. Naturally we are curious to know how so great a sum came into the possession of a poor bank clerk, such as you then were. And also I have wondered what John Carden ever did with that money."

Again the secretary wiped his brow, but, ignoring for the present Mr. Williams, he turned toward the doctor to reply.

"You have no right to ask me such questions, Doctor Meigs; but it may be that from your standpoint there is some justice in your suspicions. I am, therefore, quite willing to answer you. John Carden spent all his own money, and afterward mine, in expensive experiments. The money I obtained by a lucky speculation in a lottery, the ticket for which I bought under an assumed name, as I did many other tickets, when I was a poor clerk and had no hopes of otherwise acquiring wealth. It is very natural I should hesitate to declare myself a gambler, by explaining this openly; but never since that time have I invested one cent in speculation of any sort. And now, as I have

duties to attend to, I will bid you good afternoon, believing that you will respect my confidence."

As he concluded, the secretary, who never within the knowledge of man had uttered so lengthy a speech before, bowed gravely and stalked from the room, holding himself as rigidly upright as an Egyptian obelisk.

When he was gone the two friends exchanged glances.

"Well?" said Mr. Williams, interrogatively.

"I admit that I am puzzled," answered the doctor. "It is quite possible for Mr. Jordan to have won ten thousand dollars on a lottery ticket."

"Yes; that was clever. There's no controverting it."

"But I do not think he sold the secret of your process to the Englishmen."

"Nor do I. The man's looks convinced me I was mistaken. But they also convinced me he has a secret he is desperately trying to hide. We're on a false scent, that's all."

"I'm inclined to agree with you."

"And what can explain the fact that the Atlas company of Birmingham is using the Carden process?"

"Are you sure it's the same process?"

"Humph! Do you know anything about the way steel is made?"

"No."

"It is a very delicate process to extract the impurities from iron and to transform that metal into a steel that will stand severe tension and become of so fine a temper that it will cut diamonds. Our product also had marvelous resiliency, and can be forged without losing any of its qualities. All this is accomplished by manipulations that are the result of accurate scientific calculations. No one could stumble upon such a process as Carden evolved by years of intelligent effort, and by no other process than Carden's could such steel ever be manufactured."

"Well, what will you do now?"

"I don't know. What I'd like to do is to go to Birmingham at once and see if I can solve the mystery."

"Why don't you?" asked the doctor.

"I'm afraid to leave Jordan, to tell the truth. If he should attempt to run away I must be here to stop him. His suspicions will be aroused by this interview, and should he escape he would take the secret with him, and I would be forced to close the works. Can't *you* go, Doctor?"

"No, indeed. I can't leave my patients. There are some who need me every day of their lives — or think they do, which is the same thing. A physician isn't his own master, you know, and moreover this isn't a physician's business. Send a confidential agent."

"I will. Whom do you suggest?"

"Will Carden."

Mr. Williams smiled into the doctor's earnest face.

"If I sent Will to Europe, Jordan would at once become suspicious," said he.

"No one need know he has gone to Europe. We'll keep it quiet, and as he is known to be my partner in the mushroom business I can send him away on our private affairs, and Mr. Jordan will have no cause to be suspicious."

"I will think over the suggestion before de-

ciding. But I'm glad you mentioned Will. He's a fine, intelligent young fellow, and the trip would do him a lot of good."

"Indeed it would. Good afternoon, Mr. Williams."

"I am grateful to you for giving me this hour," said the manufacturer, rising to shake his friend's hand, "for although we have not accomplished much it has relieved me of some of my suspicions of Mr. Jordan. I am still positive he deceived me about the formula, and there is no doubt he is a cold-blooded miser who would stick at nothing to make money. Also, he has a secret. But, after all, few men are thoroughly understood, and in the end Jordan may prove to be less of a scoundrel than we have considered him."

With this the interview terminated, and Doctor Meigs went away to call upon his patients. But for a time there was an unusually thoughtful expression upon his kindly face.

CHAPTER XII

THE "SPECIAL MESSENGER"

Will Carden was quite surprised to receive another invitation to confer with Mr. Williams. This time, however, he was asked to call at the Williams house in the evening "on a matter of great importance," and while this was less formal than the previous appointment it was also more mysterious. Wondering greatly why he was summoned, the boy dressed himself with care, kissed his mother good night, and walked down the road toward the village, filled with impatient eagerness.

Will's fortunes were quite prosperous at this juncture; or, as he reflected in his boyish fashion: "Things seem to be coming my way." But he was too wise to attribute it to "luck," knowing full well how much he owed to the kindness of good Doctor Meigs, backed by his own sturdy labor and a strict attention to the details of his business.

"These 'lucky' fellows," the doctor had

once said, " are usually found to have created their own luck by hard work and upright methods," and the observation struck Will as being very close to the truth. This spring he had abandoned the idea of raising a variety of small vegetables, as he had done in previous years, and contented himself with planting all his available ground with potatoes. These, if properly cared for, would pay nearly as much profit as the market garden, and be a good deal less work. Now that the mushrooms were doing so well the boy felt he could afford to take life a trifle easier, and this method reduced Egbert's labors as well as his own.

Pondering these things he rang the bell at the big house and was at once ushered into Mr. Williams' study, where he was delighted to find Doctor Meigs seated.

After the first words of greeting Mr. Williams said:

" Will, how would you like to go to England, on a little business trip? "

The youth was so astonished that for a moment he stared at his questioner vacantly, and during this interval the mill owner made a

rapid but not less complete inspection of the messenger he was about to entrust with so important and delicate an errand.

Will Carden could hardly be called a boy any longer. He was nearly eighteen years of age, and had grown swiftly toward manhood since the reader was first introduced to him. Tall and well-knit, with broad shoulders and an erect bearing, a stranger might easily have guessed the young man to be two or three years older than he really was. Moreover, there was a sagacious and observant expression upon his young face that might well have been caused by his vivid appreciation of the responsibilities thrust upon him so early in life. Yet, lest you mistake Will for a paragon, let it be said that the same expression may often be seen upon the face of a manly young fellow looking broadly upon the great future, and it is well worth observing. Will had his failings, as all properly constituted boys have; but they were such as threw his better qualities into strong relief.

Mr. Williams seemed well satisfied with his brief inspection, and felt intuitively that he

might rely upon the youth's discretion and faith.

"Are you in earnest, sir?" asked Will.

"Very much in earnest," was the quiet reply. "The errand is a secret one, yet I do not ask you to go as a spy, but rather to investigate as fully as possible the business of the Atlas Steel Company of Birmingham. Upon your success depends to a great extent my future prosperity as a manufacturer. Will you undertake this mission?"

"If you think I am capable, sir, I will gladly go. It would please me to be of use to you, and I would enjoy the voyage and the chance to visit a foreign land."

"Very good," said Mr. Williams. "I will pay all of your expenses, and allow you a hundred dollars a month for salary while you are absent."

"That is too much, sir, and I cannot accept it," said Will, firmly. "It will be enough to pay my expenses. Egbert can look after things while I am away, so that the business will suffer very little."

"I am sorry you decline my offer," replied

the manufacturer, rather stiffly. "It obliges me to find another messenger, to whom I will probably be forced to pay double the salary I have offered you. Men who are competent and whom I may trust, are not to be had for a song, Mr. Carden."

Will looked red and embarrassed. He had never been called "Mr. Carden" by his friend Mr. Williams before, and the formal title led him to believe he had unwittingly offended the man who had been so kind to him. He looked appealingly at the doctor.

"You're a confounded idiot, sir!" said that brusque personage, with a deeper frown than usual, although in his heart the doctor was secretly admiring the boy. "Here is a chance to be of great service to Mr. Williams, who coolly informs you that much of his future prosperity — a matter of many millions, doubtless — depends upon this mission to England. Do you wish to rob him, sir, by forcing him to employ a high priced agent, when you can do as well for a smaller sum?"

Will seemed bewildered.

"You don't appear to understand me, Doc-

tor," he said, reproachfully. "It will be a splendid thing for me, a regular holiday, to make a trip like that. Why should I ask my friend to pay me a lot of money in addition?"

"The laborer is worthy of his hire," quoted Doctor Meigs, bluntly. "Can't you see that by accepting the salary — which is little enough, in all conscience — you give Mr. Williams the right to use your services in any way he may direct?"

"Come, come, Will!" cried Mr. Williams, springing up to lay a kindly hand upon the youth's shoulder. "Don't let us haggle over a price. You're worth the sum I offer, and much more, to me. So take it, and let's call the matter settled."

"As you like, sir," answered Will, feeling rather helpless between his two friends. "I am very grateful to you both for all your kindness to me, and I'll do anything you say I ought to do."

"Good!" growled the doctor, approvingly. "We'll put you through your paces, all right."

Mr. Williams laughed, and his laugh was always a pleasant one.

"And now," said he, "I will tell you why I am anxious to investigate the business of the Atlas company, which threatens me with a dangerous competition."

The conference lasted until a late hour, and when it was ended Will understood perfectly what was required of him, and undertook to discover, if possible, where the English concern obtained the secret of the Carden process for making forge steel.

"When shall I go, sir?" he finally asked.

"As soon as possible. Within a week, if you can get away. Steamers sail nearly every day, at this season."

"How will next Wednesday do?" inquired Will, after a moment's thought.

"Excellently," returned Mr. Williams. "I will send you money and further instructions to your home, for Mr. Jordan must not suspect you are in my employ. It will be best for you to confide in no one but your mother and Doctor Meigs. Merely tell your brother and sister, or any other inquirers, that you are going East."

"Very well, sir."

One can imagine the eager anticipation that

controlled Will Carden during the next few days. He ordered a new suit of clothes from the local tailor, and the doctor helped him to select a suitable outfit for his travels. Although he had never been farther away from Bingham than the city, which was twenty-two miles distant, Will had no fears of his ability to take good care of himself. He might appear a trifle "green" to experienced travellers, he admitted; but at his age any well balanced youth has ample self-command and judgment, so that he anticipated nothing but pleasure during the next busy month or two.

Only one thing grieved him. He would be away during Annabel's vacation, and the young folks had laid many plans to be together during this time. But he left with Mr. Williams a note for the girl, telling her this was a business matter of her father's that could not be delayed, and begging her not to forget him during his absence. Singularly enough, neither he nor Annabel saw anything humorous in this request.

Then, just at the last minute, Mr. Williams entrusted to him another errand that was not

wholly agreeable. Letters had come from Mrs. Williams that she was about to return home, being much improved in health; and her husband asked Will to proceed directly from Liverpool to London, there to meet Mrs. Williams at the Savoy Hotel and escort her to her steamer. Will was to see her safely started toward America before proceeding to Birmingham upon his more important mission.

At last he was off, and so novel was his journey that he enjoyed even the tedious trip to New York. The Eastern agent of Mr. Williams met him on his arrival at the great metropolis, and after a day's delightful sightseeing with the good-natured agent as guide, Will was deposited safely aboard the big Cunarder that was to bear him over the vast expanse of the ocean.

Here was a change, indeed, in Will Carden's fortunes. From " vegetable boy " to " special messenger to Europe " seemed like an abrupt transition, and often as he walked the deck he wondered if it were all a dream, and he would presently awaken in his bed at home. But then his better judgment would inform him that

there was nothing so very remarkable in his good fortune, after all. With a good friend such as Dr. Meigs, a fortunate opportunity to save the life of a millionaire's daughter, and the inheritance of an honorable name, much more than this might happen to a young fellow. Will had been in line for promotion, that was all; but he resolved to prove worthy, that his friends might not regret their confidence in him.

There is an old saying that "to be worthy of good fortune is to invite good fortune," and there is much wisdom in the adage. The worthy do not always prove fortunate, it is true; but fortune is not so blind and fickle as we are sometimes led to believe, and sterling worth is a magnet that frequently attracts it.

CHAPTER XIII

MY LADY IS GRACIOUS

The bustle and confusion of landing filled Will with eager joy. It is truly an experience of moment to any one, so it is not wonderful that our youth, fresh from a country town, should thrill with excitement at this first glimpse of a foreign land. But he did not lose his head, and managed to rescue his small trunk from the mass of baggage tumbled upon the quay, and to get it transported to the railway station.

Then the train whirled him away, and with bustling Liverpool behind him he had mighty London to look forward to — the "City of Cities" in the eyes of all civilized humanity.

By dint of intelligent inquiry on shipboard he now knew exactly how to act. Once arrived at the terminal station he took a cab for the Savoy Hotel, where Mr. Williams had requested him to take a room. He met with one disappointment, in finding that Mrs. Williams

had not yet arrived, for according to her letter she should have been at the Savoy some days since, and Mr. Williams had cabled her to await there Will's arrival.

However, there was nothing to do but await the lady's appearance; so he went to his room, removed all traces of travel, and descended to obtain his first serene view of the world's metropolis. He found a near-by restaurant, at which he dined most luxuriously, but grieved at sight of his bill. Dr. Meigs had impressed upon him the fact that Mr. Williams had millions at his disposal, and therefore his confidential agent's expenses need not be in any way curtailed. Mr. Williams had himself informed the young man that so long as Will acted as his representative he must live in a style befitting his employer's position in the world.

"Do exactly as you think I would do myself, were I making the trip in person," he said.

So Will, although conscious of reckless extravagance from his own viewpoint, determined not to hesitate to spend Mr. Williams' money freely in providing a respectable living; but it startled him to find how much was

actually required to live in London in the same way that others did with whom he was constantly thrown in contact.

After dinner he decided to attend an opera, a species of entertainment he had never before witnessed; but he contented himself with a seat obtained for the most modest sum the bills quoted. Being extremely fond of music, and of a naturally artistic and appreciative mind, the inexperienced boy found in the opera a veritable fairyland, and his dreams that night were filled with fantastic creations called up by the gorgeous spectacle he had beheld and the ravishing strains of music he had listened to. He realized he was getting a tremendous lot of experience in a very sudden manner, and it kept him keyed up to a high pitch of nervous tension until he became more accustomed to the novelty of existence in a great city.

Next morning he inquired for Mrs. Williams again, only to find she had not yet arrived.

"She should have been here several days ago," he said to the registry clerk, in an anxious voice.

"Where was she coming from, sir?" the man inquired.

"Paris, I believe."

"Then I beg you not to worry," returned the clerk, with a reassuring smile; "for most ladies find it a difficult matter to leave Paris, and frequently they linger there many days after they have planned to depart. Be patient, sir; and if the lady delays too long we will make inquiries for you in Paris."

That relieved Will's anxiety to an extent, for he could easily understand how a woman of Mrs. Williams' temperament would be likely to forget she was overdue in London, so long as the charms of Paris amused her.

His instructions were to await her at this hotel, so he decided to give her three days more of grace, and if she did not then arrive to cable his employer for advice how to act.

Will knew, in a general way, what he most cared to see in London, for he was as intelligent as the average American high school boy, and although he had never in his wildest dreams expected to go abroad, had stored up a mass of general information that was now

very useful to draw upon. So, with the aid of a guide-book, he found his way to the Tower, the House of Parliament, and Westminster Abbey, returning toward evening to his hotel with the uncomfortable feeling that should Mrs. Williams have arrived in his absence she would surely be annoyed by his neglect.

But the clerk met his inquiry with a shake of the head, and relieved his fears.

Next day he visited St. Paul's and stood before the tombs of Wellington, Nelson and other great men whose names were familiar in history. And then he mounted the top of an omnibus and rode for miles through the busy thoroughfares, until the immensity of the city overpowered him, and half bewildered he returned to his hotel to rest and collect his thoughts. It was a famous opportunity for a boy like Will Carden to take advantage of and those two days of waiting gave him experience that furnished him with pleasant recollections in all the years to come.

That evening he saw Henry Irving enact King Lear, and learned a lesson he never forgot. When on the following morning he came

down to the office, the clerk informed him that Mrs. Williams had telegraphed she would arrive at ten o'clock, so he need have no further anxiety.

He watched her arrival, with two maids, a mountain of trunks and a dozen servants impressed at the entrance to carry parcels, wraps and miscellaneous articles of all descriptions; but the sight deterred him from approaching her until she was settled in her suite of rooms.

Then he sent up a card and received an answer that Mrs. Williams would see Mr. Carden at one o'clock. The tedious wait made him nervous and disconcerted, so that when the important hour arrived and he was shown to the great lady's apartments he realized that he was not likely to create a very favorable impression.

Nor did he.

Mrs. Williams was reclining upon a couch, but she arose languidly and examined him through a little eyeglass, saying afterward in mincing tones:

"Dear me! Isn't it the vegetable boy?"

"Yes'm," said Will, shamefaced and awkward.

"I have been wondering whom it could be that Mr. Williams cabled would meet me here. The name was unknown to me. What are you, a valet?"

"Hardly that, madam," replied Will, with a hearty, boyish laugh; and surely that laugh must have made a favorable impression upon the lady, for she lowered her eyeglass and murmured:

"I have been from home so long that I am ignorant of present conditions there. But you seem to have grown bigger, and — and — older."

"Naturally, madam," said he; and then he added, with an assumption of such dignity as he could command under the circumstances: "I have the honor to be your husband's confidential agent, abroad upon business matters. For this reason Mr. Williams thought it best that I should meet you here and offer such services as I may be able to render you."

"To be sure," she said, musingly; "and it was very thoughtful of him. If I remember

rightly, you were the boy that carried Annabel home the day she fell into the pond."

He bowed.

"I am glad to see, Mrs. Williams, that you seem to have quite recovered your good health," he observed, to get away from the subject.

"Not quite, sir," she answered, in a more cordial tone; "but I am much better than when I first came from America. Won't you sit down?" noting that he was still standing. "And now, please tell me how you left my children. Were they well? Are they growing? Really, I shall be glad to see them again after this long separation."

Will had his own ideas about the interest the woman took in her children; but it was a subject very interesting to him personally, so he chatted away in his usual bright manner, relating the progress of his friends and playmates and adding such gossip of Bingham as he thought might interest his listener.

And Mrs. Williams began to approve more and more of the pleasant young man before her.

"Are you returning home with me?" she asked, presently.

"I'm afraid not. I have business in Birmingham that may detain me for some time," he replied.

She seemed really disappointed.

"I hate London," said she, wearily, "so I shall take the first steamer home. You will look it up for me, to-morrow, and make arrangements?"

"With great pleasure, madam."

"And you must dine with me this evening. I will meet you in the pink salon at half past seven, and we will go to the main restaurant."

"Thank you, madam," he said, filled with a sense of depression at the very idea of dining with the great lady.

As he rose to go she added, as if by an afterthought:

"You will, of course, appear in full dress, Mr. Carden. Until then, au revoir."

With a bow he was dismissed, and as he stumbled into the hall and the maid closed the door behind him, he remembered that a full-dress suit was something he did not possess.

Really, he ought to go back and tell her so; but the very thought of doing this made him panic-stricken, and instead he went down stairs to get some luncheon and think over his predicament.

CHAPTER XIV

A DINNER IN A DRESS SUIT

On his way Will passed the ladies' restaurant, and noted the handsome toilets of its occupants with something of a shock. Mrs. Williams would doubtless be elaborately gowned that evening, and of course he ought to be in full dress also. What an absurd situation to confront a poor country boy, who had been so proud of the new suit the Bingham tailor had provided him with! Will Carden in a "swallowtail!" The very thought made him smile — and then shudder. Whatever should he do?

The gentlemen's lunch room was rather full, but the courteous usher asked permission of a guest who sat at a small table in one corner, and then seated Will opposite him.

The gentleman was reading a newspaper, and merely glanced at the new arrival. Will could see that he had a big, impressive figure, a close-cropped beard of iron-gray, and an ex-

pression upon his face that was grave yet kindly.

Having made this cursory inspection, he gave his simple order to the waiter and then relapsed into moody abstraction. That dreadful dress suit haunted him like some malignant demon. If he made an excuse to cancel the engagement Mrs. Williams would be offended; if he appeared in his ordinary clothes she would be more offended still. And now that she had begun to treat him with some slight consideration he disliked to do anything to forfeit her respect or good will.

"Something disagreeable, sir?" asked a pleasant voice.

The gentleman had laid down his paper and was engaged in eating his luncheon. As he spoke he glanced at Will with a smile, which the boy returned, feeling rather ashamed of his depression because of so trivial a matter.

"Something quite disagreeable, as you observe, sir," he answered.

"You are an American?"

"Yes, sir. And you?"

A shadow crossed the gentleman's face.

"Formerly I lived in the States. But I am quite English, now, although I have never ceased to love my native land. That is why I ventured to speak to a young man who is so evidently an American. Can I be of any assistance to you?"

Will laughed.

"To be frank with you, my tribulation is caused merely by a lack of a dress suit," said he. "I must dine with a lady — a very 'swell' lady, sir,— to-night, and I possess only the clothes you behold."

"You have lost your baggage?"

"No, sir; I never have owned a dress suit. Indeed, these are the best clothes I have, and had not the lady asked me to dine with her I should have considered them equal to all my requirements."

"What part of America are you from?"

"A little town called Bingham."

The man gave a sudden start, and moved his lips as if about to speak. But no words came, and closing his jaws firmly together, as if to repress the impulse, he leaned back in his chair

and gazed at Will with a look that was more pathetic than curious.

The boy scarcely noticed the interruption. He rambled on, explaining that he was sent abroad on business by a Mr. Williams, and was only staying in London to see the wife of his employer aboard the steamer on her way home. It was cruel, he protested, for her to ask him to dine with her in a fashionable hotel, knowing as she did his station in life, and still more cruel to ask him to appear in a dress suit.

Of all this, and much more, he talked as he ate his luncheon, and the gentleman listened in grave silence, but most attentively.

After the meal was finished he asked:

"Have you money?"

"Yes, sir; plenty."

"Then I believe I shall be able to relieve your embarrassment, if you will walk with me a few doors down the street."

"I shall be very grateful, sir."

The gentleman arose to leave the café, and Will noticed that the waiters and ushers all bowed with profound deference as he passed out. But that was not singular. The most

careless observer could not fail to be impressed by his new friend's dignified bearing.

On the street he nodded to several acquaintances and tipped his hat gracefully to a lady who rode by in a handsome equipage. Will was quite proud of his companion, who was evidently a person of importance.

But now they turned into a fashionable tailor shop, and the proprietor was bowing and scraping most humbly before the gray-haired gentleman, who beckoned him aside.

Will did not hear the conversation that ensued, but the tailor rubbed his hands together complacently and nodded so often that the boy wondered he did not dislocate his neck.

"He will fit you out, all right, and send you the suit in ample time," said the gentleman, returning to Will's side. "And now, if there is no way I can be of further assistance to you, permit me to bid you good day."

"Thank you very much, sir."

With a smile and nod the man was gone, and now the obsequious tailor was inviting him to stand upon a pedestal to be measured. Evidently the fellow had received definite instruc-

tions what to do, for he asked no questions except where to send the clothes, and declared again and again that they would be delivered by six o'clock.

Will passed the rest of the afternoon looking up steamship offices and inquiring about sailings to New York. Mrs. Williams had said he could do this to-morrow, but he preferred to attend to the matter at once. He finally selected a steamer that sailed the next Saturday, which would give the lady ample time to prepare for the trip, and having made the booking he returned to his hotel to await with considerable anxiety the approach of the eventful evening.

At six o'clock a large parcel was delivered to his room, and upon opening it he found not only his new full-dress suit, but the accompanying linen, the proper tie, and everything else that he might need. His chance acquaintance had proved a veritable magician, for even to one of Will's inexperience it was evident such an outfit could only be procured upon short notice by means of considerable influence.

The bill that lay in the bottom of the box

startled him at first; but, had he known it, it was remarkably small for the amount and quality of the goods it covered.

From his observations during the voyage across, and his three days in London, Will Carden was not ignorant of what was required in society in the way of evening dress, and the outfit before him permitted little chance of mistake. He dressed himself very carefully, finding that each article fitted admirably; and when all was accomplished he spent several minutes gazing wonderingly at his own reflection in the long mirror.

He reached the pink salon a little ahead of his engagement, and Mrs. Williams was a little behind hers; so the interval gave him time to regain his composure. He found several gentlemen present who were dressed exactly like himself, and that made him feel almost at ease by the time Mrs. Williams appeared.

She wore a handsome evening dress of black net trimmed with jet, and many brilliant gems sparkled upon her neck and hands. After the first inquiring glance at her escort she smiled approvingly, for Will looked very proper and

handsome in her critical worldly eyes and it was an agreeable experience to have a nice looking young man at her side.

They found a small table awaiting them in the restaurant, where the scene was so brilliant that it filled Will with surprise. Handsomely gowned ladies were present in profusion, and the soft glow of the rose-shaded lights on rich glass and napery made a beautiful picture not easily forgotten by one unaccustomed to such luxuries.

Will noticed, as he seated himself, that at a neighboring table his friend of the afternoon was dining with two male companions, all in prescribed evening dress. The gentleman saw him, and returned his bow with a pleasant smile.

Mrs. Williams maintained a flow of social small talk that Will was scarcely able to understand, and surely could make little reply to. But she did not seem to expect him to converse, except in monosyllables, so he assumed an air of respectful attention to her remarks and let his thoughts and eyes wander amid his novel surroundings. He neither knew nor cared

what food was being served, for he seemed to be in a fairy land, and the merry hum of voices, the soft strains of music, the silent rush of the waiters and the atmosphere of sensuous comfort pervading the magnificent arched room, all tended to bewilder his mind and render him indifferent to the commonplace occupation of eating.

Presently a lady detached herself from a group of diners and came to their table to greet Mrs. Williams, who seemed to be an old acquaintance. After acknowledging Will's polite bow on his introduction the lady ignored him and seated herself in a vacant chair beside Mrs. Williams, beginning a brisk conversation which soon drifted into gossip about those present.

"I suppose you know very few of our London notables," she said, "having passed so much of your time on the Continent. The lady in lavender at the third table to your right is the Duchess of M——; and just behind her is Lady Mary K——, whose divorce suit you have doubtless read of. And do you see those gentlemen at a table by the pillar yonder? They

are well worth attention. The one with the moustache is Prince Von D——, and the plain-faced man is Mr. Ashkam, the great London banker. The third, with the gray hair and beard, is the head of the Atlas Steel works, the famous John Carden, who is reputed one of the wealthiest manufacturers in the United Kingdom. Next to them —— "

Will's fork fell from his hand, clattering against his plate with a sound so startling that it attracted many eyes in his direction.

Trembling violently, and with a white face, he was staring at the man pointed out as John Carden, who returned the look with astonishment.

" Excuse me — I — I am ill — I cannot stay here! " he stammered, in a low voice; and rising hurriedly, regardless of Mrs. Williams' shocked expression, he staggered from the room.

The gentleman hastily followed. He found Will in the dimly lighted ante-room, where the boy stood wringing his hands in an agony of nervous excitement. Seeing the man, he rushed toward him at once, saying:

"John Carden! Are you really John Carden?"

"Yes."

"John Carden of Bingham?"

"Yes," repeated the other, seizing Will's outstretched hands; "once of Bingham."

"Then I am your son!" cried the boy, with a sob. "I am Will Carden."

CHAPTER XV

ANNABEL MAKES A DISCOVERY

When Mary Louise, Annabel and Theodore came home for the summer vacation there was genuine disappointment to all in finding Will Carden absent from Bingham. But I think none missed him so sincerely as Annabel.

She drove over to see Mrs. Carden and Flo and chatted with them for an hour; but it was not until she found time to be alone with her father, "for one of our good talks, daddy," that she learned the truth about Will's mission abroad. In that connection Mr. Williams was obliged to tell her something of his suspicions of Mr. Jordan, and the girl listened earnestly to all he said.

"I never did like the man, dear," she declared; "nor does Will like him, although Mr. Jordan was so good to his dead father. But why don't you force the secretary to tell you the real secret of the process, when you are entitled to it?"

"I mean to, when the proper time comes," was the reply. "But I cannot get rid of the idea that Jordan has some other object than to withhold this knowledge."

"I suppose he thinks that as long as you are ignorant of the real secret of the process you cannot discharge him, or stop the payment of his royalties," she said, musingly.

"The secret is no longer so important as it was formerly," said Mr. Williams, somewhat gloomily. "That Birmingham discovery worries me more than I can explain. The English steel is even a better grade than my own, and if its makers choose to invade this country their competition would seriously affect my business, and might even ruin it."

"I'm sure Will can find out all you wish to know," she returned. "Don't fret, papa. Let us wait until he gets back."

Shortly after this conversation the manufacturer met Doctor Meigs, who asked:

"How is Jordan conducting himself these days?"

"Rather strangely," said Mr. Williams.

"I sometimes think he's getting ready to run away."

"Think so?"

"Yes. I have paid the fellow over a hundred thousand dollars in royalties, and this money, which has been accumulating in the same bank in the city that I myself use, and am also a director of, has suddenly been withdrawn and placed elsewhere."

"Where?"

"I do not know."

"Perhaps he has invested it."

Mr. Williams shook his head, doubtfully.

"Then, during the last few weeks," he continued, "he has been nervously rushing out our orders and getting the goods delivered, when there is no need at all of haste."

"Why?"

"Because as soon as delivery is made he is entitled to his royalty, which he draws promptly, and sends away. It looks to me as though he is trying to get together all the money he can, and then skip out."

"But why should he do that?" inquired the

doctor, who was plainly puzzled by this statement.

"I can't explain it, unless that foreign competition has frightened him. Ever since we had that conversation in my office, at which you were present, Jordan has been a different man. Little things seem to startle him, whereas he used to be the coolest man I ever met. He looks up sharply at every one who enters the office, and gets very irritable over small things that never before annoyed him. I've been watching him closely, you see."

"Could he possibly know we have sent Will to England?"

"I believe that secret is safe. Only Mrs. Carden knows it, and she would never betray it to Jordan, you may be sure."

"What will you do?" asked the doctor.

"Keep an eye on him, and if he attempts to get away hold him until he tells me truly the secret of the process that he sold me. Otherwise he is free to go wherever he pleases."

"Have you heard from Will?"

"No, and it is rather strange that I have not. He has cabled me that Mrs. Williams will

arrive on the *Baltic*, which is due in New York next week; but he said not a word about himself or the business matters on which he is engaged."

"Perhaps there is nothing yet to say," suggested the doctor, and with a handshake the friends parted.

On Sunday afternoon Annabel asked her father to join her in a walk, as the day was delightfully pleasant. He agreed at once, and they strolled along the lanes until they came to the Carden house, where they stopped for a little visit with Will's mother. Mrs. Carden had greatly improved in health since being relieved of so much of the drudgery of housework, and the increased prosperity of the family fortunes had rendered her brighter and more cheerful than of old. Possessed of an excellent education and much native refinement of manner, Mrs. Carden had formerly been one of the most popular women in Bingham, and although her husband's tragic loss had greatly embittered her life during the past dozen years, she was gradually resuming her natural sweetness and charming personality.

So both Annabel and her father passed a pleasant hour at the house, and then started on to resume their walk.

"Let us go by the grove," said the girl. "It's Mr. Jordan's favorite walk, and Will says he never misses an evening unless there's a hurricane to stop him."

"And hurricanes are uncommon," added her father, smiling. "Well, it looks cool and pleasant under the trees, so we'll walk that way. But why do you suppose Mr. Jordan takes such long journeys every evening?"

"For exercise, I imagine. Will says he starts right after supper and tramps a good five miles. And when he gets back he shuts himself in his room and sees no one until morning."

"A strange man," said Mr. Williams, musingly; "and either extremely simple or extremely shrewd. I can't decide which."

There was little other conversation between the two until they reached the grove; but as they passed between the great trees Annabel suddenly said:

"Do you know, papa, I almost suspect Mr. Jordan is crazy?"

"No; why do you think that?"

"Because he does such funny things. I remember Will's telling me once about a queer thing that happened in this very grove."

"What was it?" asked her father, absently.

"Mr. Jordan used to stop at a certain tree, and after looking around to find out if anyone was near he would pass his hand swiftly up and down the bark of the tree, as secretly as if he were committing some crime."

Mr. Williams turned to gaze upon his daughter's face with wonder.

"Then," said Annabel, "he would come back to the path, and resume his walk."

"Which tree was it?" asked her father, earnestly.

"Why, I think I can find it, for twice Will has pointed it out to me when we were walking here. Let me see. Here is the turn in the path — and here is where Mr. Jordan always stopped * * * and there — no, not that one — the big oak just beside it * * * that's the very tree, papa! Will once found the tracks of

Mr. Jordan's feet in the snow, where he'd walked up to it. Isn't it funny?"

Mr. Williams shook his head. There was a puzzled expression upon his face. He stared at the tree for a time as if in a brown study. The incident just related was singular enough to be interesting, but the old oak was just like a dozen other oaks that stood around. Why should Mr. Jordan pay especial attention to that particular tree?

"Where are you going, papa?"

"I 'm going to examine the tree more closely."

He walked straight up to it, and stood minutely examining the bark. Then he passed his hand over it.

"Higher up," said Annabel. "He used to feel about on a level with his head, Will told me, and he's taller than you are, papa."

Mr. Williams touched the bark higher up, and looked mystified. Surely there had been no reason for Mr. Jordan's action. Perhaps the man was mad, after all, and this was one of his crazy notions.

Wait a moment though! Wasn't that a crack

in the rough bark? Mr. Williams took out his pocketknife, and inserted the blade into the crack. Yes, the bark had separated slightly at this point. He followed the line with his knife blade, with growing excitement. It zig-zagged this way and that, keeping first to the right, then upward almost as far as he could reach, then to the left on almost a straight line; then down again to the starting point.

Mr. Williams withdrew the blade and took a long breath.

"That square of bark is separate from the rest," he said.

"How odd!" answered Annabel, her eyes bigger than usual.

Her father looked around, and espied an old root lying near. He dragged this over to the tree, and standing upon it was able to place his face close to the bark.

Then he indulged in a low whistle, for he had discovered a blackened screw-head half hidden by the roughness of the surface. Again he drew out his pocketknife and deliberately snapped one of the blades in half. With this

improvised screwdriver he set to work, and shortly had the screw removed.

Mr. Williams had been a mechanic in his younger days. He knew just what to do under the present circumstances.

Annabel watched him with an interest that became more intense every moment.

He found a second screw, and removed it; a third, and then a fourth. With this the piece of bark came away in his hand, revealing a hollow cavity in the tree behind it.

Mr. Williams took out his handkerchief and wiped the perspiration from his forehead. Then he thrust his hand into the cavity, and when he withdrew it he was clutching a bundle of papers, tied together with a cotton cord.

CHAPTER XVI

MR. WILLIAMS DECIDES TO ACT

"What is it, papa?" whispered Annabel, with extreme eagerness.

The man sat down upon the root and hastily examined the papers. When again he looked upon his daughter his face was white and drawn, and in his eyes was an expression of intense horror.

"My dear," he said, gently, "you have been the means of discovering one of the most wicked plots that any man has ever conceived."

"What is it?" she asked, again.

"I can't tell you all until I have read these papers carefully. They are ample proof, however, that Jordan is one of the greatest scoundrels on earth! Why he should have placed these papers here, instead of destroying them, I cannot understand."

"Perhaps God made him do it," said the girl, in an awed voice.

He leaned over and kissed her.

"Surely the hand of God is visible in all this, my darling," he replied, gravely. "And He doubtless led us to this grove to-day."

He placed the packet carefully in an inner pocket of his coat, which he afterward buttoned carefully. Then, after a moment's thought, he replaced the bark, putting the screws back in place. This task being finished, he proceeded to drag away the root upon which he had stood.

Even a careful observer could not now have known the bark had ever been disturbed, and satisfied that the secret was safe he led Annabel from the grove and across to a lane that would bring them close to their own home.

"You must keep all this mystery to yourself, my darling," he enjoined her, "for a time, at least, until we have planned how best to act."

"Very well, papa," returned the girl, seriously. She knew well that something important had been unearthed, and although curious, as any girl might well be, to unravel the enigma, she was wise enough not to urge her father to confide in her until he chose to do so.

Indeed, he knew only a little of the truth himself, as yet; such as had been hurriedly

gleaned by a brief examination of the papers.

Arrived at the house, he dismissed Annabel with a kiss and dispatched a groom at once to find Doctor Meigs and bring that gentleman back with him. After this he shut himself up in his study with orders that he must not be disturbed.

As it was Sunday the doctor was soon found, and came at once, suspecting that something of unusual importance had occurred. He immediately joined Mr. Williams in the study, and for several hours the two men were closeted in the little room, engaged in deep conference.

Gradually the children, awed by the atmosphere of mystery that pervaded the entire house, retired to bed, and then the servants turned out the lights and followed them, leaving only old Thomas, the butler, to show the doctor out and lock the doors for the night.

Thomas was almost asleep himself when aroused by the bell. He found the doctor and Mr. Williams standing together in the hall, and started at the sight of their stern, white features.

"Then it is fully decided we shall wait until

Wednesday?" asked the doctor, his voice harsh and grating.

"Until Wednesday," returned Mr. Williams, wearily. Then he pressed his friend's hand. "Good night."

"Good night, sir."

Thomas closed the door after the departing guest and locked it. When he turned around his master was staring into space with such a fierce look in his eyes that the old servant shrank back in fear, and then slunk away, leaving the man alone with his thoughts.

Next morning Mr. Williams caught an early train to the city, where he at once sought a detective bureau, staying several hours in earnest consultation with the chief. The result was not immediately evident, although when the manufacturer took the afternoon train for Bingham, a quiet man, plainly dressed and unobtrusive, followed him into the car and seated himself in a corner. At the last moment another man, dressed in a loud checked suit and seeming to be a commercial traveller, to judge by his sample cases, swung himself aboard the

train and noisily took a seat near to Mr. Williams, who did not recognize him in any way.

Both of these men left the train at Bingham, but they did not follow the owner of the steel works, who crossed the tracks and proceeded pensively toward the offices.

Mr. Jordan nodded as usual when his employer entered, and then calmly resumed his work. Mr. Williams entered his private office and looked through the mail before going home to dinner.

Annabel thought that her father kissed her more tenderly than usual that evening; but she did not refer to their secret, nor did he mention it in any way.

Mr. Jordan partook of his usual frugal meal at the hotel, and then started for his walk. The commercial traveller was smoking a big cigar upon the porch as the secretary passed out, but Mr. Jordan did not notice him. He walked down the road as far as the Carden house, turned up the lane, and with measured steps and upright form pursued his way to the grove and through it. At one point he stopped and listened. Everything was still among the

trees, except that a thrush sent a last wailing note after the dying sun. Mr. Jordan seemed satisfied. He left the path and walked calmly to an oak tree, where he passed his hand rapidly over the surface of the bark.

It was all done in an instant, and as he afterward proceeded on his way he had no idea that a plainly dressed stranger had been standing behind a clump of bushes watching his every movement.

The next day Mr. Williams was at the office as usual, but when Mr. Jordan sent a clerk to ask for a conference about some of the business details his superior answered that he was too busily engaged to see his secretary.

Mr. Jordan seemed surprised and uneasy, but he said nothing.

In the afternoon a telegram was laid upon Mr. Williams' desk. He opened it indifferently, but a moment later sprang to his feet with a cry of delight.

It read: "Arrived in New York to-day. Night train to Bingham. Be with you to-morrow. Mrs. Williams, who, with my son, accompanies me, quite well. JOHN CARDEN."

"Excellent!" he exclaimed, rubbing his hands together in an ecstacy of joy. "The hand of fate is surely in this. Or," and here he bowed his head reverently, "perhaps my little girl is right, and it is the hand of God!"

CHAPTER XVII

MR. JORDAN HEARS A STORY

The children were delighted with the news of their mother's speedy return. During her long absence all grievances had been forgotten, and they only remembered that the absent mother, whom they loved, was coming back to them.

All through the house was a flutter of excitement, which even the servants were unable to escape. Mary Louise, like the sweet and dainty house-fairy she was, wandered through her mother's long-deserted rooms, putting everything in order with a discretion and taste that was essentially womanly. And Annabel prepared vases of her mother's favorite flowers, whose fragrance would be sure to prove a tender greeting to the returned traveller. Even little Gladys insisted on helping "to get ready for mamma," although her sisters would gladly have dispensed with her assistance.

Annabel had another source of pleasure, for her father had said, rather briefly but with an

odd look in his eyes: "Will is coming back with your mother, although it is sooner than I had expected him."

She knew from the gravity of his voice that he did not wish to be asked questions, so she only smiled happily at the news, and kissed him.

Over at the Carden cottage Mr. Jordan was having a restless night. He returned from his evening walk as usual, but when he had locked himself in his room he began pacing the floor restlessly, a thing which Mrs. Carden, who could hear his footsteps plainly, did not remember that he had ever done before.

Had anyone been able to peep within the room — which no one ever could — he would have found the secretary's thin face distorted by a wrathful scowl. Indeed, Mr. Jordan was not at all pleased with the way things were going at the mills. Mr. Williams' evident repugnance to him, which had been growing for some time, and his flat refusal that day to confer with his secretary, had awakened in the man vague misgivings for which he could not account. And then that discovery by Mr. Will-

iams of the English steel made by the Carden process was liable to precipitate a crisis.

Mr. Jordan had known of this foreign steel for years, but had hoped Mr. Williams would never discover it. There was an ominous atmosphere surrounding him just now that warned the secretary that he must no longer delay action — such action as he had planned for, long ago.

He thought the matter over carefully, as he paced the floor, and finally made his decision. But even after he went to bed he could not sleep, and tossed restlessly upon his couch until morning came.

Then he arose and dressed with his usual care. His personal possessions were not very great. The old horse-hair trunk contained little of value, and as his eyes roved over the room he saw few things that he really cared for.

In the end he put together a few toilet articles and some linen and underwear, which he made into a package and wrapped with a newspaper. Then, with a last look around, he left

the house in his usual quiet manner and walked up the road to the village.

The man had frequently consulted his watch, and timed his actions to a nicety. He passed the village and reached the railway station just as the early train to the city was due. But he did not go upon the platform, where his presence might excite surprise, preferring to stand behind the square, brick station-house until he heard the train draw in. Even then he calculated his time. It would take so long to unload passengers; so long for the people to enter the cars; so long to load the baggage, and —

"All aboard!" cried the conductor.

Mr. Jordan smiled grimly and walked around the corner of the building. Yes, he had just time to swing aboard as the train drew out.

But then a disagreeable accident happened. A commercial traveller, dressed in a loud checked suit, dashed out of a door of the depot in the direction of the train and ran plump against Mr. Jordan, almost knocking that gentleman down and sending his newspaper bundle flying several yards away. The blundering fellow actually tumbled down, and in strug-

gling to rise caught Mr. Jordan around the knees and held him so fast that he could not move.

"Let go — release me!" shouted the secretary angrily.

"I beg your pardon! I beg your pardon!" the other kept repeating humbly; but by the time he had scrambled up and released his victim the train had pulled away, and now at constantly increasing speed was flying along the tracks in the direction of the city.

"You scoundrel!" roared the exasperated gentleman, "you've made me lose my train!"

"I beg your pardon! I *really* beg your pardon, sir!" answered the traveller, in a meek voice, as he stopped to pick up his sample cases. "It was horribly awkward of me, I know; but I've missed the train, myself. There's another at noon, however, so I'll go back to the hotel and get some breakfast."

Mr. Jordan glared at him without reply. Then he decided to make the best of his misfortune and return to the hotel for breakfast himself.

He walked into the office a little earlier than

usual, deposited his newspaper bundle beside his desk, and went to work as methodically and calmly as ever. The clerks noticed no change in him. He was as positive in his orders as usual, and his manner gave no indication of the fact that he had secretly planned to abandon his post.

At ten o'clock Dr. Meigs came in, and was shown at once into Mr. Williams' private office. A few minutes later a clerk said to the secretary:

"Mr. Williams wishes to see you, sir."

Mr. Jordan glanced at the clock, and then at his bundle, and hesitated. But a moment's thought served for him to decide how to act, and with a sullen frown upon his brow he arose and entered the private office.

"Sit down," said Mr. Williams, pointing to a chair that faced both his own and the one in which the doctor was seated.

Mr. Jordan obeyed.

"I want to tell you a story," said his employer, gravely; "and I wish you to listen to it carefully and without interruption."

The man flushed, but answered nothing.

"About eleven years ago," began Mr. Williams, "two men lived in Bingham who were friends. One was a clerk in a bank, the other was a steel manufacturer who was experimenting to find a better way to make his product. He did, indeed, discover a new and valuable process, but at a time when his fortunes were at a low ebb, and all his resources, save a few hundred dollars, had been exhausted. Being unable to form a company in America to manufacture his steel under the new process, he decided to go to Birmingham, England, where he thought he would have a better opportunity to interest capitalists. He divided his remaining money into two parts, taking half with him and leaving the remainder with his friend to be applied for the use of his wife and three children until he could send for them to join him, or return himself to support them. This man, whom he thought he could trust, promised faithfully to care for his friend's family as if they were his own."

Mr. Jordan was now regarding the narrator with interest, but there was an amused and slightly scornful smile upon his thin lips.

"The inventor — let us call him John Carden — sailed on a White Star steamer to England," resumed Mr. Williams; "but that fact was known only to his friend, who did not advertise it. Instead, he watched the newspapers, and when he saw that a sailing vessel, the *Pleiades,* which left New York about the same time that Carden did, had foundered at sea and gone down with all hands on board, he went to the wife of his friend with well-assumed horror and told her that her husband had been upon this sailing ship, and was now dead. He even showed a letter in her husband's handwriting, carefully forged, stating that he had arranged to sail on the *Pleiades* from motives of economy. And here was a newspaper report of the vessel's loss. A very pretty plot to get rid of John Carden, and it succeeded perfectly. Not only was all Bingham soon aware that Carden was lost at sea, but slanderous stories were circulated that he had run away to escape his creditors, and also that he owed his false friend, Ezra Jordan, ten thousand dollars, which he had borrowed to carry on his experi-

ments — a story which Mr. Jordan himself confirmed with hypocritical sighs."

"Sir, you are insulting!" cried Jordan, springing to his feet with a livid face. "I will hear no more of this lying tale."

"Sit down!" was the stern command. "You must hear it either from me or in a court of justice — perhaps both, before we are done."

Mr. Jordan sat down.

"I am not sure that you realize the full horror of this abominable crime," resumed Mr. Williams. "It transformed a bright and happy woman — happy — despite their impending poverty — in her husband's love, into a broken-hearted, crushed and desolate widow, whose only incentive to drag her weary way through life was the necessity of caring for her fatherless little ones. It was worse than murder, sir, for it prolonged for years the suffering of a human heart."

For a moment he paused, and in the stillness that ensued the doctor could be heard muttering dreadful words, as if to himself. Indeed, he could not trust himself to look at Mr. Jordan, who sat as motionless as if turned to stone.

"Before Carden went away," continued Mr. Williams, suddenly arousing himself and speaking in a sharp, clear tone, "he left in a sealed envelope an exact description of his secret process for making steel, and gave it into his friend's keeping with instructions that it must not be opened unless he met with sudden death. In that case Jordan was to lease or sell the process for the benefit of Carden's family."

"It's a lie," said Jordan, sullenly. "He transferred the right to me. You have seen the paper."

"A mere forgery," declared Mr. Williams. "Long before I came to Bingham, to find the man who could make such wonderful steel, you had opened the sealed envelope and prepared the forged transfer of all rights to yourself. I was very fully deceived, at that time; and although you exacted from me excessive royalties for the use of the process, I made a contract with you in good faith and built this establishment."

"Well, you have made a fortune out of it," retorted Jordan, savagely. "Why are you now

hounding *me,* who gave you the opportunity to make millions? ''

"Because you are an unprincipled scoundrel, sir! Because you have never been entitled to one dollar of the money I have paid you. The money belonged to the family of John Carden, or to John Carden himself.''

"The Carden family has not suffered,'' answered the man, moving uneasily in his seat. "I've boarded with them, and always helped support them.''

The doctor uttered an exclamation that was like a roar, and clenching his fists, half started to rise from his chair. But Mr. Williams restrained him with a look, and motioned him to have patience.

"Let us continue the story,'' he said, "for its appalling details are not half told. With John Carden well out of the way it was necessary he should not return to life to confound his destroyer. This required all of Jordan's ingenuity. For Carden not only wrote to him, when he had arrived in England, but he also wrote to his wife, and Jordan had to watch the mails carefully in order to intercept these let-

ters. If one had reached Mrs. Carden the conspiracy would have been foiled. It was a bold game, and I marvel even now that it succeeded. Carden found friends in Birmingham almost at once, who saw the value of his process and were eager to promote the manufacture of the new steel. The Atlas Steel Company was formed, with Carden a large stockholder, and soon he had sufficient means to send for his wife and family. I am almost sure that Jordan forged letters from Mrs. Carden to her husband about that time, purporting to be answers to those she received, for in no other way could his suspicions have been lulled. But the proofs of this are missing. I know, however, that when Carden forwarded to Jordan the money to enable his family to proceed to England, that Jordan kept the money for his own uses, making various excuses to his friend to account for the delay of the family in starting.

"His object in this was to work upon the husband the same horrible plot that had succeeded in ruining the life of the wife. He was watching the newspapers again."

Jordan listened with his bald head thrust

eagerly forward. His face was white and terrified.

"After several months the opportunity came, for the devil seems to favor his servants at times. The Italian steamer *Victor Chalfante* went down in mid-ocean, in a terrible storm, and Jordan, on receipt of the news, cabled John Carden that his family was on board.

"We may well imagine the agony of the unhappy husband and father when he learned that his wife and children had been so suddenly swept into eternity. Indeed, he wrote one pitiful letter to his old friend that would surely bring tears to the eyes of any honest man. It is here," touching a bundle of papers with a gesture almost tender. "But Jordan — Jordan the fiend, the worse than murderer — only chuckled gleefully at the success of his plot. John Carden would never return to America now, and Mrs. Carden would never be able to tell her husband of the new steel mills that had been started in Bingham. Jordan was triumphant, and began to accumulate the fortune which he had so cleverly arranged to steal from his friend.

"He made two mistakes, however. One was that he forgot that there is an Almighty God watching over us all. The other was that he foolishly entrusted all the incriminating papers in his conspiracy to a hollow in an oak tree."

"It's false!" shouted Jordan, now fully beside himself and rising to shake an impotent and trembling fist in Mr. Williams' face. "It's false, and I can prove it. John Carden is dead, and the money is all mine! John Carden is dead, and —"

"John Carden is alive!" cried a clear voice, as the door burst open to admit the speaker. And then John Carden himself strode into the room, followed by his son Will.

"Hurrah!" shouted the doctor, and springing to his feet he dashed at his old friend and actually embraced him in the exuberance of his joy. Chester D. Williams had never seen John Carden before; but the men were not strangers, for all that, since Will had told his father all the details of the great manufacturer's history, and never wearied singing his praises. So in a moment the two men had clasped hands, the beginning of a friendship long to continue.

Jordan, shrinking back against the wall in abject terror at this dénouement, made a stealthy effort to escape through the open door, but was halted by the burly form of the commercial traveller in the checked suit, who suddenly occupied the doorway.

"Beg pardon, sir, but there's no hurry," said the fellow, with a grin. "Better stay and see the fun. It's going to be hot in a minute."

Then he retreated and closed the door behind him, and Jordan turned to confront the blazing eyes and sternly set features of the man he had so bitterly wronged.

CHAPTER XVIII

WILL'S BEST GIRL

Man's justice is helpless to punish adequately such crimes as Ezra Jordan had been guilty of, and John Carden was so grateful for the final restoration of his beloved wife and children that he was not disposed to prosecute legally the false friend who had been responsible for his years of anguish.

"Let us leave this criminal to a Judgment surer and mightier than ours," he said, and the others acquiesced in his decision.

But in the stormy interview that followed Mr. Williams stipulated that Jordan, as a price of his personal freedom, should refund to John Carden every penny of that vast sum of money of which he had so treacherously defrauded him, and although it was worse than death to the miser to disgorge his ill-gotten gains, he was forced to agree to the proposition.

This being settled, Will was called upon for an explanation, and related the strange story of

his finding his father in London. Mr. Carden followed with a brief outline of his successful career in Birmingham, where his wonderful process had made for him a great fortune and a respected name.

The conference being now ended, Will and his father hurried away to meet the mother and wife, who was as yet ignorant of the glad surprise awaiting her. For father and son had gone straight to the office of the steel works from the station, delaying only long enough to place Mrs. Williams in the carriage that had been sent to whirl her home to the waiting arms of her eager children.

As for Mr. Jordan, he was turned over to the mercies of the commercial traveller and the little detective in plain clothes, who would see he did not escape until he had fulfilled his obligation of refunding his fortune to John Carden.

When Will and his father neared the cottage the boy went on ahead to prepare his mother for the great surprise, and after she had clasped him in her arms and hugged the boy to her heart's content, (with Flo dancing merrily

around and Egbert smiling his pleasure at his brother's return,) he said to her earnestly:

"Mother, Mr. Jordan has been discovered to be a very wicked man."

"Oh, I'm sorry to hear that," she exclaimed; "what has he done?"

"Why, he's robbed father, for one thing, by stealing his secret and selling it; and besides he tried to make us all believe father was dead."

She gave a sudden cry, at this, and clasped her hands above her heart. Then, reading his face with questioning eyes, she managed to say:

"Speak, Will! What do you mean?"

"Why, father wasn't lost at sea at all. He's been in Birmingham all this time."

She swayed for an instant, as if about to fall. Then, drawing herself tense, she said:

"If this is true, why did he never write to us? Why has he been silent so long?"

"Because Mr. Jordan made him believe we were dead, too, and poor father has been mourning for us all these years."

"I—I don't understand," she murmured,

brokenly. "How do you know all this, my son?"

"Father told me. I met him in London, and he came back with me."

A light seemed to break upon her, glorifying her worn face.

"Where is he, Will?"

"Here!" said a new voice, and John Carden stepped within the door and held out his arms.

She fainted then, which was a very natural thing to do under such trying circumstances; but when she regained consciousness she lay happily within her husband's close embrace, and now Will seized the staring Flo by one hand and the confused Egbert by the other, and led them softly from the room.

Great was the excitement in Bingham when the news of John Carden's return flew from lip to lip, together with the dreadful tale of Mr. Jordan's wickedness. When the latter had made restitution and slunk away to some unknown part of the country, there was none to regret his loss, but many willing to declare they had always mistrusted him. Scores of

Will and Annabel sat side by side.

citizens flocked to congratulate Mr. Carden and his wife, and the poor woman was happier than she had ever been since the days when her handsome and talented husband had first led her to the altar.

The two steel magnates talked over their business complications together, and decided to form a partnership, continuing the manufacture of the Carden Process Steel both in Bingham and in Birmingham, and thus controlling the industry on both sides of the ocean.

And Mrs. Williams gave a big dinner to celebrate this important event, and kissed Mrs. Carden very sweetly when she arrived upon the arm of her distinguished husband. And Nora, so happy that she had to pause frequently to wipe away the tears that gathered in her kindly eyes, quite outdid herself in the preparation of the feast.

"Glory be!" she said to the imperturbable Thomas, "The Cardens, God bless 'em! have come to their own again."

Will and Annabel sat side by side at the table, smiling and contented at being together. Even Reginald was on his good behavior, and

Gladys, who had conceived a violent love for her mother since that lady's return, was demure and silent. Flo sat next to Theodore, and Mary Louise was beside Egbert, to whom, being pitiful of his deficiencies, she was very attentive.

Merrier comrades were never seated at one table, and Will was the hero of the hour. Mr. Williams made a neat speech, at dessert, praising the boy so highly that his cheeks grew as red as cherries. Said he:

"We owe to Will the discovery of Mr. Carden —"

"Oh, no," cried Will. "We owe that to Mrs. Williams."

"And the dress suit," added his father, with a smile and a proud glance at his son.

"And we owe to Will the discovery of the papers in the oak tree," continued Mr. Williams.

"Why, that was Annabel!" said Will.

"Anyhow," declared the doctor, who, with his napkin tucked under his chin, was supremely happy, "we owe to Will those famous mushrooms we have just eaten."

"Oh, Doctor!" remonstrated Will. "You're the head of the firm, and I've no doubt you sold them to Nora at a big profit."

They all laughed, then; but they were glad to laugh at the slightest excuse to be merry. And it was an evening they all remembered as long as they lived.

Having made such satisfactory arrangements with Mr. Williams to continue the business at Bingham, Mr. Carden prepared to return to Birmingham, taking with him Mrs. Carden and Flo and Egbert. For the scene of his prosperity was to become his future home. It was arranged that Will should remain in America and attend college, after which he was promised Mr. Jordan's place as secretary at the Bingham mills, in order that he might represent his father's American interests.

"We're going to be partners, some day, my boy," said Mr. Williams, slapping Will's shoulder with characteristic heartiness; "so hurry through college, and get ready for work. And remember that every vacation you are to come straight to my home."

Of course Will was very happy at this pros-

pect; and, because he must enter Princeton in September, he devoted most of the days that remained to him in driving or walking with Annabel.

One afternoon they met the doctor striding down the road with his stout cane in one hand and his medicine case in the other.

He halted before Annabel and Will, scowling dreadfully.

"What's this I hear about your going to college?" he asked the boy.

"It's true," said Will, smiling. "I'm afraid, Doctor, I'll have to give up growing mushrooms."

"You will, eh? Well, sir, what's going to become of those poor grandchildren of mine?" growled the doctor.

"If they are ever in need, sir, I'll agree to support them."

"In that event, we'll dissolve partnership," said the old fellow, less gruffly. Then he added:

"Put out your tongue!"

"What for?" asked Will.

"You've got symptoms."

"Of what?"

"A disease that's mighty common," declared the other, with an amused laugh at his own pleasantry; "but one that seldom proves fatal."

"I don't know what you mean," said the boy, with downcast eyes.

Dr. Meigs turned suddenly to Annabel, chucking her playfully underneath her chin before she could draw back.

"Aren't you in this young lady's company pretty often these days?"

Will straightened perceptibly, plainly showing his confusion. He glanced shyly at Annabel who stood with downcast eyes, her face suffused with blushes, then he blurted out:

"Of course I am. Annabel's an old chum."

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