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*** START OF THE PROJECT GUTENBERG EBOOK CHILDREN OF THE DEAR COTSWOLDS ***

CHILDREN OF THE
DEAR COTSWOLDS

BY

L. ALLEN HARKER

AUTHOR OF

"MISS ESPERANCE AND MR. WYCHERLY," ETC.

LONDON

JOHN MURRAY, ALBEMARLE STREET, W.

1918

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OTHER WORKS BY

L. ALLEN HARKER

JAN AND HER JOB

THE FFOLLIOTS OF REDMARLEY

A ROMANCE OF THE NURSERY

MASTER AND MAID

MISS ESPERANCE AND MR. WYCHERLY

MR. WYCHERLY'S WARDS

JOHN MURRAY, LONDON

TO
THE COUNTESS BATHURST

Dear to you, too, the small "uplandish" town,
The steep stone roofs, the graceful gabled street,
The great beech woods, the rolling purple down,
The golden fields that shimmer in the heat
With molten glow of buttercups ablaze—
Dear to you, too.

Dear to you, too, the folk, slow-spoken, kind,
Wise with a mother-wisdom not of books;
The sturdy "Cotsal-bred" of cautious mind,
That judges men by "doin's, not by looks,"
With sapient nods and trenchant homely phrase—
Dear to you, too.

And since you love them well—people and land—
I bring you stories of them—just a few
Old folk and young—in hope you'll let them stand
With others that I wot of dear to you.
How happy should these prove in future days—
Dear to you, too.

FOREWORD

"I'm homesick for my hills again—
My hills again!
To see above the Severn plain,
Unscabbarded against the sky,
The blue high blade of Cotswold lie."
F. W. HARVEY.

I was in the train, and at Swindon a mud-stained "Tommy," hung round with equipment like the White Knight, and accompanied by an old lame man and a young lad, tumbled into my carriage just as the train was leaving the station. The old man and the lad had evidently been to meet the soldier at the junction, so as to lose no possible moment of the precious "leaf." They were very cheery, and in turn refreshed themselves from a bottle, what time the rather uncheerful smell of the very-small-ale permitted at present was wafted about the carriage. Mingled with the rattle of the train came scraps of conversation: much mutual exchange of news in the slow, rumbling Gloucestershire voices, a little quickened and sharpened, just then, by excitement and the shamefaced emotion that refused to be entirely hidden. Every now and then one would hear such sentences as, "Ah, so 'a be, at Armenteers that was, poor Ernie! and us could never find no trace on 'im."

But as we neared Kemble they fell silent in the last cold gleam of the fading sunlight of a February afternoon. The soldier reached for his equipment, slung it, let down the window, and leaned out. Inhaling a deep breath of the keen Cotswold air, he looked back into the carriage, and, with a world of love in his voice, said slowly, "There 'a be, dear old Kemble—'a *do* look clean."

And faster than they had tumbled in they tumbled out, to be surrounded by a group of welcoming friends, but not before the soldier had hauled out my heavy suit-case for me, as I, too, alighted there. I was going on to Cirencester, but the only porter left in these strenuous times, a very elderly porter, was absorbed into the welcoming group, and I wouldn't have disturbed him for the world. I wondered rather forlornly who would carry my suit-case up the stairs and across

the bridge for me, when out of the gathering twilight there appeared another khaki-clad figure, who turned out to be a soldier of my very own, just then training a battery at Codford, who was coming to join me for a week-end with friends at Cirencester.

As we reached the long platform that runs alongside the shuttle line, he too sniffed delightedly at the good Cotswold air, and said, "Dear old place—how clean it feels!"

This is just an epitome of what is happening all over England every time a leave train starts inland from the coast. It's not only home and family our men are so glad to see—it's the land that bred them.

"God gives all men all earth to love,
But, since man's heart is small,
Ordains for each one spot shall prove
Belovèd over all."

And for some of us that spot happens to be in the Cotswolds.

Nowhere has the spirit of place been more insistent and persistent. Surely no county has more melodious names than Gloucestershire. They chime in the ears of those that love them like a peal of old mellow bells. No ugly place could ever be called Colne St. Aldwyns or Fretherne or Minsterworth, and there is something in the very sound of Bibury, Pinbury and Sapperton, Rendcombe and Miserden, that carries with it a sense of wide grass glades and great old trees gathered together in sun-flecked woods that, in May, are carpeted with bluebells and, in October, are glorious in the vivid reds and yellows of the turning beeches. What pleasaunces to dream in when you are amongst them! What faerielands to dream of when you are far away!

Listen to the names. Say them over softly—Maisemore, Hartpury, Lassington: these are in the vale. Don't you hear how homesick we are who whisper them lovingly where there are none to recognise them? And the King of the Cotswolds is Cissister (the railway may call it Cirencester if it likes, but that is how the natives know it)—Cissister of the wide market-place and narrow irregular streets, with the wise-looking old gabled houses that have smiled down upon so many generations of sturdy Cotswold folk. Grey are the Cotswold houses, stone-roofed and steeply gabled, welcoming, friendly, venerable; and surely there is something very delightful in the thought that just now young America looks down (from a considerable height too) on those same stone roofs and gables. For young America is flying (literally, not figuratively) all over the Cotswolds. One wonders what the Church and the Abbey and the House think when the light-hearted airmen almost shave their roofs.

The mention of young America brings me to what so entirely occupies all our thoughts just now, that there might seem something almost impertinently irrelevant in daring to write of anything else. But just inasmuch, as the old, easy-going, comfortable England has been in the melting-pot for nearly four years, and because the new, nobler, more strenuous England will change most things, it has seemed to me that it might not be amiss to collect these little sketches of some dear Cotswold folk, old and young, of what will soon seem an almost forgotten time.

Much has been written, and admirably written, of the Cotswolds themselves; but not much to my knowledge—except in the ever-delightful "Cotswold Village," by Arthur Gibbs—about the people.

Most of the people in this book belong to those old easy times of over twenty years ago. Only one of the stories deals with anything approaching "present day," and it is nearly four years old. One story—I may as well confess it here—has nothing to do with the Cotswolds; but Teddy in "A Soldier's Button" was Paul's cousin—and a dear, and the Cotswold country is the most hospitable country in the world, so we let him in. Mrs. Birkin, Mrs. Cushion, Williams, and Dorcas Heaven are of the soil, and so are the children.

Mrs. Birkin, Mrs. Cushion, and hundreds like them, have had their hand in the making of our men. They are but humble, simple folk. In their lives they asked but little of fate, and what fate sent they accepted with the patient philosophy of the poor. They belonged to their period, and their period has passed.

Cotswold names are so much prettier than any one can imagine that it has always been a self-denying ordinance to refrain from using them, but generally I have resisted temptation. Otherwise somebody might go seeking Mrs. Birkin in Arlington Row and be angry with me because she is no longer there. I live in terror of accurate people with large-scale maps, who seek to pin me down to this place or that. But they may take it from me that all the places are, as the Cotswold folk would say, "thar or thar about."

CONTENTS

CHAPTER

- I. [Mrs. Birkin's Bonnet](#)
- II. [A Philosopher of the Cotswolds](#)
- III. [Especially Those](#)
- IV. [At Blue House Lock](#)
- V. [Keturah](#)
- VI. [Mrs. Cushion's Children](#)
- VII. [Sanctuary](#)
- VIII. [A Cotswold Barmaid](#)
- IX. [Fuzzy Wuzzy's Watch](#)
- X. [The Dark Lady](#)
- XI. [Her First Appearance](#)
- XII. ["Our Fathers Have Told Us"](#)
- XIII. [A Giotto of the Cotswolds](#)
- XIV. [The Day After](#)
- XV. [A Coup d'État](#)
- XVI. [The Staceys of Elcombe House](#)
- XVII. [A Soldier's Button](#)
- XVIII. [Paul and the Playwright](#)
- XIX. [A Misfit](#)
- XX. [The Contagion of Honour](#)

CHILDREN OF THE DEAR COTSWOLDS

I

MRS. BIRKIN'S BONNET

The very first time that the baby went out the monthly nurse carried her to see Mrs. Birkin; and as she marched with slow and stately tread up the narrow garden path to the cottage, a swarm of bees settled all over both infant and nurse. Fortunately the nurse was a Cotswold woman, and knew full well that if a swarm of bees settles upon an infant during the first month of its existence, and departs without stinging, it is a very lucky omen. And people born in other parts of the world will agree as to the good fortune of the latter contingency.

Mrs. Birkin in her porch, and the nurse in her cloak of bees, stood like two statues in the hot sunshine of that September afternoon, the nurse hardly daring to breathe, lest by some inadvertent movement she should change so stupendous a piece of luck into disaster.

Presently the brown cloud lifted itself from the white bundle in the anxious nurse's arms and passed with its own triumphant music to some other place.

The baby still slept sweetly, oblivious alike of good or evil fortune. Mrs. Birkin, her ruddy cheeks pale under the weather-stains of years, came forth from her cottage as the nurse tottered to meet her, holding out the baby and exclaiming hysterically: "Take her, take her, and let me sit down somewhere, for my legs won't bear me no longer!"

"The Lard be praised!" cried Mrs. Birkin, seizing the baby. "That there lamb 'll be lucky an' good-lookin', an' she'll 'ave a good 'usban' for sure. Bless 'er! Them bees knows what they be about, an' 'tis plain they knew as you was Cotsal barn an' bred, an' wasn't none of them faintin', scritch'n' women as don't rekkerni'ze the Lard's voice, not when 'E 'ollers in their yer."

Then, seated on the little wooden seats on each side of the tiny porch, the women proceeded to sing the size and the exceeding beauty of the new baby, who seemingly preferred the soothing

lullaby of the bees, for she woke up and "hollered" with surprising vigour.

A little later the baby paid her visits to Mrs. Birkin in a fine, white perambulator, and, as that worthy woman put it, "You didn't know where you was" before that remarkable infant toddled up the cobbled path to the cottage quite unassisted.

Time slips by noiseless and fleet-footed in a quiet Cotswold village, even as in noisier and more strenuous places, and "Squoire's little darter" grew into "our young lady." To be sure, there were other young ladies in the neighbourhood, for the village is large and cheery, with many nice places around; but the other young ladies were in no way remarkable. No swarm of bees had settled on any of them in infancy. For it really seemed as if some of the sturdy sweetness of the bees had passed into the baby they thus honoured. As was said of jolly Dick Steele, "she was liked in all company because she liked it."

And now the village was upside down with excitement, for our young lady was going to be married, and Mrs. Birkin was to have a new bonnet for the great occasion.

Mrs. Birkin felt that she had an unusually important part to play in the festivities attendant on this great event, for our young lady's father, who had an excellent memory for dates, had decreed that the wedding-day should be on the anniversary of the day on which, nineteen years before, the swarm of bees had distinguished his daughter. Such a thing had never happened since, though plenty of babies had come both to Mrs. Birkin's village and the other villages round about, and you may be sure that Mrs. Birkin knew all about every baby that arrived within a ten-mile radius. She is an authority upon babies. She is one of those women who is everybody's mother because she has no living children of her own. In the churchyard, under the green mound that now marks the humble resting-place of Mr. Birkin, there were once two tiny graves, where, side by side, lay Mrs. Birkin's twin sons. And for the sake of those two babies, dead these forty years, Mrs. Birkin's heart had kept young and kind, and full of love for all other babies. So that it came about that the very crossest infant ever born into a world it seemed to find singularly unattractive was good with Mrs. Birkin, and in consequence she was in great request with busy mothers.

Nor was it only the babies who loved Mrs. Birkin. Little girls brought their dolls for her to dress, and little boys, even bad little boys, whose grubby hands were against every other man, woman, or child in the village, refrained from pillaging Mrs. Birkin's garden, and had been known to weed it for her, all for love.

For months past, in fact, ever since our young lady's engagement was announced, Mrs. Birkin had pondered the great question of the Bonnet. She had not had a new bonnet for six years. Four years before that, again, she had indulged in a widow's bonnet, in which, on Sundays, she did honour to the memory of the departed Birkin; until the crape grew green with age, and our young lady herself suggested that the time had come when Mrs. Birkin's somewhat mitigated woe might find expression in head-gear less indicative of intense gloom.

In our village, except of "a Sunday," the question of costume is extremely simple. The men wear corduroy; the women, lilac or pink print, with sunbonnet to match. There are those who wish that the wearing of these uniforms extended to Sundays,—the villagers, in the week, are so much more in harmony with the beautiful, grey, old houses,—but those who, like "Squoire," love these people well, would not for the world debar them from the wearing of that finery dear to the heart of woman in cottage and castle alike.

Squoire drives a coach, and often on Saturday afternoons he will pull up in the very middle of our one street and shout, "Any one for the town?" And sure enough, three or four eager damsels and matrons bustle out of their cottages, are packed in as inside passengers, and away goes the coach to distant "Ziren," where country folk can see the shops and make their purchases, Squoire bringing them and their bundles home in the evening again, and never a penny to pay for carriage hire.

Three times lately had Mrs. Birkin made this journey to "Ziren," rightly so called from its many fascinations. She had flattened her nose against the plate-glass windows of that stately shop in the market-place where there were displayed hats of the most bewitching beauty, and fabrics so delicate that Mrs. Birkin fairly caught her breath at the mere idea of any one daring to wear them. It was undoubtedly an entrancing vision, that shop; but then nothing was priced, and there were no bonnets in that window, and for a bonnet Mrs. Birkin had come to look.

At the corner of Black Jack Street, not quite in the market-place, but facing it, was another shop. Here there were hats and bonnets in plenty, marked in plain figures for all to see, and there was one, manifestly a bonnet "suitable for an elderly person," that positively fascinated Mrs. Birkin. Of white straw was it, trimmed with scarlet geraniums and elegant excrescences of

watered ribbon of a delicate mauve shade—a truly bridal bonnet, fitted to grace even the marriage of our young lady herself. But its cost was twelve and sixpence, a truly prohibitive price for Mrs. Birkin—"A'most a month's keep," she sadly whispered to herself. She went away from that window. She walked right round the market-place, she looked into every milliner's window, she gazed upon other bonnets; but there was nothing to compare with the creation compounded of scarlet geraniums and mauve ribbon in the shop in Black Jack Street. All the same, Mrs. Birkin went home with only three yards of scouring flannel to show for her day's shopping.

But she dreamed of the bonnet, and her waking hours were haunted by its beauties. "I can't afford no more nor ten shillin's," she said to a neighbour with whom she discussed the question. "Mebbe if I waits, her'll get a bit faded, and they'll put un down in proice."

Thrice more did Mrs. Birkin avail herself of Squoire's kindness and drive in the coach to Ziren, and on the third occasion she screwed up her courage to enter the shop, and in trembling tones demanded of the young lady behind the counter whether there was any chance of the bonnet—for it still graced the window—"bein' a bit cheaper for cash. I couldn't pay for un to-day," she added; "but next week I be comin' in again, an' if so be as her were two shillin' less, I med manage un."

The young lady was good-natured and approachable. She even lifted the bonnet from its stand in the window, and proposed that Mrs. Birkin should try it on.

This Mrs. Birkin did, though her knees knocked together during the process, and she was fain to confess that her handsome, sunburnt face was assuredly "uncommon set off" when framed in the scarlet geraniums and pale mauve ribbons.

"Of course I can't promise that it won't be gone before next week," said the young lady. "It's a very attractive article; but if it is still here, we might be able to meet you. You wouldn't like me to put it aside for you, to make sure?" she suggested.

But here Mrs. Birkin was firm. "No," she said; "if so be as you has a chanst to sell it, far be it from me to stand in your way. But if it be still yer, when I do come back, then, if I've got the money, I'll 'ave she. The ribbons is gettin' a bit faded," she added shrewdly; and with this parting shot Mrs. Birkin hurried from the shop to buy yellow soap.

She was not well off, even as such a term is modestly read in a Cotswold village community. For one thing, she was far too fond of giving. For another, although she "went out days" when she got the chance, and was as sturdy and healthy at sixty as many women are at forty, yet she could no longer work in the fields in summer, a long day's haymaking being more than she could stand. Squoire let her live in her cottage rent free, for the departed Birkin had been one of his labourers; moreover, his daughter was very fond of Mrs. Birkin, and that went a long way with Squoire. He also had obtained for her of late, from certain mysterious powers called "Guardians," an allowance of three and sixpence a week, so that with what she could earn Mrs. Birkin got on fairly comfortably. The bonnet money was money saved up for years against illness, but "Law bless you!" she said, "'tis only once in a way. That there bonnet 'll sarve me till I be put away in churchyard along of Birkin, an' if I don't go foine to see that there blessed lamb married to her good gentleman, when be I to go foine? You just tell me that."

The day of the wedding was drawing near. Only six days now till the great day itself. But Mrs. Birkin was still bonnetless. In vain did she count her savings over and over again; by no arithmetical process could they be persuaded to amount to more than eleven shillings and fivepence three farthings. Squoire sent round word that he would drive the coach into Ziren that afternoon and that anybody might go that liked. Mrs. Birkin went, carrying with her her whole worldly wealth.

Once in the market-place, she hurried to the shrine of the Bonnet. It was still there, and on it was a card bearing the reassuring legend, "Much reduced; only nine and elevenpence halfpenny."

Mrs. Birkin paused outside that she might savour the sweets of purchase by anticipation. For fully five minutes did she stand gloating over the bonnet—her bonnet, as she already felt it to be, and she was on the point of entering the shop when she caught sight of a neighbour on the other side of the road, one Mrs. Comley, who held by the hand a small and exceedingly dirty boy about ten years old. His free hand was thrust into one of his tearful eyes, and sobs shook his small frame. It was plain that Ernie Comley was in grievous trouble. Mrs. Comley, too, looked flushed and miserable. She was an unhealthy-looking, undersized little woman whose somewhat dreary days were passed in futile attempts to overtake her multifarious duties. Mrs. Comley was no manager; and it was not surprising, for one weakly baby was hardly set upon its bandy legs before another appeared to claim her whole attention. Comley was a farm-labourer with twelve shillings a week, so that the charitable made excuses for Mrs. Comley. Besides, she "did come

from Birmiggum," and the Cotswold folk felt that that explained any amount of slackness and general incompetence.

It was not in the nature of Mrs. Birkin to pass by any one in trouble. She forgot her bonnet for the moment, and hurried across the road to inquire the cause of Ernie's tears. "We come by the carrier this morning," Mrs. Comley explained,—it was like her to pay for the carrier when "Squire" would have brought her for nothing,—"I 'ad so much to do, an' Ernie 'e done nothing but w'ine and cry somethin' dreadful all the time because I told 'im plain 'e can't go to no weddin's, nor no treats after, neither. Do you know what that boy've bin an' done? 'E've gone an' tore the seat clean out of 'is Sunday trowsies, an' there ain't a bit of the same stuff nowhere. We've bin an' tried all over the place; an' go in corderoys 'e shall not, shamin' me before all the neighbours, as is nasty-tongued enough as it is. 'E be the most rubsome child I ever see. There ain't no keepin' 'im in clothes, that there ain't."

Mrs. Comley gave the "rubsome" Ernie a spiteful shake, which caused that unhappy urchin to burst into renewed and louder sobs.

"There, there," said Mrs. Birkin, soothingly, "don't 'ee take on so! There's sure to be summat as can be done, and I'm sartin of this, as our young lady 'ad far sooner 'e come in 'is corderoys than stopped away. She said most partic'lar as she 'oped *heverboddy* 'u'd come. There, Ernie, then, don't 'ee take on so." And Mrs. Birkin patted the boy's shoulder with a kind, comforting hand.

"I tell you as there ain't nothing as can be done," Mrs. Comley retorted fretfully. "Them cloes is tore about shockin'. They wasn't new when 'e got 'em, an' 'e be that rubsome they've all fell to pieces. 'Tain't only the trowsies. And do you mean to tell me that 'e could go to hany weddin' like this 'ere?"

Mrs. Birkin fell back a step that she might the better regard the lachrymose Ernie, and sorrowfully she came to the conclusion that his mother was right; for, indeed, his appearance was the reverse of festal. Although his corduroy trousers had so far withstood his rubsome tendencies, his jacket had given way at the elbows, and he looked altogether as disreputable a small boy as could be met in a summer's day.

"I tried to get 'im a suit at the Golden Anchor, if they'd only 'ave let me take it on credit; but they be that 'ard—'cash with horder,' that's their style. An' it's no manner of use me a-goin' to any of the big tailors: they wouldn't so much as look at me. There, Ernie, do 'old that row. You'll never be missed in all that crowd. No one 'll know but what you was there."

This reflection seemed in no way to comfort Ernie, who burst forth into a loud howl, and was dragged down the market-place by his weary and incensed parent.

Mrs. Birkin stood where she was, immersed in thought. Across the road the bonnet shop beckoned beguilingly, and her work-worn hand tightened upon her purse. Slowly she crossed the road, and once more stood staring at the bonnet. How beautiful it was! How brilliant its geraniums, how crisp and dainty its bosses and twists of ribbon! "It be like the bit o' carpet beddin' under Squire's drawin'-room windows, that 'a be," said Mrs. Birkin to herself.

She stared so hard at the bonnet that her eyes grew misty, and the card with "much reduced" danced before her; but still she did not go into the shop. She stood like a statue for nearly five minutes, still staring at the bonnet; but she no longer saw it. What she saw was her own potato-patch last autumn; and in it, hard at work, was Ernie Comley, digging her potatoes for her because her lumbago was so bad.

"What do it matter for a hold image like me what I do wear?" she muttered. Then she turned from the window that held her heart's desire, and hurried down the market-place after Mrs. Comley and the rubsome Ernie.

She found them staring gloomily into the window of the ready-made clothes shop.

"You come in along o' me," she cried excitedly. "There's a suit in that window, 'This style eight and eleven three,' as 'll just do for Ernie, allowin' for growth. I'll buy it for un, an' you can pay me back a bit at a time, as is most convenient. Come on in."

The suit was bought, and presently Ernie, dirty, and as cheerful as he had been tearful a few minutes before, emerged from the doorway, hugging a large brown-paper parcel.

"I must do my shoppin' sharpish," Mrs. Birkin said as she came out of the shop, "or else Squire 'll be back before I be ready. Good afternoon to you. No; don't you never name it. 'Tis no more than you'd 'a' done for me."

To herself she murmured as she hurried up the market-place, "I don't suppose as she'll ever pay I, she's but a slack piece; but I couldn't abear as that boy shouldn't 'ave none of the fun. We're none on us young but once."

Mrs. Birkin's Sunday bonnet was black, and although a black dress for best is not only permissible, but suitable, for an elderly cottager even at a wedding, to wear a black bonnet upon so festive an occasion is to commit a solecism of the most glaring kind.

Mrs. Birkin was a woman of much resource. Once the bonnet of her dreams had become an impossibility, owing to the expense of Ernie Comley's wedding garment, she set herself forthwith to manufacture another as like the one in the shop window at Ziren as her means would allow.

To that end she purchased a small, a very small, pot of cream enamel; red flowers, of a nondescript kind it is true, but still red, and plenty of them for the money; and three yards of pale lavender ribbon. She then picked all the trimming off her old bonnet, washed it, dried it in the oven with the door well ajar, lest the precious thing should "scorch." When dry, she enamelled it cream, inside and out, and when the enamel in its turn had dried, she trimmed the rejuvenated bonnet with the new flowers and ribbon. And a very imposing confection it looked, and quite unlike anything to be seen in any window of the Ziren shops. Mrs. Birkin herself felt certain misgivings about it; but she had done her best, and by her best she must abide.

It happened that the night before the wedding our young lady's maid was packing her going-away trunk, talking the while about the villagers and their excitement over the morrow. This maid was "own niece" to Mrs. Birkin, but she was not proud of the relationship. She was a smart young woman who had travelled, and she looked down upon her simple old aunt with, at the best, a tolerant sort of amusement.

"You'll see some wonderful costumes to-morrow, Miss," she said as she folded dainty garments. "The whole village has got something new. My old aunt now—not that you'll have time to notice such as she—but you never saw such a bonnet as she's gone and trimmed for herself. A silly old woman, that's what I call her. She'd saved up quite a nice bit of money, and was going to have a new bonnet out of a shop in the town they sets such store by, though 't isn't much more than a village to them as have travelled, is it, Miss? Well, what does she go and do but lend the money as she'd saved for her bonnet to a woman in the village to buy a suit for one of them nasty, mischievous little boys, so that he could come to your weddin' and the treats an' that. 'Twasn't aunt told me, else I'd have given her a piece of my mind. A fool and his money's soon parted."

Our young lady turned almost fiercely upon her maid. "I think it was perfectly lovely of Mrs. Birkin," she cried, with a ring in her voice that warned that sharp girl she had in some way offended. "I wish there were more people like her in the world. It would be a kinder, better place. There's nothing here one half so beautiful as that bonnet of hers."

The maid went on folding lace petticoats in silence, for there was a sound of tears in her young lady's voice. She wondered at the curious ways of the gentry; one never knew where to have them.

The church was packed for the wedding. Only the seats on one side of the central aisle had been reserved for the guests; by special request of the bride, the other side was kept for the villagers, first come, first served, with no distinctions whatsoever. Mrs. Comley was there, with Ernie, all new suit and hair-oil. Mrs. Birkin came a full hour and a half before the service, and secured a corner seat next the aisle from which wild horses could not have dragged her.

The priest had said his say, the organist was thundering the wedding-march, the wedding was over, and the bride, her veil thrown back from her radiant face, was coming down the aisle on her proud young husband's arm. Mrs. Birkin, tearful and exultant, stood in her place devouring the pretty spectacle with eager, kind old eyes. As the bride reached Mrs. Birkin's pew she stopped, slipped her hand from the bridegroom's arm, and turning, flung both her own, bouquet and all, round Mrs. Birkin's neck. She kissed the old woman before the whole church and whispered loudly in her ear: "Mrs. Birkin, dear, that's the most beautiful bonnet I ever saw."

In another moment she was gone. The last pair of bridesmaids had passed, and after them, visitors and villagers alike thronged into the sunshine. Mrs. Birkin, her bonnet much awry, owing to the heavy bridal bouquet, strayed out with the rest in a sort of solemn rapture. She had been honoured above all other women on that great day.

"Wot did 'er say to you?" asked Mrs. Comley, enviously, when they got outside.

Mrs. Birkin laughed. "Bless 'er sweet face!" she exclaimed triumphantly, "if her didn't go and think 't was a bran' new bonnet as I'd got on! I must 'a' made un over-smartish, that I must."

A PHILOSOPHER OF THE COTSWOLDS

It is possible that to the unobservant his great qualities were hidden: all that they saw in him was a tall, shabby-looking old man, who walked with that indescribable garden-roller sort of motion usually associated with the gait of those who minister to us in the coffee-rooms of hotels—an old man, who, professedly a jobbing gardener, looked like a broken-down something else. Frequently they did not even take the trouble to crystallise their doubt into a question, a sure and certain measure towards its solution.

But there were those who saw beneath the surface, who were moreover privileged to have speech of him—and he was always very ready to converse, leaning on his spade the while, but with the air of one who only just tolerated such interruption.—these would find that here was one whose ideas were the result of reflection and observation, not mere echoes of the local press; or, as is sometimes the case in other and higher walks of life, those of the reviews or quarterlies.

To tell the truth, my philosopher could read but indifferently well, and when he indulged in such exercises, as "of a Sunday," liked the print to be large and black. As the halfpenny papers in no way pander to such luxurious tastes in their readers, he was fain to take his news second-hand, by word of mouth, thereby materially increasing its romance and variety.

One day, *à propos* of some flowers he was to take to the church for Easter decorations, I asked him whether he was a churchman himself. "No," he said slowly, stopping short and watching me somewhat anxiously to see the effect of this pronouncement, "I goes to chapel, they 'ollers more, and 'tis more loively loike—I bin to church, I 'ave, don't you think as 'ow I 'aven't sampled 'em both careful—but Oi be gettin' a holdish man, an' them curicks is that weakly an' finnicken in their ways, it don't seem to do me no sort o' good nohow. Not as I've nothin' to say agen 'em, pore young gen'lemen; they means well, but they be that afraid of the sound of their own voices, and they looks that thin and mournful—I can't away with 'em." Here he shook his head sadly, as though overcome with melancholy at the mere recollection.

"You are quite right to go where you feel you will get most good," I said meekly. "Is Mr. Blank a very powerful preacher?"

Williams (that was his name) smiled a slow, crafty smile, shutting one eye with something the expression of a gourmand who holds a glass of good port between himself and the light. "Well, I don't know as I should go so fur as to say as 'e's powervul, but 'e do 'oller an' thump the cushion as do do yer 'art good to see, an' 'e do tell us plainish where them'll go as bain't ther to yer 'im, but I bain't sure as 'e's powervul. The powervullest preacher I ever 'ear was Fairford way at a hopen-air meetin'—an' 'e was took up next day for stealin' bacon!" Here he returned to his digging with the air of one who had said the last word and could brook no further interruptions.

Regarding politics, Williams was even more guarded in his statements: I could never discover to which side he belonged, even at a time when party feeling ran particularly high, as our town had been in the throes of two Parliamentary elections within the year. He seemed to regard the whole of the proceedings with a tolerant sort of amusement—tolerance was ever a feature of his mental attitude towards life generally. But as to stepping down, into the arena and taking sides!—such a course was far from one of his philosophical and analytic temperament. He listened to both sides with a gracious impartiality that I have no doubt sent each canvasser away equally certain that his was the side which would receive the listener's "vote and interest."

"The yallers, they comes," he would say, wagging his large head to and fro, and smiling his slow, broad smile, "an' they says, 'If our candidate do get in, you'll see what us'll do for 'ee. 'E'll do sech and sech, an' you'll 'ave this 'ere an' that.' But the blues, they went and sent my missus a good blanket *on the chanst*."

"And for whom did you vote after all?" I asked with considerable curiosity.

"Well, I bain't so to speak exactly sure," he said, scratching his head. "I bain't much of a schollard, so I ups an' puts two crasses, one for each on 'em, an' I goes an' marches along of two percessions that same day, so I done my duty."

But his universal tolerance stopped short of his legitimate profession. In matters horticultural he was a veritable despot, sternly discouraging private enterprise of any sort. Above all did he object to what he was pleased to call "new fanglements" in the way of plants, and in the autumn had a perfect passion for grubbing up one's most cherished possessions and trundling them off in the wheelbarrow to the rubbish heap. One autumn a friend presented me with some rare iris bulbs, which, knowing the philosopher's objection to "fancy bulbs," I secreted in a distant greenhouse which he as a rule scornfully ignored. On a day when some one else was benefitting

by his ministrations I hastened to fetch them, intent on planting them "unbeknownst," as he would have said.

Not a trace of them remained, and I had to wait until his next visit, when I timidly asked if he happened to have moved them. "Lor' bless my 'eart! was them things bulbses? I thought as 'ow they was hold onions and I eat 'em along of a bit of bread for my lunch. I remember thinkin' as they didn't semm very tasty loike!"

On the subject of the then war there was no uncertain sound about his views, and had he been a younger man his waiter-like walk would doubtless have changed to the martial strut induced among the rural population by perpetual practice of the goose-step. As it was, he thirsted for news with the utmost eagerness, and hurried up one Sunday morning to inform us that Lord Roberts had taken "Blue Fountain" about two days after that officer had arrived in South Africa.

It was rumoured that a gentleman of pro-Boer proclivities proposed to address like-minded citizens in the "Corn Hall." I fear he must have had but a small following if, as I believe, the majority of the natives were of like mind with my usually philosophic gardener. "I'd warm 'im," Williams exclaimed, digging his spade into the ground as though the offending propagandist were underneath—"I'd warm 'im. I'd knock 'is ugly 'ead off before 'e'd come 'is nasty Boerses over me. Let 'im go to St. 'Elena and *mind* 'em; then 'e'd know. 'Tain't no use for 'im to come and gibber to the loikes of us 'as 'ave 'eard their goin's-on from them as 'ave fought agen 'em, and minded 'em day by day and hour by hour, till they was that sick and weary! ... Boers! I'd Boers 'im," and with grunts and snorts expressive of intense indignation the philosopher rested on his spade, glaring at me as though I were a champion of the King's enemies—which Heaven forbid.

"It's like this 'ere," he said, after a moment's pause: "there's toimes w'en the meek-'eartidest ain't safe if you worrits 'em, and these 'ere be them sart of toimes."

When he became gardener to friends of mine, he was old and they were young. His progress was slow and dignified, so were his manners. He could wither a budding enthusiasm with a slow smile charged full of scorn as effectually as a May frost withers the peach blossom. His own omniscience was emphasised in such fashion as to make his employers acutely conscious of their youth and ignorance. It is true that his master was not so excessively young, but then neither was he particularly well instructed in matters horticultural, and Williams had but a poor opinion of a man who, while he could tell you the long Latin name of every grass in the field and every weed in the hedgerow, had but small appreciation of carpet bedding, and had been heard to remark that a cabbage moth was really much prettier than a cabbage. Moreover, the said master extended his liking for moths and butterflies to other "hinseksexes" of various and inferior sorts, and collected the same in small glass tubes, of which he carried numbers in his pockets. When a man is addicted to such "curus fads" as these, it is not to be expected that an elderly and experienced gardener should so much as consult him about things connected with his own craft.

Towards his mistress Williams showed an indulgent toleration; not that he ever did what she asked him—oh dear, no! But still he permitted her to "come anigh him," and shout her behests into his ear. He was decidedly deaf at the best of times, and when suggestions were made of which he disapproved his infirmity increased ten-fold.

Sometimes the "young missus"—she was really young, being still in her teens—attempted a little gardening on her own account, as when she planted crocus bulbs on a grassy bank facing the drawing-room windows. She had hoped that Williams would not notice them, as that bank was never mown till well on in the spring. But Williams not only noted but disapproved their very earliest appearance. "A grass bank be a grass bank," he asserted, "and bulbs a-growing be out of place," so he mowed the grass assiduously and the crocuses came to nought.

"He really is a most aggravating man," exclaimed the young missus; "he won't let one have a thing one wants."

However, the absolute monarchy of Williams was not destined to continue. Even as he had ruled his master and mistress there arose another who ruled not only them but Williams also. Where the young missus had meekly suggested that certain things might be done in such a way as they never were done, this personage had but to point a diminutive forefinger in the direction of anything he coveted when Williams would hasten to procure it for him with the greatest alacrity. He was not of imposing stature, this new autocrat. When he first began to tyrannise over Williams, he stood just about as high as that worthy's knee, and his walk, in its uncertainty, strongly resembled that of Williams himself on the night of the last election, when the Tory candidate was returned by a majority of two votes.

But to return to the autocrat. He certainly interfered with Williams's work, causing him to

waste whole hours in hovering about near the drive gate that he might catch a glimpse of his equipage as he set out for an airing in a fine white coach propelled by a white-clad attendant. Williams would not have been averse from occasional parleyings with the attendant. She was young and pretty; but she had other and more lively fish to fry, and would have scorned to do more than exchange the most formal of passing courtesies with "that there deaf old gardener"—who, however, was never so deaf but that the clear little voice calling "*Wee-ams*" attracted immediate attention.

As time went on and the autocrat's steps grew steadier, the white coach was abandoned, and whenever he could the late occupant thereof escaped from the white-clad attendant and assisted Williams in his horticultural operations—a course which he found infinitely preferable to going walks with his nurse upon the high road. He upset all Williams's most cherished theories, and, not infrequently, his practice. He insisted upon helping to wheel manure from the stable-yard to the potato patch, and fell into the manure-heap. He hung on to a big water-can that Williams was carrying with such force that he spilled most of the contents over himself, and he persisted in digging in such close proximity to Williams that the senior gardener was fain to rest upon his spade and admire his assistant. He possessed a garden of his own, a chaotic piece of ground in which might be found specimens of everything growing in the larger garden all mixed up anyhow. That Williams, who but a few short years ago had objected to innocent crocuses upon a green bank, should, with his own hands, have planted a beetroot cheek by jowl with a Michaelmas daisy, and allowed a potato to flower in close proximity to a columbine, seems incredible. But so it was.

"Bless 'is 'eart, 'e do like a bit of everythink," Williams would say, wagging his head and beaming at the autocrat, who chattered incessantly in the high, clear little voice that Williams found so easy to hear. The young missus profited by the subjugation of Williams to do sundry bits of gardening on her own account which he never discovered. As for the "professor gen'leman," as the cottage children called him, he bowed beneath the yoke of the autocrat with equal meekness. It is said that a fellow-feeling makes us wondrous kind, and it is certain that Williams and his master understood each other perfectly as regards this one subject.

In exchange for his instruction in gardening the autocrat occasionally essayed to teach Williams grammar.

"You mustn't say 'he were,' Williams; you must say 'he was.' It's 'he was; we were.' Do you understand?"

"Well, no, Mazter Billy, I can't say as I do; but I'll say 'we was' if it do please you."

"No, no, Williams. 'We were.'"

"What do us wear, Mazter Billy?" Williams would interpose, resting on his spade and smiling broadly at his own wit; while the autocrat broke into delighted laughter, and the grammar lesson came to an end for that day.

When the "professor gen'leman" engaged his gardener, that worthy explained that he "didn't want no reg'lar 'alf-'oliday," but that during the cricket season he would like an occasional afternoon off, as he was an enthusiastic admirer of the national game. On the autocrat's fourth birthday the old gardener presented him with a tiny cricket-bat, and during the summer months gardening was varied by batting practice. Williams was too old and too stiff to bat or run himself; but he bowled to the little boy with a tennis-ball, and gave him gentle catches, and these proceedings delighted Billy as much as they interfered with Williams's proper business.

When the Fifth of November came, he made what Billy called a "most 'normous Guy Fawkes"—a real Guy Fawkes, stuffed with straw, and clad in a cast-off coat and trousers of Williams's own, with a mask for a face, the whole crowned by a venerable top-hat. It says much for the depth and sincerity of Williams's affection for the autocrat that he should have thus sacrificed a hat still bearing the smallest outward semblance of such head-gear. For Williams himself never wore any other shape. Winter or summer, his large bald head was protected from rain or sun by a wide-brimmed and generally seedy tall felt hat. On Sundays it was a silk one, carefully brushed, but decidedly smudgy as regarded outline. All the children in the adjacent cottages were bidden to see the guy, as Williams proudly cast it upon a large bonfire that he had been saving for the occasion for many weeks. The professor gentleman let off rockets, and even Billy himself was permitted to fire off several squibs. It was altogether a great occasion, and was regarded in the autocrat's family as a sort of apotheosis of Williams, for shortly afterwards he fell ill, and grew worse so rapidly that he was removed to the cottage hospital in the town. His cottage was very small, and his wife very old, and the doctor is a man who has the very greatest objection to letting people die for lack of proper care and attention.

His gentle old wife crept down the hill every day to see him, but her accounts were far from cheering.

"'E be that deaf 'e can't yer what they do say, and 'e be that weak and low nothin' don't seem to rouse 'im."

So Billy's father went down to the hospital to see Williams, and found him lying, gaunt and ashen-coloured and still, in the straight white bed. The ward was clean and sunny and comfortable, but Williams did not seem to mend.

"He seems to have lost heart," said the cheery matron; "he's not so very old, or so very ill, but that he might get round, but his deafness is against him, and if he isn't roused he'll slip away simply because he doesn't care to stop."

Billy's father leant over the bed and laid his hand on the gnarled work-worn hand lying outside the white coverlet. Williams opened his eyes and stared languidly at his master. Presently there lighted in the tired old eyes a gleam of recognition.

"It be very quiet here," he muttered, "very lonesome and fur aff; them doctors and nusses they mumbles so, I can't yer 'em, and I'd like to yer summut.... I can allays yer Mazter Billy, 'e do talk so sensible—"

"He shall come and see you," said the visitor, loudly, right into the old man's ear; but Williams shook his head wearily, and closed his eyes again.

"What's the best time?" asked Billy's father of the matron. "I'll bring the little lad—it might rouse him; he has always been so fond of him."

"The morning's the best time," she answered. "He sleeps so much. We can but try it, sir."

Next day the autocrat—his rosy face very solemn, and his little soul oppressed by the solemnity of the occasion—pattered across the parqueted floor to the bedside of old Williams. The occupants of the three other beds in the men's ward—it is quite a little hospital—raised themselves and watched the pretty child with interest as he put out his little gloved hand timidly to touch this strange new Williams, lying so white and still in the clean, straight bed.

"Speak to him, sonnie!" said a voice at his ear.

"Williams!" whispered the child very low and timidly. Then, remembering that he never used to speak to Williams like that, he said loudly, "Williams, dear! the celery is very good."

Williams opened his eyes, and when he saw Billy a smile broke over his face like the November sunshine itself.

"Didn't I say as 'e talked sensible?" he asked of the world in general. Then, "So you be come at last, Mazter Billy!"

"Tell him you want him to 'get well!" whispered Billy's father.

"I wish you'd make haste and come home, Williams," Billy shouted; "I've got to go walks wiv Nanna nearly every day now, and it's so dull."

"Do ee miss Oi, Mazter Billy?"

"'Course I do. We all do. Please get well, Williams! Aren't you tired of stopping here?—though it's very pretty," he added hastily, fearing lest he had said something rude; "but Mrs. Williams is very lonely, and so am I."

"I be main tired, Mazter Billy. I don't seem to 'ave no sart o' stren'th in me, I be a hold man ___"

"There's such a lot of chrysanthemums in the drive, Williams, and in your garden too," Billy continued, remembering his instructions to "interest" the sick man, "and Trimmie has scratched up such a lot of bulbs in the bed in the middle of the front lawn, and thrown the earth all over the place."

Trimmie was the autocrat's fox-terrier, and his misdeeds were the only subject upon which Williams ventured to disagree with that gentleman—on occasion expressing a strong desire to thrash "that there varmint of a dog" for sundry scratchings which his master only regarded with admiring amusement.

For the first time for a whole long week Williams raised his head quite two inches from the pillow, exclaiming:

"That there dog'll 'ave to be beat, scrattin' and scramblin' and spilin' my garden—" and Williams dropped his head on the pillow again with an emphatic bump.

Here the nurse interfered, and the autocrat, having succeeded in rousing the patient rather more effectually than the authorities either anticipated or desired, was led away.

Half an hour later the nurse approached his bedside.

"Here's your beef-tea, Mr. Williams!" she almost shouted; "you must try and take it."

"Who be you a-hollerin' at?" growled the patient. "I'll take the messy stuff without so much

noise about it."

"I don't believe the old image is half so deaf as he makes out," whispered the nurse to the matron, feeling rather nettled at this unexpected retort.

The old image kept muttering to himself all that day, and those who listened heard remarks to the effect that there was no rest to be expected this side of the grave, that he simply couldn't lie there and think of his garden going to "wrack and rewing, all along of a slippety varmint of a tarrier. Just let me catch him a-scrattin' in my borders, and I'll give 'im what for."

The ultimate result of these mutterings being that, in another week, Williams was discharged as convalescent, and by Christmas was well enough to dictate to his mistress as to what greenery she might cut for the decoration of the house.

"Ladies, they did cum," said he to his wife, "and did read in that there 'orspital, but they did spake so secret-like and quiet, I couldn't never yer what it were all about; and the doctor 'e cum, and passun 'e cum, but I didn't seem to take no sort of delight in none of 'em. Then Mazter Billy 'e cum, and did talk the most sensiblest of the lot.... And, in spite of that there influinzy, yer Oi be!"

III

"ESPECIALLY THOSE"

They did not know that Billy had so many friends until he lay a-dying. Then they knew.

It takes some of us more than four years to make one friend. Billy had only lived four years altogether, but every one he knew was his friend, and he knew every one in his little world.

"I want some ice for Master Billy's head!" said the parlour-maid. "He's that feverish, doctor says it's to be kept on all the time."

Mr. Stallon, the fishmonger, looked grave.

"I haven't a bit of ice on the premises. It's ordered, but it won't be here till to-morrow. Dear! dear! and to think as the little gentleman's so bad!"

Mr. Stallon was a stout, seafaring-looking man, with a short brown beard. He shook his head, and looked really sorry.

"Whatever shall we do?" cried the parlour-maid. "Whatever shall we do?"

"Do!" echoed Mr. Stallon. "Do! why, get some, to be sure. I'll go to Farenam for it myself. Tell your lady she shall have it in a' hour or so."

Mr. Stallon owned an inn as well as a fish-shop. He crossed the road to his inn yard; there he harnessed his horse to his spring cart, and he drove to Fareham for the ice. Billy's town is a very little one, but Fareham, six miles off, is big, and Mr. Stallon got the ice. I'm afraid that he drove furiously, and beat his horse. But he quite forgot to charge for the ice, and no one ever thanked him for getting it. He didn't mind, he was one of Billy's friends.

The Earl was another. The Earl is young, fresh-coloured, and chubby, and somewhat lacking in dignity. He is an M.F.H. for all that, and Billy was wont to go with him to the kennels, and knew all the old hounds by name.

The Earl and Billy held long conversations on the subject of poachers. Billy's sympathies were apt to go with the poachers; but that was the fault of the Radical curate.

As for the curate, he and Billy were dear friends. He would spend long sunny afternoons bowling slows, and twisters, and overhands to Billy, and he could sing such charming songs.

One of Billy's peculiarities was that he exacted songs from all his friends. Then he learnt them himself, and sang them in his turn. The curate's favourite song was "For it's My Delight, On a Shiny Night." It was this song that caused Billy's predilection for poachers.

The Earl could sing too. Of his répertoire the favourite was—

*"She went and got married, that 'ard-'earted girl,
And it was not to a Wicount, and it was not to a Hearl."*

Here Billy always interrupted, exclaiming delightedly, "That's *you*, you know!" and demanded the verse again.

There was one friend from whom Billy exacted no songs. This was old Williams, the gardener. He was a very good gardener, but deaf. Billy was the only person whom he could hear well. He

really had no notion of singing, that gardener. So he told Billy tales in broad Gloucestershire instead, and Billy trotted after him, assisting in all his horticultural operations, and they loved each other.

But the fever had got a hold upon Billy, it was such a hot July.

At last a Sunday came, when those who loved him best feared that he could not last through the day. At morning service the curate gave it out that "the prayers of the congregation, are desired for William Wargrave Ainger"; then he paused, and with a ring of supplication in his voice, which startled the listening people, said, "little Billy Ainger, whom we love—who lies grievously sick."

"William Wargrave Ainger" had fallen on inattentive ears, but the familiar name struck home, and the congregation prayed.

In the pause which followed the words "especially those for whom our prayers are desired," the deaf gardener's voice was heard to say "Amen"; but no one smiled at him that Sunday.

The Earl had no surplice to take off, so he reached Billy's house first; but the curate caught him at the drive gate, for the curate ran.

There was no sound in the house but the voice of Billy's mother, singing to him, over and over again, the same old nursery rhyme. It ran:

"O do not come, but go away—
 Away with your eyes that peep;
O do not come to Billy's house,
 For Billy is going to sleep."

It has a quaint lilting tune, and Billy loved it, but he could not sleep.

His father came down to the Earl and the curate, and silently they followed him up into the darkened nursery. Billy smiled when he saw them. He could not speak, he was so tired.

His mother knelt at the head of his bed, singing tirelessly. His father knelt down at the other side, devouring the thin, flushed, little face with loving, sorrowful eyes. The curate knelt down at the foot of the bed, and the Earl, who made no attempt to wipe the tears from off his ruddy cheeks, knelt by a chair. By the darkened window sat the pretty hospital nurse, in her white cap and apron.

"O do not come to Billy's house," the mother's voice went on. Then she sang more softly, and suddenly there was silence:

Billy had gone to sleep.

The drive gate clicked, a quick step sounded on the gravel outside. It was the doctor. He came hastily into the room, and, stepping softly over to Billy's mother, lifted her up, and set her in a chair.

He took her place, laying his hand on the child's pulse, and on his forehead. Then he said in a whisper, "He'll do, he's gone to sleep."

The three men rose from their knees, as Billy's mother fell on hers, with the first tears she had shed, in all that weary week.

They followed the doctor out of the room, and crept downstairs into the hall. The doctor pushed Billy's father into the dining-room, saying, "You must give me some lunch. I want to see the little chap again, in twenty minutes or so—what the deuce was the matter with you all? Did you think he was dead?"

"I did," said the Earl, in an awestruck whisper.

"Go away!" said the doctor testily; "go away, you long-faced lunatics, and leave us in peace!"

The two young men turned and went into the drive, where they found Williams, waiting for news. The Earl went up to the old man, and put his mouth to his ear, saying loudly, and with pauses between each word—"He—is better—he's asleep—the doctor—says—he'll do."

Williams blew his nose noisily, in a large red handkerchief; then said huskily, "The Lard be praised! your lardship, the Lard *be* praised!"

Then the Earl and Williams shook hands; and the curate and Williams shook hands. The two young men shut the gate softly, and went down the road.

The curate went to lunch with the Earl. They had champagne, and the Earl grew frivolous, as his manner is; he has not much dignity, and he and the curate are old friends, for they were at Eton and "the House" together.

"I say, old chap!" said the Earl confidentially, "you were jolly careful that the Almighty should

make no mistake, this morning."

The curate leaned back in his chair, and with more than a reminiscence of their college tutor in his manner, remarked, "In matters of importance, it is well to be strictly accurate."

IV AT BLUE HOUSE LOCK

The life of Dorcas Heaven, who keeps the Blue House Lock, is somewhat lonely and monotonous. Her post is more or less of a sinecure, for but few barges pass along that bit of the canal. Indeed, the canal itself, though winding through the prettiest bit of country in the neighbourhood, is only navigable during a wet season. After a drought it grows so shallow that cows are wont to stand derisively in the very middle of it, cooling their legs.

Elijah, husband of Dorcas, is a labourer on a farm some two miles off.

As the path alongside the canal leads to nowhere in particular, there is not much traffic; but when a barge does come, Dorcas "bustles her about sharpish," and there is a great to-do. She looks upon herself as more or less the hostess of the occupants of the barge. "They change the weather and pass the time of day," their destination and their business are exhaustively discussed, and when at length stillness settles down over the Blue House, when there is no sound but the cry of a peewit or the rustle of a water-rat in the rushes, Dorcas fetches a chair into the doorway and sinks upon it, exclaiming, "Law! what a paladum it have been, to be sure!"

On Sunday mornings Dorcas does not go to church, for "Elijah do like a bit o' meat of a Sunday," and Dorcas is a good wife first and a good churchwoman second. She therefore defers her attendance until evening, when Elijah accompanies her. While the bit o' meat is in course of preparation he strolls round for "a bit of a talk" with one "Ethni Harman, licensed to sell beer and tobacco," whose house of cheer lies on the outskirts of the town, and where the very latest electioneering news is to be had. Elijah has been heard to express an opinion to the effect that "there ain't no 'arm in going to church twice, for them as it suits, but once, along of my missus, be enough for I."

Had it been in Elijah's nature to be astonished at anything, he would have felt some surprise at the amiability with which Dorcas had lately speeded him on his way to "The Cat and Compasses" on Sunday mornings. She had at one time been rather given to inconvenient suggestions as that "them peas want sticking, and the salery be ready for banking," when Elijah would fain have been sunning himself upon the bench outside Ethni Harman's hospitable door, a mug of cider and like-minded friend beside him. He usually fell in with his wife's suggestions, for he was a man who loved a quiet life, and Dorcas—when annoyed on Sunday—was apt to carry on her domestic duties with unnecessary vigour far into the night on Monday.

The fact was that, of late, Sunday mornings had become for Dorcas the corner-stone of her week, and in this wise: it did not as a rule take long to get Elijah's dinner under way; this done, Dorcas would take her chair into the doorway, and read her Bible. She generally chose the Book of Revelation, carefully forming the words with her lips and following each with gnarled and work-worn forefinger. With Dorcas, as with many people whose lives are somewhat hard and monotonous, the prospect of a suite of rooms in one of the many mansions was extremely pleasant. Moreover, the Cotswold peasant dearly loves any form of spectacle, and although Dorcas could not pronounce, far less understand, many of the words she met with, there was a sense of pageant all around her as she read; while her appreciation of the city which has "no need of the sun, neither of the moon to shine in it," was as purely sensuous as that of any disciple of Wagner himself.

"And now, a little wind and shy" scattered the apple-blossoms over the path, and the Sunday silence was broken by a clear child-voice. To Dorcas such sound was as the skirl of the pipes to a Highlander in a far country; her heart beat quick and her cheeks grew redder, and she rushed out to see who "was a-comin"; for Dorcas had "put away four" in the "cemetery" on the Fletborough road, and one had lived to be four years old. Besides, to let any one pass the Blue House without "givin' of 'em good-day!" was a thing she had never done—"not once in twenty year." So she laid her Bible on the chair, covering it with a clean white handkerchief, and crossed the few feet of garden which lay between her cottage and the towing-path.

A sturdy little boy, in reefer coat and muffin cap, with round, fresh little face, and cheeks pink as the petals of the apple-blossom nearest the calyx, danced with excitement on the bank as

he watched his father gathering some yellow "flags" which grew at the water's edge. The attendant father—parents and such were always a secondary consideration with Dorcas—was not very successful, as the ground was soft and slippery.

"Is it wet down there, dad? Can I come? Oh, get that big one just over there! Won't muth be pleased? What dirty boots you'll have! Shall I hold your stick for you to cling on to?"

Then he noticed Dorcas. "Good-morning!" said he with gay courtesy. "Isn't it a fine May morning?"

"It be that surely, little master!" answered Dorcas in high delight. Then "the little gentleman's dada"—he never achieved a separate identity in the mind of Dorcas—scrambled up from the swamp in which he had been standing. He, too, proved most approachable, and she learned that the youthful potentate in the reefer jacket had never walked so far before, that the "scroped out old quarry" just beyond the Blue House was his destination, and that he would probably come again next Sunday.

He came every Sunday morning all through that summer, and always with his dad. Sometimes they went tapping for fossils in the disused quarry, sometimes they came with butterfly-nets and caught "Tortoiseshells" and "Wall-Browns," and upon one great occasion a "Fritillary." But whatever they sought or whatever they caught, Dorcas was always, as who should say, "in at the death," and shared the excitement and the triumph with them.

The little gentleman was very friendly—a child is quick to recognise an admirer as any pretty woman—and it is possible that the attendant father understood and indulged the childless woman's craving for a child's affection. Sometimes Dorcas felt a qualm of conscience, and wondered whether her adored young gentleman ought not rather to be in church these sunny Sunday mornings; though had he been in church he certainly could have been nowhere in the neighbourhood of the Blue House. But she was comforted when she heard that he went with his mother to a children's service in the afternoon. Henceforth she gave herself up to the study of natural history and the worship of her dear "little gentleman" with a light heart.

Even in winter he sometimes came "of a fine Sunday," and Dorcas would spend many hours of the following week vainly trying to determine whether she admired him most in a sailor suit, or in the breeches and gaiters of which he was so proud. One never-to-be-forgotten day the rain came down in torrents just as her sultan and his grand vizier reached the Blue House. They took shelter with Dorcas, and the sultan was graciously pleased to be lifted up that he might reach a certain mug from the top shelf of the dresser—a mug which had belonged to "im as wer gone." Dorcas made gingerbread cats and ducks, and her artistic efforts went so far as to attempt a king "with a crown upon 'is 'ead." After regaling himself with these delicacies her sultan would hold up a rosy face, ornamented by sundry sticky streaks, to be kissed in farewell; and when she had watched him round the bend of the canal her eyes would grow dim, and she would go back to the Book of Revelation, murmuring another favourite quotation to herself, "The Lard gave and the Lard 'ave took away. Blessed be the name of the Lard."

Of course the many charms of the "little gentleman" were duly reported to Elijah, and the residence of Ethni Harman took on a reflected glory from the fact that it was but a stone's throw from that of her sultan.

It was a wet summer, and there came four wet Sundays one after the other. Vainly did Dorcas try to fix her mind on the streets of jasper, while all the time she was straining her ears for the sound of the little voice that never chimed into the stillness. She grew to hate the patter of the rain, on the path outside; even the fact that the canal, for once, was full, and three barges passed in one week, did not console her. The gingerbread animals grew stale and crumbly between two plates, and the gorgeous mug, "A Present from Fairford," was put back on the top shelf of the dresser again.

The weather changed, and there came a lovely Sunday. Elijah set off to the "Cat and Compasses" as usual; Dorcas hustled about with a pleasant sense of expectation and went and stood on the towing-path, her eyes fixed on the distant bridge. Some boys went by to bathe beyond the second bend, with laughter and shouting. Then the only sound was the hum of bees settled on the purple scabious growing a-top the crumbling Cotswold wall.

On Monday Dorcas could bear it no longer. "I be that tewey and narvous, I don't know what I be about," she remarked, as she locked the door of the Blue House and hid the key under the mat. Should a barge come—well, it must manage somehow! Barges were never in a hurry. She had come to a momentous decision. She was going to inquire after her "little gentleman." Whether he was ill or gone for a holiday, or was merely forgetful, she would find out and end this dreadful suspense. She was a very simple-minded woman, but in her heart of hearts she felt a

little sore with the grand vizier, for she had a notion that he was by no means ignorant of what these Sunday visits meant to her.

"I believe 'e'd 'ave come afore this if 'e'd been let. 'A be that meek-'earted 'a wouldn't 'urt a vloi, let alone a 'oman," she said to herself with a half sob. She was convinced that her sultan could not forget so utterly the humblest of his slaves. So she put on her best clothes and tight elastic-sided boots, with lots of little white buttons adorning the fronts.

At the Blue House, Dorcas was never either self-conscious or shy; but when she reached her sultan's palace, having timidly pushed open the drive gate, she became aware that the new boots creaked horribly, and that perspiration was dropping from her eyebrows into her eyes. Having mopped her face, and generally pulled herself together, she managed to reach the front door, though her knees trembled, and her heart fluttered like a caged bird.

Never was such a noisy bell! It clanged and echoed in most alarming fashion; she wished that the stone steps would open and swallow her up. What would they think of her for daring to make such a clatter? Besides—and at the dreadful thought she nearly cried out—of course she ought to have gone to the back door.

For full five minutes she stood on the steps, listening for any sound inside the house, but all was perfectly quiet. She turned and went into the drive, meaning to go round to the back door, when it occurred to her to look back at the house; she had been far too nervous to do so as she came in. The lower windows were shuttered, and all the blinds were down.

They had gone then! and it was empty. "And they never didn't bring 'im for to say good-bye to me."

Life's little tragedies generally happen to the lonely. What in a full and happy life ranks but as an episode, becomes an epoch in the sad-coloured days of lean monotony. Dorcas wiped her eyes more than once, on her way home, and went heavily for many days. Elijah saw that she was fretting, and tried to distract her by news from the town, and occasional suggestions that she should go over "and see sister-law" in an adjacent village; but beyond her necessary journeys to the town to buy such stores as she could afford, Dorcas never left home. She scrubbed the kitchen table till she grudged to sully its whiteness by so much as a yellow bowl, and she made herself a warm new winter dress, but, for all her industry, the time hung heavy on her hands, and she never forgot her "little gentleman." The wet season was followed by an Indian summer of exceptional beauty. "The spirit of October, mild and boon," was in the air; the tottering Cotswold wall, which laid its wayward length on the far side of the footway, was covered by sprays of crimson blackberry, mingled with the fluffy greyness of "old man's beard." Dorcas no longer stared hungrily down the towing-path on Sunday morning, but she did not forget; and, in token of her remembrance, the twenty-first chapter of the Book of Revelation was marked in her Bible by a little woollen glove with a large hole in the thumb. Her sultan had dropped it during his last visit.

The birds sang as though it were spring, and Dorcas began to read aloud to herself to keep her thoughts from wandering. "And God shall wipe away all tears from their eyes," whispered the kind Gloucestershire voice, when suddenly, above the triumphant voices of the birds, above the soft wash of the water among the yellowing reeds, rang that clear sound for which the soul of Dorcas had hungered so cruelly.

"I wonder if the lady at the Blue House will know me again, Dad!"

* * * * *

It seemed as though the grand vizier had not been so greatly to blame after all. He had been suddenly called away to the north of Scotland; and although he had left directions that before the sultan and the household followed him that potentate was to be taken to say good-bye "to the lady at the Blue House," although the sultan himself had repeatedly suggested the propriety of such a pilgrimage, his nurse had always considered the road too muddy.

"I thought, sir, as you was all gone fur good and all," said Dorcas, with a catch in her voice; "and I were that taken to I never made no inquiries."

On his way home the grand vizier was rather silent. Once or twice he made a queer little face, and seemed to swallow something in his throat. At last he quoted, but not to the sultan, "By heavens, it is pitiful, the bootless love of women for children in Vanity Fair." The rosy-faced child, who had been wondering why the usual Sunday service of gingerbread had been omitted, was rather surprised, but nevertheless asked curiously, "Are you thinking of the Blue House lady, Dad?"

His father stooped down hastily and kissed him.

V
KETURAH

On Mondays the doctor stayed at the surgery to see patients from two till seven. He did not live at the surgery, oh, dear no! but had a fine house, with a carriage drive and a conservatory, right at the other end of the town. The waiting-room was very full on Mondays, people came from all parts to see the doctor; moreover, it was market-day, and the pursuit of health could be combined with that of business.

It was getting late, and only two people were left in the waiting-room—a shabby, nervous-looking woman and a handsome lad of sixteen, who had come to consult the doctor about a sprained thumb. "One of the gentry," thought the woman to herself, as she noted the trim riding-breeches and the leather on his shoulders.

From time to time she looked anxiously at the clock, clasping and unclasping her thin, work-worn hands.

A door banged outside, the consulting-room bell pealed, signifying that an interview was over. It was the lad's turn next. He stretched his long legs preparatory to obeying the expected summons, when the woman rose hastily and came and stood in front of him, saying eagerly, "Sir, will you let me go in out of my turn? I won't keep the doctor a minute; it's to ask him to come to my child who is very ill. I've been away far too long as it is, but I'd no one as I could send."

"Of course, of course!" exclaimed the lad, who had risen to his feet when she first spoke, looking very shy and embarrassed, "and I am awfully sorry, you know, but the doctor will be sure to do it good. He's 'A one,' you know——"

At this moment the door opened and a voice cried, "Next, please!" and the little woman, casting a grateful look behind her, hurried into the presence of the doctor. He looked up surprised as she entered—poor people generally came on Thursdays.

"Well?" he demanded. With rich and poor alike the doctor's manners were always somewhat abrupt. He was saving of speech, though it is true that he expanded under the smiles of youth and beauty.

"Please, sir, could you come and see my little girl? She's bin ill now these three weeks; she don't get no better, and she does nothing but cough, and seems that hot and restless, and is that weak——"

"What have you done?" interrupted the doctor.

"I've kep' 'er in bed and giv' 'er 'Dinver's Lung Tonic.' My 'usband, 'e don't 'old with doctors —'e's a Plymouth Brother, and don't seek advice——"

The doctor growled out something about "nonsense," prefaced by a somewhat forcible adjective, then "All right! I'll come. Where do you live?"

After giving her address, the woman held out to him a little screw of paper. He waved it aside impatiently, saying, "Haven't seen her yet," held the door open, and the woman hurried out.

"I'll come directly," he shouted after her. His heart was much softer than his manners.

"These Plimmy brothers are the biggest lunatics going," he said to himself, "with their faith-healing and their providence-mongering. I'd like to dose the lot of them."

The doctor was not accurate in his diagnosis of the sect in question, but in his own mind lumped together every sort of religious enthusiasm.

* * * * *

Matthew Moulder, baker, was an upright, God-fearing man, foreman to the baker—our little town boasts but one. He turned out excellent bread; moreover, he was a good husband, a conscientious if not affectionate father, and a diligent worshipper in that upper room, wherein assembled a handful of people of similar religious views. He indulged himself in few pleasures, and rather wondered at the frivolity of his neighbours, who took life with that cheerful philosophy still to be found in portions of England which yet remain to justify the description "merrie."

His wife was meek-hearted, and easily ruled; she never questioned his authority, but having early laid to heart the maxim that "what a man doesn't know can't vex him," she was careful to vex Matthew as seldom as possible.

How, then, did these two sedate and respectable persons come by such a child as their

daughter Keturah?

Keturah of the elf-locks and great wine-coloured eyes. Keturah, who danced and sang and giggled the live-long day; who yawned in sermons and played "handy-pandy" with herself, while her father uplifted his voice in prayer. Who turned up in the hunting-field when she ought to have been safe in school, ever ready to open gates for the "gentry," with dazzling smiles, showing the whitest of white teeth, and with curtsies that suggested drawing-rooms rather than the village lane.

At the little school, which she attended with a fitfulness perplexing in the extreme to the worthy mistress, she did her lessons far better and more quickly than anybody else. There was no doubt about it, Keturah was a "character."

While there were but few people outside the row of cottages where they lived who even knew Matthew and his wife by sight, everybody knew Keturah. Always in mischief, always *en évidence*, always doing the unexpected, undaunted by misfortunes and punishments which would have struck terror into the heart of any well-regulated little girl; she had, during her six months' residence in our midst, attained to a notoriety which was apparently as much a matter of indifference to her as it was painful to her parents. Her father looked upon her as a cross to be borne with Christian fortitude. He wrestled in prayer on her behalf, and on occasion with Keturah herself, accentuating his remarks by means of a stick. But, as Thomas Beames, her slave and shadow, remarked on one occasion, when they played truant to attend a meet some seven miles off, "They'll beat we when us do get 'ome; but us'll 'ave our fun fust."

Thomas was a round-faced, in no way extraordinarily small boy, who was dominated by Keturah's stronger character; he loved her, why, he himself could not have told. Perhaps because he admired the way she always made sure of her "fun" regardless of consequences—a disregard the stranger in Keturah's case, for Nemesis was by no means leaden-footed. As a rule, the punishment was in very truth the other half of the crime.

She loved her mother, and regarded her father much in the same light that he regarded her, with this difference that she looked for no change in him, but with a philosophy as pagan as the rest of her conduct accepted his existence as a necessary evil. Indeed, had Matthew but known it, she extracted considerable "fun" out of circumventing him.

But Keturah had fallen on evil days. A fishing expedition, during which she tumbled into the canal, and after which she walked about till she was, as she put it, "moderate dry"—"at least not to notice"—had ended in the mysterious illness to which the doctor had just been called.

Matthew Moulder had gone that evening to a prayer-meeting in a neighbouring village, where he would stay the night with a hospitable brother; this fact, taken together with the fact that Keturah seemed most alarmingly ill, had given her mother the courage to call in the doctor.

He had seen Keturah, had expressed himself with his customary vigour as to the imbecility of people who could treat a case of acute pneumonia with "Dinver's Lung Tonic" for sole remedy, and now he had returned to the little bedroom to have a final look at the child.

She was too weak to raise herself on her elbow, but she turned her head on the doctor's entrance. "Shall I go to hell?" she asked, devouring his face with her great fever-bright eyes.

The doctor started. She had not volunteered any remark before.

"God bless my soul, no!" he exclaimed. "You'll go to Weston-super-Mare when you're well enough."

Keturah shook her head. "But if I don't get well? Shall I go to hell?"

Theology is not one of the doctor's strong points. Being as a rule much concerned with the treatment of the body, he expresses himself with diffidence regarding the ultimate fate of the soul. But on this occasion he shook his head vigorously, holding the hot thin little hand in a firm comforting clasp. "You must ask a parson about these things, my dear, but I am quite sure that no little girls go—but you are going to get well—cheer up! Eh?"

"Could I ast the young gentleman parson wot plays cricket?" Keturah's voice was hoarse and eager.

"The very man—couldn't do better. I'll send him round as I go home," and the doctor turned to go. He hurried down the narrow stairs, but stopped at the front door to call back into the house, "She's to live in poultices, mind! *Live* in 'em."

He stopped at the curate's lodgings as he drove home, and went right in, to find the cleric in question resting his slippers upon the chimney-piece, while he smoked and read the evening paper.

"There's a kid down with pneumonia in the Waterlow Cottages, and she fancies she's going to hell. She'd like to see you, so I said I'd send you. Her people are Plymouth Rocks, or some such

thing. She's a queer little soul—dying, I fear."

"It can't be Keturah?" exclaimed the curate, swinging his feet off the mantelpiece and standing up on his long legs.

"I believe that is the creature's name."

"Oh, you mustn't let Keturah die! She's a genius!"

"She may be a genius," said the doctor grimly, "but her people are the balliest lunatics in creation, and I rather fancy that geniuses are just as likely to die of neglect as other folk—" But the curate had not waited for the rest of the sentence. He seized his hat and ran into the street, his slippers (down at the heel) going flip, flop, on the wet pavement as he ran.

"He's a good chap," murmured the doctor as he climbed into his dog-cart. "He's a devilish good chap."

He went to see Keturah again that night, and found that his instructions had been carried out to the letter. He also found the curate there, in his shirt-sleeves, assisting Mrs. Moulder to make poultices. He often does such things. His people look upon it as an amiable eccentricity. "'E's a curus gent," they say. "'E'll turn 'is 'and to hany think."

He turned his hand to the nursing of Keturah with such success that two days later the doctor said, "She is better, but weak as a kitten. She must have brandy. You must watch for the grey look and give it her then."

"Oh, sir!" exclaimed poor Mrs. Moulder, who, since the invasion of the curate, could not call her soul her own, "Oh, sir, I daren't. My 'usband wouldn't 'ave it in the 'ouse. 'E's tee-total, 'e is —"

"Tell him it is medicine," said the doctor shortly. "She must have it, and here it is. Give it her in milk like this!" and suiting the action to the word, he measured out something into a tea-cup. Something that had a most unmistakable smell.

Keturah drank it, and her ashy cheeks grew a shade less grey. Then she turned to the doctor, with one of her dazzling smiles. "I don't think much on the taste of it, but"—with immense conviction—"it do make you feel so cheerful-like, about the knees."

Her mother wrung her hands, but the doctor chuckled, and, placing on the table the innocent-looking medicine bottle he had produced from his pocket, nodded at it, remarking, "Every time she looks so grey, mind!"

Mrs. Moulder burnt brown paper in the bedroom, for Matthew came home at five. She dared not pour the accursed stuff away, for the doctor and the curate between them had frightened her out of her wits, by threatening legal proceedings if Keturah were in any way neglected. She had been obliged to confess to the visits of the doctor, who might fly in at any moment when Matthew was at home. But she had not felt in any way called upon to tell her husband that the curate had sat up with Keturah the whole night that he was away, helping her poultice, and allaying the child's fears as to eternal punishment so successfully that she fell asleep. It was therefore a shock to Matthew, on his return to tea that afternoon, to hear an undoubtedly clerical voice, apparently reading to Keturah.

The house was perfectly quiet, though there were movements in the back kitchen, showing the whereabouts of Mrs. Moulder. He stood at the foot of the little narrow staircase and listened, fully prepared to find some taint of ritualism in the curate's ministrations. He had come to make a convert of Keturah, of that he was sure; was there not an office—Matthew almost licked his lips over the word "office"—in the Book of Common Prayer especially adapted to the visiting of the sick? All the Protestant in him rose in rebellion. He would be calm, but he would convict this meddling priest out of his own mouth. Then with the dignified strength born of a just indignation bid him begone!

The bedroom door stood open, and he heard Keturah's weak little voice saying, "Tell it again! I like it."

Matthew braced himself to listen, and this was what he heard:—

"We built a ship upon the stairs,
All made of the back bedroom chairs,
And filled it full of sofa pillows,
To go a-sailing on the billows.

"We took a saw and several nails,
And water in the nursery pails;
And Tom said, 'Let us also take

An apple and a slice of cake;—
Which was enough for Tom and me
To go a-sailing on, till tea.

"We sailed along for days and days,
And had the very best of plays;
But Tom fell out and hurt his knee,
So there was no one left but me."

"So there was no one left but me," repeated the weak child-voice. Matthew rose from the third stair from the bottom, where he had been sitting, and stumbled somewhat blindly into the parlour, where he sat down on the slippery horse-hair sofa. He cleared his throat and blew his nose, and there was an expression on his face which was seldom seen there.

"And ther' was no one left but me." The forlorn weak voice repeating that, moved him strangely. Keturah was the last of the children. There had been six babies before Keturah, and none had lived beyond babyhood. At that moment he forgot how naughty she was, how unregenerate! He only remembered that she used to lay her baby face against his, and that she said "dada" the very first word she spoke.

A hundred pretty scenes of her first years flashed into his recollection. His suspicions of the curate were forgotten, and in their place came cold-handed fear to fill his heart with the dread that Keturah might not get well.

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After all, one honest man can recognise another, whether he wear an M.B. waistcoat or a baker's apron. Anyhow, the curate so far won upon Matthew Moulder that he persuaded him to allow the district nurse to be sent to sit up with Keturah till she was "round the corner," and that the nurse might keep a sharp look out for the recurrence of "the grey look."

As Keturah grew better, Matthew made, with his own hands, and at the instigation of the curate, a whole series of fantastic little loaves that she might the better "fancy her tea."

"My Dada don't say much, but I knows now that 'e *do* like me," said Keturah, in a burst of confidence to Thomas Beames, and Thomas, with that caution for which the Cotswold folk are justly famed, replied—

"Mebbe 'e do. But folks when they be growed up be oncommon akard 'times."

* * * * *

"As for that there doctor," said Mrs. Moulder to a bosom friend, "'e's the most commandingest gent I ever see. But 'e *do* get 'is own way. 'E and that curie between them come over Matthew something wonderful; they flaunted their brandy in 'is very face, and 'e never said nothink. They giv' 'er champang one night, as she was so low, an' 'e hopened the bottle 'imself. But I will say this for 'em, they always says to Keturah, when they giv' 'er them liquors, 'Now, remember, you're never to tech this when you be got well. You're to be a tea-totaller like your dada.' An' Matthew, 'e took 'er to Weston 'is own self. 'E do seem more set up about Keturah than 'e was. But, mark my words, if you wants to call your 'ouse your own, don't you let that there doctor inside of it, that's all."

Curiously enough, it was Matthew Moulder who was grateful to the doctor.

VI MRS. CUSHION'S CHILDREN

She was rather like her name, for she seemed specially created to make life easier for other people.

A short, comfortably stout, elderly woman, with a round, rosy face and kind blue eyes beaming behind steel-rimmed spectacles. On Sundays the spectacles had gold rims and were never seen on any other day.

To be taken as a lodger by Mrs. Cushion implied introductions and references—from the

lodger—and Mrs. Cushion was by no means too easily pleased. If neither the vicar, the doctor, nor the squire could guarantee your integrity and personal pleasantness, there was no hope of obtaining Mrs. Cushion's rooms. Moreover, she preferred gentlemen. She was frankly emphatic about that.

To be sure, in wet weather "they did make a goodish mess," what with tackle and muddy boots and the many garments that got soaking wet and had to be dried. But then, they *did* go out for most of the day, and that gave a body time to clear up after them. And when they'd had their dinners they put their feet on the mantelpiece—"I always clears all my own things off of it except the clock"—and they smoked peaceably till they went to bed. "Now, ladies"—it was clear that Mrs. Cushion was not partial to ladies—"they did stay indoors if there cum so much as a spot of rain." And they rang their bells at all sorts of awkward times. "You couldn't be sure of 'em like you was of gentlemen. When a gentleman settles down, he settles down, and you knows where you are, and what's more, you knows where 'e is. Now, ladies, as often as not, 'ud be upon you in your kitching before you so much as knew they was in the passage—an' it were onsettlin'."

No lady was ever allowed to set foot in Mrs. Cushion's hospitable house in May or June or the first part of July. Those months were sacred to the fishers; but as a favour to one of the references she would sometimes consent to take a lady in August.

The vicar, my old friend, was my reference, and he stood surety for my general "peaceableness." He assured Mrs. Cushion that so long as I might sleep with my back to the light that I would not want to alter everything in my bedroom (one lady lodger had done this, and Mrs. Cushion never forgot or forgave the "'ubub" that ensued), that I was in search of perfect quiet in which to finish a book, and lastly he got at Mrs. Cushion through her kind heart—declaring that I was a delicate, muddly, incapable sort of person who required looking after.

So at the beginning of a singularly sunny August I went down to Redmarley to take possession of two rooms in "Snig's Cottage." The cottage stands about half a mile from Redmarley itself, high above a bend of the river known as "Snig's Ferry," and the villagers always call it "Snig's."

Who Snig was no one knows, for the cottage was built "nigh up on three 'undred year ago." The vicar, who is something of an antiquarian, says even earlier. In the memory of man "Snig's" has never been bought, it is always "left," and the heritor, so far, has never been willing to sell, though, as Mrs. Cushion remarked scornfully, "Artises an' sich do often come after it, an' one, an American gentleman 'e was, wanted to buy 'un and build out at the back all over my bit o' garden and kip the old 'ouse just as a' be for a curiositee. I let 'im talk, but, bless you, my uncle left it to me in 'is will and I shall leave it the same in mine; and so it'll always be, so long as there's one stone to another. 'Ouses is 'ouses in these parts."

Solid and grey and gabled, the little six-roomed house still stood in its trim garden, outwardly the same as when the untraceable Snig first named it. Inside, its furniture was a jumble of periods, but there were no aspidistras, nor did any ornament cling to a plush bracket on the walls. Jacob and Rachel were there, and the infant Samuel, and on either side of the clock was a red-and-white china spaniel and a Toby jug. Mrs. Cushion frankly owned that she had preferred her own "bits of things" to some of her uncle's that were there when she came. To make room for her mahogany sideboard she had sold an old oak chest to the American gentleman, who was glad to give a good price for it.

"A hoak chest," said Mrs. Cushion, "is an on'andy thing to keep the gentlemen's beverages in. One always 'as to lift everything off the top to get inside. Now, my sideboard 'as doors and shelves all convenient one side, and a reg'lar cellar for beverages on the other. Not but as what folks 'ud be much better without them."

Mrs. Cushion was, herself, strong for the temperance cause, but she was too tolerant a woman and too excellent a landlady to do more than hint her disapproval. And by calling every form of alcohol "a beverage" I'm certain she felt that in some inexplicable way she so rendered it more or less innocuous. She never spoke of either wines or spirits by their names, only collectively as "beverages."

And I speedily learned that although indulgence in such pleasures of the table was to be tolerated, even condoned, in men, women were expected to be of sterner stuff; and I believe my modest half-flagon of Burgundy, reposing in meek solitude in all the roomy glory of the "cellaret," grieved her far more than when that same cellaret was filled by the varied and much stronger "beverages" of her male guests. Yet she never failed to remind me when there was only, as she put it, "one more dose," that I might order a fresh supply from the grocer.

Men she regarded as children. Her mental attitude towards them was that of "boys will be

boys," and they might be bald and stout, Generals or Viceroy's or Secretaries of State in their public capacity—but did such an one become Mrs. Cushion's lodger she instantly felt called upon to stand between him and every discomfort, to condone his vagaries, and to give him, so far as was humanly possible, every mortal thing he wanted. Small wonder that her "fishing-gentlemen" took her rooms months before-hand and year after year.

"I don't suppose as you've noticed, miss, being, so to speak, unmarried yourself—but there's something in men-folk as seems to stop growin' when they be about ten year old. It crops up different in different sorts, but it's there all the same in all of 'em. And when it crops up—no matter if 'e be hever so majestic an' say nothing to nobody, the seein' eye can figure 'im out in tore knickerbockers an' a dirty face same as if he stood in front of you—more especially if you've 'ad little boys of your own."

"I suppose," I said—perhaps a bit wistfully, for Mrs. Cushion was rather fond of referring to my spinsterhood—"it does make a great difference.... First you know your husband so well, and then your sons.... By the way, what was your husband, Mrs. Cushion?"

Mrs. Cushion turned very red and was manifestly uncomfortable. "I'd rather not talk about 'im, miss," she said hastily. "He weren't an overly good 'usban' to me ... but the children..." Here Mrs. Cushion beamed, and with restored tranquillity continued, "The children 'ave made it all up to me over and over."

Yet from an outsider's point of view, especially from that of one who was "so to speak unmarried," Mrs. Cushion didn't seem to get any great benefit from her two sons. One was in Australia and one in Canada, and though she had been living in Redmarley some six years, I could not discover that either had ever been home. They were not, I gathered, particularly good correspondents, nor did they seem to assist their mother in any way financially, or send presents home. All the same, they were a source of pride and joy to Mrs. Cushion, and a never-failing topic of conversation. In fact, I think that one of the things that caused her to tolerate my sex and my spinsterhood was the real interest I took in Arty and Bert, and my readiness to talk about either or both at all times.

They were never quite clear to me, and this was odd, because Mrs. Cushion was certainly graphic and vivid in her descriptions as a rule. She would never show me their portraits because she said they "took badly," both of them.

By my third August I could have passed a stiff examination in her "gentlemen." I felt that I knew *them* intimately, both as to their appearance, manners, and taste both in viands and beverages.

There was Mr. Lancaster, who ate meat only once a day, drank white wine, and was that gentle and considerate you'd never know he was there except that he did lose his things so, and had a habit of putting his coffee-cup and pipes and newspapers under the valance of the sofa.

"Faithful-'earted, I calls 'im!" said Mrs. Cushion. "Every Saturday reg'lar he sends me the *Times* newspaper, and it is gratifying to see a 'igh-class newspaper like that once a week. It do make me feel like a real lady just to read the rents of them 'ouses on the back page, and it does me no end of good to know who's preaching at St. Paul's Cathedral—all the churches, in fact; it's almost as good as being there."

"Wouldn't you rather have a picture paper?" I asked.

"Certainly not, miss," Mrs. Cushion replied with dignified asperity. "I much prefer what Mr. Lancaster reads his-self, an' it's the kind thought I values far more than the amusingness of the paper. It seems to keep him an' me in mind of one another."

"Do your boys often send you papers, Mrs. Cushion?"

"Well ... not so to speak often.... It's difficult for them, and I dare say the papers in those parts ain't like ours. Perhaps they wouldn't be suitable——"

"Is Mr. Lancaster married?"

"Not to my knowledge, miss," answered the cautious Mrs. Cushion. "He don't behave like a married man.... Not"—she added hastily, eager to give no wrong impression—"not that 'e's ever anything but most conformable; only there's a difference between them as is married and them as isn't. I'm sure you see it yourself, miss, though, to be sure, you're nothing like so set in your ways as some. If I was you, miss," said Mrs. Cushion, suddenly beaming upon me like a rosy sun in spectacles, "I shouldn't give up hope. Mr. Right may come along for you even yet. I 'ad a friend who married when she were fifty-nine.... To be sure, 'er 'usban' was bedridden, but 'e's living to this day, an' it's a good fifteen years ago."

"I don't think I should like a bedridden husband, Mrs. Cushion."

"You'll like whatever you gets, my dear, never you fear." And Mrs. Cushion bustled out with

the tray, leaving me to the rather rueful reflection that her last speech was more complimentary to my stoicism than to my matrimonial prospects.

"Snig's" was an ideal place to work in: quiet without being lonely; fresh and bracing, yet seldom cold; beautiful with the homely, tender grace of pastoral England. The doctor and his wife "over to Winstone" were hospitable and kind, the villagers were friendly as only peasant folk in the remote Cotswolds still are; the vicar I always look upon as one of the most understanding and delightful people I've ever met. That autumn the squire and his large lively family were up in Scotland, but this only increased possibilities of work, and I stayed on at Snig's into October.

One day the vicar summoned me to luncheon. A friend from a distance had motored over, bringing with him his guests, a visiting parson and his wife, to see the church and the village, and he implored my presence "to keep Mrs. Robinson in countenance."

Not that anything of the kind was needed, for Mrs. Robinson turned out to be a most self-sufficient and didactic lady, with "clergyman's wife" writ large all over her. Her husband was of the conscientious, mentally mediocre type of parson, with much energy and no imagination; and luncheon seemed a very long meal. There appeared a curious dearth of topics of conversation, and for lack of something better the vicar explained my presence in Redmarley, mentioning that I had been living for the last two months with the excellent Mrs. Cushion—"who comes, I believe," he added, "from your part of the world."

"Caroline Cushion?" Mrs. Robinson demanded, with that air of cross-questioning a witness which made small-talk so difficult. "If it's Caroline Cushion, she did live in our parish, and she certainly wasn't 'Mrs.' then, but a middle-aged single woman. She left soon after my husband got the living, but I remember her quite well—she came into a house, or something, and went away to live in it."

"It's a curious coincidence," said the vicar easily, "but it can't be our Mrs. Cushion, for not only is she married, but she has grown-up sons to whom she is absolutely devoted."

"It's unlikely," said Mrs. Robinson, "that there could be two Caroline Cushions both coming from the same village, and both inheriting property at a distance. The matter should be looked into, for certainly with us she passed always as a single woman, and to the best of my belief had spent almost her whole life in the village. Is she a fairish woman, stout, with red cheeks?"

"She is very pleasant and fresh-looking," said the vicar, looking at me for help. "But I am quite sure she can't be the one you mean."

"I'm not at all sure of anything of the kind," Mrs. Robinson snapped. "She may have been living a double life all these years. As I said before, the matter should be looked into. I'd know her again if I saw her. I never forget a face."

I don't know why it was, but I suddenly felt most uncomfortable, and was surprised at my own passionate determination that Mrs. Robinson should *not* see Mrs. Cushion. We had reached the walnut stage, and I suggested to her that she and I might go and sit in the drawing-room and leave the gentlemen to smoke.

"My husband doesn't smoke," she said severely as we crossed the hall; "he doesn't think it becoming in a clergyman, and I must say I agree with him. But then *he* is rector of the parish, and one of those—too few, alas! in these lax days—who acts up to his convictions.... Now, about this Mrs. Cushion..." Mrs. Robinson by this time was seated beside me on the vicar's chesterfield. "I feel quite anxious. What can be her reason for masquerading as a married woman here? Even if she *had* married since she left her old home, it's most unlikely that her name would still be Cushion, and it's impossible that she should have grown-up sons. Have you seen them?"

"They are both abroad," I answered, "and isn't Cushion quite a common name in Gloucestershire?"

"Not at all; it's a very *un*common name, that's why I remember it so distinctly—and to think she always passed for a most respectable woman!"

"So she is," I interrupted with some heat. "A most kind and admirable woman in every possible way. Every one here has the greatest respect for her. She's probably a cousin of your one—who doubtless was quite excellent also. Would you care to go out and look at the dahlias? The vicar has quite a show."

Never did I spend a more trying half-hour than the one that followed. Mrs. Robinson kept returning to the subject of Mrs. Cushion with a persistency worthy of a better cause; and I, for no reason that I could formulate, kept heading her off and trying to turn her thoughts down other paths. It was Mrs. Cushion's sons that seemed to annoy her most, and I had the queer, wholly illogical feeling that Mrs. Robinson would, unless prevented, snatch them away from Mrs. Cushion, and that it was up to me to prevent anything of the kind. So nervous did I feel that I

accompanied the party to see the church and the village, and only breathed freely again when Mr. Vernon's car had borne Mr. and Mrs. Robinson away in a direction wholly opposite to Snig's.

As his guests vanished over the bridge in the direction of Marlehouse, the vicar sighed deeply. "Now, why," he demanded, "should Vernon have brought those people to me? I suppose he was so bored himself he had to do something. She's his cousin, I believe, and what a trying lady!"

"Did you 'ave a nice party, miss?" asked Mrs. Cushion an hour or so later, as she brought in my tea.

"Curiously enough, there was a clergyman and his wife from your old home, Mrs. Cushion. I wonder if you remember them? A Mr. and Mrs. Robinson."

"I suppose you didn't happen to name me, miss?" Mrs. Cushion asked—I thought a trifle nervously.

"Well, I didn't, but the vicar did."

"Yes, miss, and did Mrs. Robinson seem to remember me?"

"She remembered some one of your name, Mrs. Cushion, but it couldn't have been you—perhaps you have relations in her parish?"

"May I make so bold, miss, as to ask exactly what she did say?"

"That it was a *Miss* Cushion she knew, who left soon after her husband got the living."

"I dare say she did," said Mrs. Cushion grimly; "and there was many as would have gone, too, if they'd had the chanst. If it's not taking a liberty, miss, was you exactly *draw'd* to Mrs. Robinson?"

"Certainly not," I replied. "I couldn't get on with her at all. Are they popular in the parish?"

"It's not for me to say, miss. I left two months after they did come. They was new brooms, you see, and swep' away a lot of old customs. They wasn't like the Reverend 'ere—he's all for 'live and let live'—but they was all for making every one live as they thought proper. I don't say they was wrong, and I don't say they was right, but whichever it was, it weren't peaceable."

"But," concluded Mrs. Cushion, "I've no business gossiping here, and you wanting your tea."

So she left me to my tea and the reflection that she had neither contradicted nor confirmed Mrs. Robinson's statement.

During the next couple of days I was conscious of a certain constraint in our, hitherto, completely cordial relationship. Mrs. Cushion was just as careful as ever for my comfort—everything was just as well done, and meals as punctual, and rooms spick and span as before; but I missed something. I missed the interest she used to take in me and the interest she allowed me to take in her. She was still the perfect landlady, but I grievously missed the frank and genial human being.

I had lunched with the vicar and his guests on Tuesday. On Friday afternoon Mrs. Cushion got a lift into "Ziren" to do some shopping, and I had to take my own letters to the post office. I met the vicar on his way to call on me, and he turned back and walked with me, and I speedily perceived that something worried him. The vicar is stout and gouty, and walks but slowly. We only just caught the post, and then he asked me to go with him to the vicarage to look at a black dahlia in his garden before the first frosts took it.

In the garden he stopped long before we came to the dahlias and exclaimed, "I've heard from that vexatious woman."

"Mrs. Robinson?"

"Yes; just read her letter."

"DEAR MR. MOLYNEUX," it ran, "I feel it is my duty to tell you that I have been making inquiries about Caroline Cushion, and there is no question whatever that she is the same person who was living here when my husband and I first came to the parish. It happens that Mrs. Bayley, widow of the former incumbent, is at present staying with Lady Moreland at the Manor, and I called upon her the day I returned from Mr. Vernon's, that I might make searching inquiries as to where Caroline Cushion had lived before she left for Redmarley, where I understand she was left a cottage by her uncle, her mother's brother. Mrs. Bayley remembered her perfectly well, and, I must say, spoke highly of her. But she was as astonished as I was to hear she was posing as a married woman with a family, for she had lived in this parish from her youth up. I grieve much that I should have to bring this life of duplicity to light; and I feel it is only right to let you know, that you may take steps to sift the matter and bring the woman to a proper sense of her wrongdoing. For if during the years she lived here she really possessed a husband and children, she shamefully neglected them; and if she is unmarried the case is infinitely worse. Please let me

know the result of your investigations.

"Yours sincerely,

"ELAINE M. ROBINSON."

In silence I gave back the letter to the vicar and involuntarily I shivered, for the wind was very cold.

"Well?" he asked impatiently, "what do you make of it?"

"I can't make anything of it. The whole thing's a mystery."

Then I told him of my tea-time conversation with Mrs. Cushion, and of the curious constraint in her manner ever since: of how unhappy it made me, and how cordially I detested Mrs. Robinson and wished her far further than the Forest of Dean—though to the Redmarley folk the Forest of Dean is indeed as the ends of the earth.

"If I know anything of human nature," said the vicar, punctuating his remarks with vicious flicks of the finger upon Mrs. Robinson's envelope, "Mrs. Cushion is as honest and straightforward a woman as ever stepped, a *good* woman, a kindly woman. Has she never said anything to *you* about her husband?"

"Only once. I asked about him, and I saw it was a painful subject, so I never mentioned him again. I fear he was an unsatisfactory person."

"But what am I to say to this pestiferous woman? If I don't answer her, she's capable of coming over here and setting the whole village by the ears.... I should like," he added vindictively, "to throw a stone through her window." As he spoke I was reminded of Mrs. Cushion's remark, "There's something in men-folks as seems to stop growin' when they be about ten year old": for although the vicar is stout and bald, and his close-cropped beard and moustache quite white, yet there and then I seemed to see "a little boy in tore knickerbockers and a dirty face same as if 'e stood in front of me."

"Wait a day or two," I suggested; "she won't expect an answer by return because you've got to make your 'investigations,' you know."

He groaned. "How can I? If there's one thing I wholeheartedly abhor it's poking and prying into another person's affairs—it's so ... ungentlemanly. I wouldn't do it to my worst enemy, but when it's a decent, kindly body who has been my right hand in every good thing that's been done in this village ever since she came.... Look here, my dear. Perhaps you—without hurting her feelings—could find out something to satisfy Mrs. Robinson. It would come better from you."

I doubted this, but I promised the poor worried vicar to do my best. I walked back to Snig's as fast as I could, for I was chilled to the bone. It certainly was a very cold east wind.

Mrs. Cushion was back when I arrived. A bright fire blazed on my hearth and hot muffins awaited me for tea. She looked cold and depressed, and she had no news for me either of the fashions in the "Ziren" shop windows or of acquaintances she had met. Even references to her beloved boys failed to elicit more than monosyllables.

Next morning she began to cough. For a day and a half she struggled on doing her household work as usual. Through the night I heard her coughing so incessantly that I got up and went across to her room. It had turned very cold, and in spite of her protests, I lit a fire and did what I could to relieve her, in the shape of hot black-currant tea and rubbing her with embrocation. I also took her temperature, which was 104°!

In the morning she was so ill that she consented to stay in bed, and I sent a note to the doctor by the boy that brought the milk.

When he came he declared Mrs. Cushion to be down with influenza, and that she must be very careful. He would send in the parish nurse that morning and a woman to do for me. If a trained nurse should be necessary, he'd get one, but he thought if I could stay for a day or two to superintend things we could manage. Warmth, rest, and quiet in bed till her temperature went down were all that was necessary.

Everything went smoothly. The parish nurse was a personal friend of Mrs. Cushion. The woman sent in "mornings" was most attentive and efficient, and the fact that she was no cook did not seem to matter, for so much more than Mrs. Cushion could eat was sent in by sympathetic neighbours that we lived on the fat of the land on the surplus. If there had ever been any question as to Mrs. Cushion's popularity in Redmarley, it was answered now, and in the most emphatic way.

Anxious inquirers came at all hours, and I spent most of my time watching the garden that I

might open the door, front or back, before the visitor could rap—you rap with your knuckles in Redmarley, whether the door happens to be open or shut: the latter only occurs in cold weather or on washing-days.

One thing did strike me, and that was the number of young men and boys who came, not only to inquire, but to bring offerings of all sorts. It seemed to me that every male being under thirty that I had ever seen in Redmarley, man or boy, or hobbledehoy, came to get news of Mrs. Cushion—and I was always careful to ask their names and write them down, for I soon discovered that their solicitude gave her pleasure.

It was the only thing that did seem to give her pleasure just then. When the cough was easier and her temperature went down, she remained heartrendingly weak, and at the end of six days the doctor asked me if I thought "she had anything on her mind," for, if so, it must be got at and lifted; for she'd never get well at this rate.

Now that she was, of necessity, rather dependent on me in a good many small ways, Mrs. Cushion had become less reserved, more like her former self, in fact—but yet, I always felt that there was something between us. Her blue eyes, sometimes without the spectacles now, would follow me about with a wistful, weighing expression that was full of dumb pain and pathos; but naturally all exciting topics were taboo, and I had never again, since that first afternoon, referred to Mrs. Robinson and her disturbing revelations. One evening about nine o'clock, when Mrs. Cushion had been in bed eight whole days, when the nurse had gone for the night, and I was left in charge, when I had made up her fire, lit the night-light, and arranged the hand-bell and all her possible wants on a table by her bed—I was going back to mine, but she stopped me as I reached the door with a faintly whispered "Miss!"

I went back to the side of the bed and looked down at her. She was very pale, and had put on the spectacles as though to see me better in the dim light.

"Miss," she repeated, "I can't kip it to myself no longer; that there Mrs. Robinson was right—I wasn't never married an' I never 'ad no children."

Mrs. Cushion's hands were picking nervously at the sheet, though her eyes never left my face for a single minute. I seized one of the weak, cold hands, and held it in both mine—but I could not speak.

"You'd better sit down, miss, while I tell 'ee.... All my life long I've loved children—more especially boys. When I was a young 'ooman, I 'ad my chanst same as most. One was a school-teacher, most respectable 'e were—but I couldn't seem to fancy 'im: and t'other, 'e were a hundertaker, and I couldn't fancy 'is trade—so there it was. An' as time went on I did get thinkin' about the little boys as I should like to 'ave 'ad; and they did seem to get realler and realler—Arty and Bert did—till I sorter felt I *couldn't* get along without 'em.... Do it seem very queer to you, miss?"

"Not a bit, dear Mrs. Cushion."

"Now, I ast you, miss—do I look like a hold maid, or do I look like a comfortable married woman with a family?"

"I think you look *very* married," I exclaimed quite truthfully—"very motherly."

"Well, so do I think—and when I came 'ere where no one knowed anything about me excepting I was Uncle's niece, I says to myself, says I, 'You act up to your looks, Caroline Cushion—an' then you can talk about your children same as the rest.' I didn't trouble my 'ead about a 'usban—I 'adn't never thought about 'im. So when folks asked me—like you yourself, miss—I just prims up my mouth and shakes my 'ead, and they sees as 'e weren't up to much, and they says no more. Sometimes I've thought as it were a bit onfair on 'im, pore chap, an' 'im never done me no 'arm—but—there.... I couldn't stop to think about 'im. 'Twere the boys as I wanted—an' they *did* comfort me so, miss, an' I don't know 'ow as I can ever give 'em up."

"But I see no reason why you should."

"Ah, miss, you speaks so kind because you do think, 'She's ill, poor thing, and we must yumour 'er,' but what'd the Reverend say? You may depend as that there Mrs. Robinson 'll never let it alone. What'll 'e say? An' if 'e says as I've got to tell every one I ain't no married woman an' never 'ad no children, I'd rather not get well. I couldn't face it, miss. Because I *can't* feel as the Lard's very angry with me—I can't."

"Mrs. Cushion, will you let me tell Mr. Molyneux, and see what he says?"

Mrs. Cushion sighed. "I suppose 'e'll 'ave to be told, an' you'd tell him more straight-forward nor I could. It's all so mixed up like. You see, them boys ain't never done no 'arm to any one—they so far off and all—an' I will say this, miss, they've give me a sort of 'old over young growin' chaps I wouldn't 'ave 'ad without 'em. Many's the young chap as 'ave listened to a word from me about

drink and the like, because 'e's thought, "There, she knows as it's only natural—she's got some of 'er own—she won't be too 'ard on me"—and they did like me, I knows they did—they did indeed, miss."

I thought of the hobbledehoy and the shy, furtive presents of eggs and honey and tight little bunches of flowers, and an occasional rabbit—how come by it were perhaps better not to inquire—and the inarticulate lingering, the waiting for intelligence they were too shy to ask for—I thought of these things, and I knew that Mrs. Cushion spoke the truth.

"Now, you, miss," the tired, whispering voice went on, "if I may say so, you *looks* unmarried; and yet, I do believe as you understands."

"I do, I do, Mrs. Cushion."

"It seemed some'ow as if it 'ad to be, and yet there's no one 'ates lies and bedanglements more than me. An' there I've been and gone and done it myself. But I ain't going to own it!" Mrs. Cushion added almost fiercely. "Not if I 'ad to let Snig's an' leave these parts. I'd *far* rather die."

By this time she was as flushed as she had been pale before, and I had to tell her she mustn't talk any more, but leave it all till the morning, when we'd consult the vicar.

For about an hour I sat by her bed, till her more regular breathing showed me she had dropped off into the sleep of sheer exhaustion.

In the morning I sent a note to the vicar by one of the solicitous young men, and by ten o'clock he was in my sitting-room, while the parish nurse was getting Mrs. Cushion's room ready upstairs.

I told the story very briefly, and as far as possible in her own words; and the vicar, who had been sitting at the table facing the light, suddenly got up and stood by the fireplace, his elbow on the mantel-shelf, shading his eyes with his hand and almost turning his back upon me.

"And if she can't keep her children, she won't get well," I concluded.

"Of course she must keep her children," he muttered hoarsely.

"But what about Mrs. Robinson?"

He blew his nose, with his handkerchief all over his face, and then turned on me triumphantly, handing me a letter.

"I was coming to you this morning in any case, to show you this. I suddenly decided what to say and thought you'd like to see it. I'm glad I wrote before you told me this. There's a decisive vagueness about it that will, I know, command your literary respect—if nothing else."

This is what he had written:

"DEAR MRS. ROBINSON,—Of course you are right. The Caroline Cushion you knew never was married nor had she any children; and she always was, as you charitably supposed, an entirely respectable woman. The confusion arose with Miss Legh and me, and I apologise for the trouble we have inadvertently caused you. Thanking you for so satisfactorily clearing up the matter, I am yours faithfully,

"G. W. MOLYNEUX."

The parish nurse knocked at the door. "I've put her quite straight, Miss Legh, and the doctor said yesterday she can have anything she fancies for her dinner."

Up the steep stairs the vicar climbed, pausing at the top to get his breath. Mrs. Cushion was sitting up in bed, propped up with pillows. She had on her best cap and the gold-rimmed spectacles sacred to Sundays.

"Peace be to this house, and all that dwell in it," said the vicar from the threshold.

I shut the bedroom door and left them.

When the vicar had creaked heavily downstairs again, I went and opened the front door for him.

"Poor soul!" he said, "poor, hungry-hearted, loving soul! Do you remember Elia?" And more to himself than to me he murmured, "And yet they are nothing; less than nothing, and dreams. They are only what might have been."

The Reverend Grantley Molyneux hobbled down to the church for the first time for some weeks. An attack of gout, unusually severe, had kept him veritably "tied by the leg" during the best of the June weather. Now that he was about again there were but gleams of watery sunshine to tempt him out of doors. However, the sunshine if watery was warm, and by the time the "old vicar"—for so he loved to be called—had reached the church he was glad to enter and rest in its cool grey shadows.

From sunrise to sunset Redmarley Church stood open. There were no week-day services—the worthy yeomen who formed the bulk of the congregation would have looked with great suspicion on any such innovation; but none the less would they have been indignant had the church been shut.

For nearly forty years the present incumbent had ministered to the people of Redmarley. He was, on the whole, decidedly popular—indeed, rumour had it that in his slim youth he had been over-popular—with the fair, being in the matter of susceptibility to their attractions something of a Burns. But, unlike Burns, he attempted no explanation, no vindication of his conduct, if such were needed, and it is surprising how short-lived are rumours when there is no one to contradict them.

The old vicar had ruled his life according to the maxim given by an exceedingly wise man to a young politician, "Never quarrel, never explain, never fear." He found it to answer wonderfully well on the whole, and for the last ten years had placidly increased in bulk, untroubled by any enemy other than the gout.

A courteous scholarly man, of a somewhat florid old-world politeness, he seemed strangely out of place in this remote Gloucestershire village, but he suited the people, and the people suited him. Gallio himself was not more careless of doctrine than is the average Cotswold peasant, whose highest praise of "passun" lies in the phrase, "'e don't never interfere with oi." The old vicar never interfered, not even in so far as to appoint a curate when disabled himself by gout.

Had he worn a ruff instead of the orthodox "choker," he might have passed for one of his own Elizabethan ancestors, as he rested in the squire's pew, his head leaning against the high oak back.

A long face, with high narrow forehead and pointed beard, cheeks heavy and creased, straight nose, with strongly marked sensitive nostrils. The mouth full-lipped and shutting firmly under the grey moustache cut straight across the upper lip. Truly a fine old face, deeply lined and sorrowful, bearing upon it the tragic impress of great possibilities, that had remained—possibilities.

The grey coolness of the little Norman church was restful. The vicar sighed and closed his eyes—those full blue eyes that had once been bold and winsome, that were still keen. The old live mostly in the past, they are not often dull or lonely. At will they can summon a whole pageantry of love, and friendship, and eager strife. The vicar of Redmarley was much given to warming his hands at the fires of recollection. His memory was excellent, and he had much to remember, for he had lived strenuously. Age had not dimmed his faculties, his hearing being particularly acute.

Presently his good dream was disturbed, and he began to be annoyed by a strange little scraping noise for which he could not account.

It was almost continuous.

He leant forward and listened, frowned, then looked interested, and finally rose from his seat.

The noise ceased.

He sat down again and waited. Sure enough the sound began, again, and it was for all the world like the scratch of a quill pen in the hand of a rapid writer. He decided that it came from a chapel on the right side of the altar—the chapel in which his wife was buried. A square sarcophagus stood in the centre, but there were no seats, as the chapel was quite small. Hobbling up the three steps that led to it from the body of the church, the vicar looked about him but could see nothing, and the silence was unbroken.

Suddenly it occurred to him to look over the tomb which filled the centre vacant space. What he discovered caused him to exclaim, more surprisedly than piously:

"God bless my soul!"

Seated on the floor, in the narrow space which separated the side of the tomb from the church wall, was a young man. A card blotting-book lay on his knees, a leather ink-bottle was stuck into the tracery of the tomb, and scattered round him were closely written sheets of manuscript. He looked up at the vicar's exclamation, but made no attempt to rise.

"Sir! What are you doing here?"

The vicar's voice was low, but in the "Sir!" there was infinite rebuke.

The intruder lifted his gaunt face the better to observe his questioner. Then he pointed to the scattered papers, saying:

"It is not difficult to see."

"But why do you write in my church?" persisted the vicar, peering over the side of the tomb at this strange sacrilegious person, with a curiosity that almost mastered his annoyance.

"Because there was nowhere else. I have done no harm to your church—besides, how is it more your church than mine?"

"Do you think you could come and converse with me in the porch upon this subject? I am old-fashioned, and your action strikes me as incongruous. Moreover, it tires me to stand."

The young man scrambled to his feet. Laying his hands upon the tomb's flat top he vaulted lightly over, and stood beside the vicar on the wider side of the tiny chapel.

The vicar frowned, demanding:

"Would you like me to jump over your wife's grave?"

A momentary gleam of amusement lighted up the stranger's tragic black eyes as he noted the vicar's cumbrous figure and swathed foot. Then his expression changed, and he said gently:

"I beg your pardon."

Often in these last days he had found himself wondering with a sort of tender curiosity about the Lady Cicely Molyneux, "aged twenty-one years," who had lain there so long.

When they reached the porch the vicar sat down, and, pointing to a place beside him, said:

"Sit down, and tell me what you mean when you say there is nowhere else?"

The young man obeyed, saying wearily:

"It is the simple truth. I am lodging at Eliza Heaven's, in the village, and you probably know that there is no living-room except the kitchen. I share a bedroom with three of the boys, and the rain comes down in torrents every day. I can't tramp about the country—I only get wet through and fall ill. My holiday lasts ten days—how could I spend it better? The church was quiet; I was under cover. No one has ever come in before."

The vicar stared silently at this strange youth clad in threadbare black, with flannel shirt open at his lean throat. He felt attracted to him in spite of his square grim jaw and Nihilistic-looking crop of thick black hair. His voice was not uncultivated and the vicar recognised, with a little thrill of pleasure, the soft guttural "r" which proclaimed the stranger to be Welsh. Lady Cicely was Welsh, and for her sake the vicar loved well that courteous fiery little people.

"I am sorry you should have had such a wet holiday. In fine weather the country round here is very beautiful, and you look as though long days out of doors would be better for you than literary work—anywhere."

The young man looked rather surprised at the urbanity of this speech but it is difficult for the Welsh to be other than courteous, even when they meet with churls. It was easy, therefore, to explain the position of affairs to this gouty but amiable old gentleman. The hunted look left the stranger's eyes, the tense lines round his mouth relaxed as he said, "I work at a cloth factory at Stroud. One of my mates told me his mother would lodge me for my holiday—I could not afford to go home—so I came here. I am a Socialist, but my father was a Wesleyan minister. I speak at Labour meetings in Stroud—that is my next speech I was writing—it is nearly finished."

The musical voice ceased; the vicar gave a little start; he had been gazing out on the sunlit grass in the churchyard. Then he turned and faced his new acquaintance: "Will you let me read your speech? It would interest me greatly. It is long since I took any active interest in politics. I am glad I found you instead of Daniel Long the clerk. He would, with the best intentions in life, have been rude. I can understand your seeking sanctuary in the church, and, as you say, She belongs to all of us; but—perhaps it is prejudice—I had rather you didn't write political speeches there. Will you come and write at the vicarage instead? You shall be quite undisturbed."

The young man cleared his throat, and when he spoke his voice was rather husky: "How do you know I should not steal your spoons?"

"My good friend," the vicar answered cheerfully, "though I know but little of politics, I know this much, that it is nothing less than my whole possessions you Socialists want. Spoons, indeed! that's but a small part of it; and you don't want to steal them either, but to take them, boldly and in the light of day, that every one may see and admire the redistribution.—I believe that is the word—of property."

As he spoke the vicar rose, and, leaning heavily on his stick, prepared to fare forth into the sunshine again. The little Welshman made no answer, so the vicar turned and put his hand on his shoulder, saying kindly: "But as you write, you probably read. I have plenty of books. You must

come and see them. Come now!"

"May I collect my papers, sir? I won't be a minute." The voice was eager, with a deference in the tone which had been lacking at first. The vicar smiled—that pleasant smile, which had won him so much goodwill. "I like these Welshmen," he thought to himself, "always so much in earnest, always responsive." Then he sighed and frowned as his gouty foot gave a warning twinge.

He and his strange acquaintance walked through the churchyard together. At the vicarage door the old man stopped, and, rubbing his hands delightedly, exclaimed, "Now you are going to enjoy yourself."

"I am bewildered; Fortune is not usually kind to me," murmured the stranger, as he followed his host into a room walled round with books. The vicar sank wearily into an armchair, while his servant arranged his gouty foot upon the rest. As the door closed behind the man, the little Welshman clasped his hands, and, standing before the vicar with flushed cheeks and shining eyes, cried breathlessly: "Do you mean that I may take them down—handle them—read them?"

The vicar laughed. "Sesame," said he, and waved his hand towards the largest bookcase.

What "Sesame" meant the other knew not, nor cared. It was a permission, that was enough. He held out his work-worn hands, palms upwards, to the vicar, saying simply: "They are clean."

The vicar leaned back in his chair and closed his eyes, quoting softly, as if to himself: "These are all at your choice; and life is short." But the stranger did not hear him, for he found himself amidst a company "wide as the world, multitudinous as its days, the chosen and the mighty, of every place and time."

VIII A COTSWOLD BARMAID

It seemed an odd name for an elderly woman, even when, as in this case, she happened to be a barmaid: but some one with an eye for likenesses christened her "Bobby" because of a really striking resemblance to the statesman at that time familiarly known as "Bobby Lowe." Anyway the name expressed her, and Bobby she remained to the end. Let it not be imagined that disrespect was so much as suggested by the title: she was the best respected woman in our town, and certainly one of the most influential.

There was a college, of a sort, near the town where Bobby lived, and generations of students and the whole hunting youth of the countryside passed through her kind hands, and every man amongst them will acknowledge that he was the better for having known Bobby.

It is to be supposed that at one time she was slim, instead of round-about, that her abundant white hair was once brown or golden, that she had a story of her own apart from the "Moonstone" and her "boys"; but we took her for granted none the less thankfully that we were apt to forget how unique she was, till we were far from Bobby and the Moonstone Bar.

Youthful new-comers were her especial care. She not infrequently confiscated their money if she thought they were going to "play the giddy," only restoring it when she considered they were capable of using it with some discretion. And how carefully she looked after the digestions of such as were inexperienced in the matter of drinks! "What?" she would exclaim, "green chartreuse, sir, and you just bin 'avin' beer! You really mustn't, sir, you'd be that bad" ... and the best of it was that nobody was ever foolish enough to resent her interference.

"If a holdish man likes to take too much," she would say sorrowfully, "it isn't me that can stop 'im, but with these young chaps just fresh from school, I must do my best according to my lights."

What becomes of the young chaps fresh from school where there is no Bobby to take care of them I wonder.

"As you know, sir," she continued, "I don't hold with drinkin' for drinkin's sake, but I do think that a gentleman should be able to take his glass sociable-like, and friendly. There don't seem no good fellowship in them there aereated waters, and I'm sure they ain't no good to a body's inside, by theirselves."

She had a healthy crop of prejudices this Bobby of ours. Any sort of blasphemy or loose talk she could not away with. "It's sort of natural for a man to swear if he's a bit taken to or astonished," she would say in lenient mood, "but when they goes breaking the third commandment like as if it was a hold chipped plate, it gives me cold shivers down my back—that it do."

She never expostulated, but her square, rosy face got less square and less rosy if, in her presence, the conversation waxed too forcible and free. At such times the offender would be warned by one of Bobby's old friends who respected what he probably called her "fads." If the new-comer profited by the warning all went well, but if he offended a second time he was forcibly ejected and found himself in the dark and draughty covered way leading to the Moonstone stables, with the explanation, "you can pile on the adjectives here, old chap, but she doesn't like it."

Bobby was a sincere believer in good works, and many were the "boxes" benefited by winnings at billiards or otherwise: and every Sunday saw her slowly taking her decorous way to church, seemly and satin-clad, bearing the very portliest of prayer books.

For man in the abstract, she had the greatest respect, but taken individually, she looked upon him as singularly gullible, and as requiring much maternal supervision, both digestively and morally. "Law! They may talk about their science and their chemistry and that, but bless you! Just let one of them minxes come along, and they're no better than imbeciles, that they're not."

The one human creature for whom Bobby's kind heart could find no toleration, was a "minx." And by "minx" she meant such pretty girls of the shop and dressmaker class, as she imagined cherished hopes of "marrying a gentleman." The idea that one of her boys (anybody under thirty was a "boy" to Bobby) should get entangled in the meshes of a minx, or more dreadful still, "marry beneath him" roused Bobby as did nothing else. How she got her information no one could ever imagine, but she always knew when anything of the kind was afoot, and Machiavellian were her methods of preventing such a catastrophe. More than one "county family" has Bobby to thank that no undesirable daughter-in-law has been added to its ranks. People under twenty she considered her especial charge. She gave them much homely and excellent advice, and only such drinks as she deemed suitable to their tender years.

When one of Bobby's old favourites came back from foreign parts the very first place he would hasten to was Bobby's bar. He would lounge in, after the fashion of a stranger, and ask, in a feigned voice, for what had been his favourite drink in the old days. But Bobby's ears were very quick, one sharp glance at the stranger, a little cry of recognition ... and over the counter he leaps and fast in his embrace is the old barmaid's stout, comfortable, little figure, and for a minute or two neither she nor the stranger can see each other very clearly. And then, what a talking over of old days there would be! What asking after old chums! At such times Bobby would even give us news of the minxes. Poor pretty minxes, did any of you ever marry gentlemen I wonder? They were really very nice those minxes! But we don't remember them as we remember Bobby—Bobby of the silver hair and little dumpy figure, who by sheer force of strong and kindly character held sway over several generations of hot-blooded young England. She was not beautiful; she was not, as the world accounts it, clever: but she was of the type of the eternal mother-woman. "Bless you," she would say with her broad, confident smile, "it's easy enough to manage 'em if only you lets 'em think as they're managin' you."

IX FUZZY WUZZY'S WATCH

He was Billy's little brother, and we called him "Fuzzy-Wuzzy" because his abundant yellow hair stuck out straight and bushy all over his head. Moreover, at tennis parties he was sometimes allowed to "squeege" the soda water into the tall glasses held out for that purpose by thirsty friends; and they would say "Here's to you, Fuzzy Wuzzy!"

This, however, is not a story of Fuzzy Wuzzy, but of a man to whom Fortune had not been kind, whereas Fuzzy Wuzzy was.

"He is the rowdiest chap in the college, he goes on the drunk for days together; and yet he's a perfect gentleman, even when he's drunk."

We were all of us sitting on the lawn. Fuzzy's mother looked up as Mr. Calcraft spoke, asking, "Who is this unhappy person?"

"Oh, the 'Bookie' you know, that chap who's got Vereker's old rooms. Riddell is his name—the professor knows him."

Mr. Calcraft waited for the professor to give further information, but he said nothing. Then a small voice remarked: "*I* know Mr. Riddell. He's got the beautifullest big dog, and he gave me a ride on its back—I like him."

Fuzzy was sitting on my knee—after a moment's silence his mother asked, "Do you like him, Hugh? Is it true that he is so wild?"

The professor took his pipe out of his mouth. He was not given to discussing the students, we all knew that—but this time he said, "I like Riddell. He's a very clever fellow, and most good-natured. I think his little weaknesses are much exaggerated. *I have seen no sign of rowdiness.*"

Mr. Calcraft laughed. "If you'd been at 'The Moonstone' the other evening, sir, you would have seen more than a sign. He broke every cue in the billiard room, and nearly threw the marker out of the window!"

"Did he frow a man out of the window?" exclaimed Fuzzy ecstatically. "Oh, Mr. Bookie *is* strong."

There was a horror-stricken pause. They had forgotten Fuzzy. His mother looked reproachfully at Mr. Calcraft, and somebody murmured something about *virginibus puerisque*.

"If only the 'Bookie' could be kept sober," Mr. Calcraft remarked apologetically, "he would be a splendid chap. He is all right for weeks together, and is as hard as nails; then he goes off and makes an ass of himself down town, and it makes people cut him. He told me the other day that he doesn't know a lady in the place."

"He is going to know one!" said Fuzzy's mother, "he's going to know *me*. I think it is too bad. You all say he is foolish, yet not one of you has the courage to tell him so, I think it is a shame."

"He would be an awkward chap to tackle," murmured Mr. Calcraft. "He'd throw you out of the window as soon as look at you."

"He can't throw me out of the window," said Fuzzy's mother, "and I shall talk to him. You must ask him to lunch, Hugh!"

Then we all went to eat gooseberries in the kitchen garden and played at horses with Fuzzy.

The first day of the horse show Riddell was with Mrs. Ainger all the time. As usual he was untidy. His tie was over his collar, his collar frayed; he wore a terrible old cap, and the front of his coat was smothered in dust from Fuzzy's boots, for that gentleman spent the greater part of the afternoon perched on Riddell's shoulder.

"The Bookie" looked radiant, and carried off his lady to tea in the tent; I followed, sitting with friends at the next table. They looked a little surprised at Mrs. Ainger's cavalier, for that lady was known to be particular as to the men she admitted to intimacy.

Afterwards I heard all about it. It seems that the professor had asked Riddell to lunch, and that he had behaved beautifully. He was a cultivated man, and talked well, in the softest, most musical voice in the world. His knowledge of swear-words was the widest and most far-reaching; when with men his conversation was so garnished with oaths, that one had to pick one's steps, as it were, to discover what he was talking about. But with ladies, he was the most courtly and careful of men. At the horse show he had discovered Mrs. Ainger trying to lift Fuzzy to see over the heads of some yokels who obstructed the view. In a moment Riddell had relieved her of her burden, and devoted himself to her for the rest of the day. The professor was counting marks and could not come.

Then ensued a time of peace and quiet for the Bookie. He followed Mrs. Ainger like a big dog, constituted himself head nurse to Fuzzy, and he was sober, absolutely sober, for six months. When other ladies met him constantly at the Aingers', and found him to be not only harmless but charming, they also asked him to lunch and to dine. Thus "The Bookie" who had plenty of money, and was of unexceptional family, became something of a personage. He bought new clothes, and wore a clean straw hat. His linen was no longer frayed, and he shaved twice a day.

Mrs. Ainger sang his praises wherever she went, and openly declared that she believed all the stories of his rowdiness to be slanders; she had not seen his bill for billiard cues from the "Moonstone."

At the end of April came the "Point to Point" steeplechase, a day fatal to the Bookie, who was "well on" by five o'clock in the afternoon. Mrs. Ainger was not at the races, so she was spared the spectacle of her protégé, swaying gracefully on the seat of his dogcart as he drove off the course. He had not brought his man, and as he was, his friends considered, quite capable of getting home in safety, they preferred not to be seen with him. He pressed them courteously to accompany him, offering to stand them a dinner at the "Moonstone." But they stood in awe of Mrs. Ainger, and not considering themselves in any way called upon to act as keeper for the Bookie, they let him alone.

Fuzzy's Nana was of a literary turn, spending a large proportion of the salary she received for her attentions to Fuzzy on the lighter kinds of fiction. On this particular afternoon, having wheeled him in his go-cart some distance along the high road, "she sat her down upon a green

bank," and bidding him "Play about, there's a good boy, and pick some pretty flowers for mama!" she was soon immersed in a periodical, bearing a bloodcurdling device upon the cover.

Fuzzy gathered a bunch of celandines, and with them clasped tightly in his hot, fat hand, set off at a run down the road, giggling delightedly when he discovered that Nana neither called him nor yet started in pursuit.

Trotting gleefully along for some little distance he turned off into an inviting-looking lane. He kept close to the hedge for there was a sound of galloping hoofs, and Fuzzy was an extremely sensible small boy. Then there passed him a horse and dogcart, the horse going at a hand gallop, the dogcart empty. This struck Fuzzy as strange, but then strange things do happen when one sets forth to seek adventures. So he girded up his stocking which had become uncomfortably wrinkly and trudged on.

Presently he saw a man lying by the side of the road. Now Fuzzy had a large acquaintance among road men, and for tramps he felt a real affection. Had they not sometimes got white rats in their pockets? Nay, those of a superior sort even carried ferrets! He and his mother were wont to bestow pence on tramps, and on the road men, boots and the professor's old coats. In fact the professor was often heard to complain that he met his favourite coat by a heap of stones every time he went out. Fuzzy advanced fearlessly to inspect this weary man, who was lying on his face, with one arm doubled up under him in the strangest fashion. The man did not move as Fuzzy came up, and the little boy went and stood by the prostrate form, saying, with a comical imitation of his father:—"Thirsty weather, eh?" but the usual "It be that, Master!" did not follow.

The afternoon was very still. The sound of galloping hoofs and bumping wheels had died away in the distance. Suddenly Fuzzy gave a little cry—"Bookie! Bookie dear! are you hurted? Why do you lie in the road? gentlemens don't lie in the road—O Bookie! your foot is bad, it's all bleedy and dreadful!"

The Bookie did not answer, "he kind of snored" as Fuzzy afterwards described it. The child tried to turn him over on his back, but the Bookie being six foot two, and proportionately broad, and Fuzzy by no means tall for his age, this proved an impossible feat.

"I'm afraid he's hurted very bad, his face is so red and dirty," said Fuzzy to himself. Then, with Herculean efforts, he succeeded in inserting his own legs under the Bookie's head, so that it rested on his clean holland smock. He stroked the tumbled hair, and laid his soft little face upon the Bookie's hot, prickly cheek. They remained thus for what seemed to Fuzzy an interminable time. He began to grow sleepy himself. His head nodded, and finally he too fell over on to his back sound asleep.

When the Bookie came to himself he lay still for a few minutes collecting his thoughts. He discovered that his arm was certainly broken, that a wheel had gone over his ankle, that his face was resting on something soft, and that not ten inches from his face was a pair of small, dusty strap-shoes.

This last discovery completely sobered him. He raised himself on his good arm and looked down at the something which had been supporting him. A golden head, resting on two plump arms crossed behind it; sturdy legs, crushed by his weight, which now drew themselves up stretching out again as if relieved ... and then the Bookie realised that Fuzzy had found him, and had stayed to keep guard.

"God help me for a drunken beast! and I can't carry him for my arm's broken," he ejaculated. He got up on to his knees feeling very giddy. The movement woke Fuzzy. He too was puzzled for a moment as to where he could be, then, he saw the Bookie, and, his brains not being muddled by various "drinks" and a heavy fall, he sat up, saying in his tender little voice: "Are you hurted much, my poor dear? I stayed with you till you woked up."

The Bookie looked at Fuzzy and tried to speak, but somehow he couldn't. Fuzzy was on his feet in a moment and held out his grubby hands: "Shall I pull you up? I can pull dad up."

The Bookie took one of the little hands and carried it to his lips, saying brokenly, "Why do you love me, Fuzzy? I'm not worth it."

Fuzzy took no notice of this remark, it was just one of those foolish and irrelevant things that grown-up people have a habit of saying, so he said, "Aren't you tired of sitting in the road? Hadn't we better go home? I'm very hungry."

The Bookie tried again to get up on to his feet, but something had gone wrong with his leg, as well as his arm, and after a few excruciating efforts he gave it up.

"I'm afraid it's no go, Fuzzy, I can't walk; you see I was pitched out of the dog-cart, and I'm all smashed up—whatever is to be done?"

"Shall you be very lonely if I go home and tell them?" asked Fuzzy with his arms round the

Bookie's neck, "and then they could bring a carriage for you; you're too big to go in my mail cart, or I'd lend it to you. It's in a field wiv Nana."

"How on earth I got into this lane I can't think, it's right off the high road. O Fuzzy Wuzzy, what an ass I've been!" The Bookie groaned, and Fuzzy clasped his arms tighter round his neck. Then he wiped his friend's dirty face with the crumpled smock, remarking: "Your poor face is so grubby, and you've lost your hat!"

"Where's yours?" asked the Bookie.

"I think it felled into the ditch!" Fuzzy answered composedly, "but there's no sun to sun-stroke us."

"You must be got home, old chap; it's getting ever so late and they will be anxious; do you think you could go by yourself, and tell them where you left me?"—"a pretty tale, truly," thought the Bookie to himself.

Fuzzy was torn by conflicting desires. He hated to leave his wounded friend, and he wanted his mother. Finally, having embraced the Bookie several times, he trotted off down the lane and into the high road once more. When he got home it was nearly eight o'clock. His father and mother, white-faced and anxious, were standing at the drive gate, straining their eyes in the twilight. Nana, having searched vainly herself, had only just come back to confess that Fuzzy was lost. He hardly waited to receive his mother's caresses, but seizing her by the hand, dragged her down the road, crying excitedly: "Come quick! the Bookie's hurted and he's all alone."

By dint of much questioning, the Bookie's whereabouts and the extent of his misfortunes were arrived at. The dogcart and horse were captured in an adjacent village, and the Bookie spent a month indoors. Fuzzy went to see him every day, so did they all, but they never spoke of the accident. They played Poker and Nap round his sick-bed, and the beggar constantly won.

The night before he went down he told them about Fuzzy. He forgot to swear at all during the narrative, but at the end he said: "And I'm damned if those dusty strap-shoes wouldn't get between me and too much of the best champagne ever bottled!"

X

THE DARK LADY

Nobody knew her—that is to say, none of the other ladies knew her. She was staying at the "Moonstone" for the hunting, accompanied by a maid, a couple of grooms, and six horses. The hotel people called her "the Baroness." Billy always spoke of her as "that pretty lady"; but then it is possible that admiration for her daring horsemanship coloured Billy's views.

On this particular afternoon Billy and the unknown lady found themselves at the same gate, in the gathering gloom of a November afternoon, six good miles from home. She was trying to lift a refractory latch with her hunting-crop when Billy rode up on his shaggy sheltie, dismounted cap in hand, and opened the gate for her.

"We seem to have lost the others, you and I. Shall we jog home together?" she asked, as Billy, having carefully fastened the gate, followed her down the ratty lane. "I'm not very sure where we are; but I suppose this lane leads somewhere," she continued.

"I know the way," answered the little boy cheerfully. "I shall be very glad of your company. Jackson—that's our man—lamed the cob early in the day and had to go home, and it's lonely riding by one's self."

"I am often lonely," said the lady, more to herself than to Billy.

"Are you? So am I. I'm the only one who hunts, you see; but I'm going to school at Easter, then I shan't be lonely any more."

"Are you glad to be going to school?"

"Oh, yes! I shall like being with the other chaps awfully; but, of course, I shall miss my people ... and the dogs, and the pony."

"Your people don't hunt, do they?"

"No; we've only the cob and my pony. Mother doesn't hunt, she's too nervous; and father doesn't care for it. Mother drives to the near meets sometimes, but when it is a long way she likes Jackson to come with me for the day. Not that he's any mortal use," added Billy with a gleeful chuckle. "He's a potterer, and my brother is too little."

"I wonder," the lady began, then stopped suddenly. Billy turned his rosy face towards her, but she did not speak. The child, because he knew one woman so well, divined that this woman was

tired and sad. So he, too, was silent. The horses' hoofs went thud, swish, thud, swish, through the foot-deep decaying beech leaves. A delicate silver mist gathered round the roots of the great trees; like the bridal veil of a rosy girl, it spread itself over the stretches of ruddy space. They had turned into the grass-carpeted main avenue of the Earl's famous park, and Billy sniffed delightedly at what he called "the good smell of Christmas." Happy Billy! to whom the death of summer brought no sad thoughts.

"I'm afraid you are very tired!" he said suddenly, in his kind boyish voice. "Would you like to stop a bit?"

The lady started. Not, indeed, that she had forgotten Billy; she was in a subconscious way basking in the warmth that radiates from all simple and kindly people. Her rebellious mood of the last weeks had passed. That mood in which she loved to assert her fascination for men; mentally snapping her fingers in the faces of her sister women so ready to think evil of her. Certain kinds of men come to heel easily and she felt her triumph to be but a poor one. This half-hour's companionship of a friendly little boy had altered everything; at the moment she no longer felt herself to be the sport of circumstance; but her heart ached and her voice was weariful as she said:—"No, we won't stop. I am tired, but we are only about three miles from home. You live just outside the town, don't you?"

"Yes! at that tall grey gabled house where the cross roads meet!"

"I have seen you go into the drive. Do you do lessons—who teaches you?"

"Partly Mother, partly Dad. I am not clever at lessons." Billy flushed as he spoke; he was fully aware that his small love for books was something of a reproach. People expect so much from the child of clever parents. He did not know that his strongly developed sporting instincts were the pride of his bookish father's heart; nor how cheerfully that father had forgone many a rare edition, that Billy might ride to hounds. "A modest lad, a good lad; let him play about in the sunshine—the rest will come." So Billy's father, who would relate with glee how successfully Billy had vetoed one topic of conversation. On an evening, not so very long ago, Billy had put his head round the drawing-room door, demanding, "Is Dad going to talk about 'The Dark Lady of the Sonnets?' 'cause, if he is, I'm not coming in. I've had enough of hearing about her."

So Dad vowed he would talk of her no more, and discussed the habits of "Pug" with a learning that astonished and charmed Billy beyond telling.

The much-vexed question of Mary Fitton's identity with the "Dark Lady of the Sonnets" had raged with violence in Billy's house. His father had written many articles upon the subject—articles appearing in those fat, uninteresting magazines which littered drawing-room and study; in whose closely printed pages Billy sought in vain for "pictures and conversations." He did wish that Dad wrote for the *Strand*.

Curiously enough, as they rode home in the gathering eventide, the thought jumped into Billy's head that the dark lady of the sonnets must have been exactly like the Baroness. With the inconsequent aptness of childhood he proceeded to quote aloud lines learned to please his father:

"For sweetest things turn sourest by their deeds;
Lilies that fester smell far worse than weeds."

The lady pulled up short and, turning in her saddle, asked with a catch in her voice, "Why do you say that? What is it? Where is it from?"

"Oh, it's those sonnets, you know—I've learnt lots of 'em to please my dad."

"But what made you quote that just then?" persisted the Baroness, her eyes dark and tragic with some nameless fear: "What made you quote it then? Were you thinking of me?"

Billy blushed and took off his cap that he might rumple his hair, a thing he always did when perplexed.

"I *was* thinking of you," he said at last, "yet that has nothing to do with you. This has though"—and, blushing more than ever, Billy repeated:

"Thine eyes I love, and they, as pitying me,
Knowing thy heart, torment me with disdain;
Have put on black, and loving mourners be,
Looking with pretty ruth upon my pain:
And truly not the morning sun of heaven
Better becomes the grey cheeks of the east,
Nor that full star that ushers in the even,

Than those two mourning eyes become thy face.

Billy stopped breathless, but confident that he had said the right thing this time.

"It is very pretty!" said the lady with a sigh—"but the other is true. What a queer little boy you are to repeat poetry like that! How old are you?"

"I shall be nine at Easter. Then I go to school. Where are you going when the hunting is over? It ends early here; we never kill a May fox—the crops, you know."

"I don't know where I shall go, probably to London, or to Paris, or——" here she murmured something in a language Billy did not understand, then, turning to him, said dreamily:

"That is my home of love: if I have ranged,
Like him that travels, I return again."

You see I know something of your poetry too! But, wherever I go, I shall be lonely—lonely and sad."

There was a sound of tears in her voice. Billy, infinitely distressed, felt that this melancholy lady must be cheered and encouraged, so he said stoutly:

"I've never seen you alone before. You've generally got Mr. Rigby Folaire, or Captain Garth, or Lord Edward, or all of them."

"That's just it," said the Baroness, and Billy was more puzzled than ever. Feeling that he must get on to more comprehensible ground, he asked,

"How did you lose the others?"

"Probably very much as you did. Anyhow, here we are together, and I am very glad. I have enjoyed your society extremely. I shall remember our afternoon."

The Baroness was destined to remember, for at that moment Billy's pony put his foot in a rabbit hole and came down, throwing the child with some violence against the trunk of a tree. They were riding at the edge of the wood.

The pony scrambled up and galloped off; but Billy lay quite still in a pathetic heap. The Baroness had pulled up her tall horse almost on to his haunches, for Billy had been thrown right in front of her. Now, with the reins over her arm, she was stooping over the prostrate Billy, while the nervous thoroughbred trembled and curvetted beside her.

The Baroness was noted for the speed and grace with which she could mount or dismount.

She lifted Billy in her arms. There was a big bruise on his temple, and he seemed stunned by the fall. His head rolled on to her shoulder, lying there heavily. Reaching for her flask from the pocket of her saddle, and with the reins still round her wrist, she sat down on the ground with Billy in her arms. She soaked her handkerchief in brandy, and dabbed his forehead, and, as if to aid her, there pattered down upon his upturned face the first drops of a cold November shower.

The Baroness had faced many dangers in her time. To "scenes" of various kinds she was quite inured; but she trembled as Billy's face touched her neck, and there was a look in her eyes that neither Mr. Rigby Folaire nor Lord Edward had ever seen there. Presently Billy stirred and opened his eyes, saying eagerly, "I'm all right, mother! It wasn't Dalgo's fault I fell off. It's all right."

Sitting up suddenly, he saw the Baroness, and knew where he was. But he had clung to her—she always remembered that.

He scrambled to his feet, exclaiming, "I beg your pardon. Did I frighten you? I am so sorry"; then, turning very giddy, sat down again amongst the wet leaves.

"I wonder if I ought to give him brandy," murmured the Baroness. She put her free arm round him, while the tall horse sniffed inquiringly at them both.

The white mist crept higher among the trees and the rain grew heavier. Billy shivered.

"We can't sit here," said the Baroness decidedly. "You'll have to ride Frivolity in front of me. I don't know where your pony is, and if he has galloped home they will be in a dreadful state. So we must hurry.

"How strong you are!" said Billy, admiringly, as she swung him up to the saddle in front of her—"and how kind!" He put his hand on hers that held the reins, her other arm was round him. Thus they rode home in the cold gloom of that November afternoon.

* * * * *

"Billy's late!" said his mother nervously as she poked the study fire. "I am always worried when

he is out without Jackson; he is so reckless, and Jackson came home just before lunch, you know." Billy's father pushed his papers away from him, and came and stood beside her at the fire.

"There he is!" he said, "there's the drive gate."

"That's a horse; besides, Billy always goes straight to the yard—Oh, can he be hurt? and some one has come to tell us. Go down quick and see."

On no occasion did Billy ever go hunting but his mother pictured every possible mishap. Had the child ever realised her agony of apprehension he would never have gone; but she loved him too well to interfere with his pleasures. "He's such a manly little fellow," she would say when he came safely back, forgetting her dread in her pride of him—until next hunting day.

She followed her husband into the fire-lit hall. The door stood open. The well-loved little figure was silhouetted against the gloom, and the kind young voice was persuading some one to come in. "Do come and have some tea," she heard him say; then, as he saw his mother: "It's the dark lady, dear; she has been so kind to me. Has Dalgo come home?"

The mother went out on to the steps beside her husband. The unknown lady had already turned her horse preparatory to departure, but waited just to say in short, jerky sentences:

"Your little boy was thrown, and the pony ran away. I thought it best to bring him home without looking for the pony. He fell with some force against a tree, but I don't think—!"

"Won't you come in?" asked Billy's mother, going down into the rain beside her guest. A great many considerations flashed into her mind, but—"and let me thank you."

The soft voice was so like Billy's. For a moment the Baroness wavered. She looked somewhat wistfully into the hall where the ruddy firelight danced on the old oak furniture, but she gave a little wriggle on her saddle and said lightly and in the voice that jarred, "Thanks! but I'm far too wet. I must go home and change. The boy is wet. I hope the pony will turn up all right," and with that she rode out of the drive.

Billy spent some days in bed with concussion of the brain. He talked constantly of his "dark lady" to the bewilderment of his mother, who had no idea how firmly he was imbued with the notion that *his* dark lady was *the* dark lady—"of the sonnets," as he always piously concluded.

As for the lady—when Billy's father went down to the "Moonstone" that very evening in the pouring rain, to thank her for her kindness to his little son, she was declared to be engaged and would see no one.

When Billy's mother went next morning she was told that the Baroness had gone to town the night before. Her servants and her horses followed her, and the hunt knew her no more. She left no address. Mr. Rigby Folaire and Lord Edward inquired her whereabouts in vain. But Billy knew she had "gone back into the sonnets"; for had she not said, as they rode home in the rain that afternoon,

"That is my home of love: if I have ranged
Like him that travels, I return again"?

Billy was sure; and even Billy's father has given up talking about Mary Fitton.

XI HER FIRST APPEARANCE

Somehow or other it got noised abroad in the town that Lady Valeria was coming to church the very next Sunday.

The town was much interested. There are people who speak of our town as a "village." Such people are lacking in all sense of proportion. We pity them, and try to ignore the insult.

But to return to Lady Valeria. For nearly four years we have had her in our midst. At first she was known as "the Earl's baby"; but her appearance and character were such that she speedily achieved a distinct entity, and now her doings are chronicled with extreme minuteness.

"Mammy dear! Mammy dear!" said Lady Valeria, "what does God do in church?"

Her mother looked puzzled for a moment, then she said, "He listens to our prayers, and to the psalms and hymns we sing."

"Will He speak to me, mammy dear? Will He want to kiss me?"

Most people wanted to kiss Lady Valeria; she was quite used to it.

"We cannot see God," answered the Countess gravely.

"Why, mammy dear?" asked the persistent treble voice, "what does He hide for?"

The Countess looked beseechingly at her husband, but he would not come to her assistance; he went and looked out of the window, and his shoulders shook. He gave her no help in these matters—no help at all—and, really, there never was a more inquiring child than Lady Valeria.

"I'd like to see God, mammy dear! why can't I?"

"We can none of us see God—yet," said her mother, gently; "we shall see Him some day if we are good. Now listen, sweetheart, you must be perfectly quiet in church, and not talk at all; you must do whatever I do. Remember, it is God's House, and we go there to thank Him for all He gives us, and to pray to Him for help to do right."

Lady Valeria's face was very solemn, and she held it up to be kissed, and she made many protestations with regard to the extreme decorum of her conduct when Sunday should come. Then the head nurse appeared and carried her off to nursery tea.

Her parents had misgivings as to the sobriety of her behaviour in church. The Countess felt nervous and said so; as for the Earl, he laughed and loved her, but he said that nothing would induce him to accompany his daughter to church next Sunday afternoon. Hers was a character of much originality. She acted with decision, and always unexpectedly; and the little Countess, who was only nineteen years older than her daughter, often felt that the baby girl was the stronger of the two.

There was a pleasant flutter of expectation among the Sunday-school children, and, indeed, among the congregation generally, at the children's service on that memorable Sunday when Lady Valeria first came to church. Since her own christening, and that of her small brother, nothing so exciting had occurred. The Earl's seat was high up in the centre aisle, in full view of the congregation. As the young Countess walked in, leading her little daughter by the hand, she had to run the gauntlet of the kindly inquisitive eyes of the entire congregation, an unusually large one. She blushed very much, for she was a shy little lady, who loved to go her gracious way quietly and unobserved. Not so Lady Valeria—from her earliest infancy she had been taught to give pleasure by her pretty smiles, and that to "notice people" was one of the most binding of her obligations. Though certainly no Pharisee, she dearly loved "greetings in the market-place," and as she trotted up the aisle she nodded gaily to her acquaintances, who were there in large numbers. She waved her fat hand to the curate as he took his seat in the choir, much to his confusion.

In the choir were two of the lodge-keeper's sons. Their white garments had for the nonce concealed their identity; but presently Lady Valeria recognised them, and, mounting a high hassock, she nodded and waved ecstatically—she felt so sure they would be delighted to see her in church. She wondered why they looked so red, and why they did not pull their front locks and grin, as they were wont to do when she passed them in the pony carriage. She felt chilled and disappointed at this lack of responsiveness on the part of so many of her friends.

The service began. Lady Valeria carefully copied her mother and made no sound. That lady, who had not noticed "the nods, and becks, and wreathed smiles" which marked her daughter's entrance, felt her cheeks begin to cool and was conscious of a hope upspringing that her temerity in bringing Lady Valeria to church was to be triumphantly vindicated.

Suddenly, however, in the middle of the psalms, which were read in alternate verses by vicar and congregation, she noticed that, in the congregation's verse, somebody was saying in a triumphant sing-song:

"There was a lady loved a swine.

'Honey!' said she,

'Pighog, wilt thou be mine?'

'Hunc!' said he."

The final "hunc" was a life-like imitation of one of the Earl's prize pigs. The verse in question happened to be shorter than Lady Valeria's, and she finished after the congregation.

The curate turned purple, and the vicar's voice trembled. The Countess blushed redder than before, and, stooping down, whispered, "You mustn't say *anything*, darling!"

Lady Valeria looked up in pained surprise.

"Every one else is talking, mammy dear. I'm sure God wouldn't mind."

Her mother shook her head again, and Lady Valeria relapsed into a wondering and somewhat injured silence. Why should those Sunday-school children be allowed to bawl out all sorts of

seemingly irrelevant remarks, while she was checked for one little tiny rhyme? Truly, church was a puzzling place. She sighed, and pulled off her gloves, then she rolled them into a neat ball and played catch with them. But she was no hand at catch, and the gloves fell with a soft "plop" into the aisle. Her mother looked up at the little sound and again shook her head. Lady Valeria yawned.

Then something happened. There was a scuffling at the back, and the vicar's wife, who is a strict disciplinarian, marched up the aisle propelling a small boy in front of her—the very small boy who was the cause of the disturbance. Lady Valeria nearly fell off her stool in her excitement. The procession of two, the pusher and the pushed, passed the Earl's pew, and reached the big brass bird, whose classification had been puzzling Lady Valeria for the last ten minutes. The vicar's wife left the small boy just beside the big bird, and marched down the aisle again. The hymn finished, the vicar went into the pulpit and gave out the text. Thomas Beames, the culprit, stuffed his fists into his eyes, and wept copiously, but silently. There he would have to stand, publicly disgraced, with his back in full view of the congregation for the rest of the service.

"I'll turn dissenter, I will!" vowed Thomas, in his miserable soul. "I'll vote yallow when I be growed a man. I won't cap she, when I do meet her in the street."

The vicar's voice exhorting the children to industry, sobriety, and universal charity fell on deaf ears as far as Thomas was concerned. But what he did hear was the soft patter of little feet behind him, then came a pull at his arm by two small impatient hands. He took his fists out of his eyes, and looked down to see Lady Valeria standing beside him. Her blue eyes were full of pity, and she said very softly and distinctly, "Don't ky, little boy! there's plenty of room in our seat!" and before the astonished Thomas could demur, one of the imperative little hands had seized his, and pulled him into the Earl's pew, where he sat crimson and desperately uncomfortable for the rest of the service; but he was not quite so sure that he would vote "yallow when he were growed a man." The sermon was long. The vicar felt this flying in the face of law and order must be lived or preached down.

Lady Valeria yawned again. Heedless of the precepts of St. Paul, she removed her hat. Then she leaned her head against her mother's shoulder and slept.

She slept all through the sermon; even the singing of the closing hymn did not awake her.

The school children, including the now repentant Thomas Beames, had clattered out, and still the Lady Valeria slept.

Her mother kissed and woke her, and as they walked across the sunny market-place, Lady Valeria remarked cheerfully, "Mammy dear, mammy dear! I like church, you feels so nice and fresh when you comes out!"

XII

"OUR FATHERS HAVE TOLD US"

Ridgeway came in with the morning paper while Johnny was still at breakfast. Johnny was late, but at the beginning of the holidays he generally was late unless it happened to be a hunting morning.

Something had evidently stirred Ridgeway out of his usual stately calm, for instead of bringing in the paper neatly folded upon a salver, he held it open in his hand, and his hands were shaking.

"It's all here, Master Johnny!" he cried. "Bobs 'e spoke and Lord Curzon 'e spoke, and the King and the Viceroy sent messages and no end of nob's besides: and to think of it! the General was there to 'ear it all. An' that gentleman wot writes the books you're so fond of, *he* was there an' 'e wrote a hymn 'specially for the occasion."

Johnny snatched the paper and Ridgeway retired to the sideboard, where he stood with his back to Johnny, blowing his nose and clearing his throat in a highly unprofessional fashion.

"I'm glad grandfather was there," Johnny said presently. "Don't you wish you'd been there, Ridgeway? But I suppose you were born a bit too late ... you were born after the Mutiny, weren't you?"

"Bless you, yes, Master Johnny. Why, 'owever old do you think I am?"

"Everybody seems rather old in this house after school, you know," Johnny explained apologetically. "At school there's fifty chaps, and Hatton Major's the eldest and he's just fourteen and seven months. He's leaving this term. I shall be leaving at midsummer, you know, for then I

shall be fourteen. When'll grandfather be back, Ridgeway?"

"The General said 'e'd telegraph this morning. I expect 'e's a bit tired after that dinner. My word! it must have been a fine sight—all those old chaps, and the officers, all with their medals and their orders on. Somethin' like a *Tamash* that was. They've seen a deal, they 'ave."

Johnny rose from table with the paper still in his hand. "I think," he said, "that grandfather would wish all the servants to hear what's in this paper, and I'd like to read it to them. Please tell them to come here at once, Ridgeway."

The long line of servants filed into the room just as they did when the General was at home to read prayers. And Johnny, fair-haired, round-faced, and ever so serious, stood up before them all to read aloud about the dinner that the proprietors of a great newspaper had given to the survivors of the Indian Mutiny of 1857.

Everybody was impressed; and the cook, who was fat and full of sensibility, wept audibly.

Johnny's voice did not falter except when he stumbled over one or two of the long words in some of the speeches, till he came to what Ridgeway called "the hymn" written by Mr. Rudyard Kipling.

"One service more we dare to ask:
Pray for us, heroes, pray,
That when Fate lays on us our task,
We do not shame the day."

As he reached this last verse his voice broke.

"That's all," he said hastily, "and thank you very much for listening." Then he fled to the stables, bearing the precious newspaper with him that he might read it all over again to the General's groom and the stable boys.

Johnny was the youngest of a long line of soldiers and civilians who had served our Indian Empire. Father and mother were still in India, though they were coming home before the hot weather and mother would probably not go out again. Johnny, himself, always talked of "going back" when he should be through Sandhurst; although he had left India for good at four years old. Yet he heard "the East a-calling" with the same loud imperative call that all his race had so ungrudgingly obeyed.

Johnny adored the works of Mr. Rudyard Kipling. His nursery days had been enriched and enchanted by the *Jungle Books* and *Just So Stories*; and as he grew older he chose out for enthusiastic admiration certain heroes from among the short stories, heroes who were to him a never-failing inspiration and example. He was sure, of course, that Mr. Kipling was "a real person," but he was infinitely more confident that Bobby Wicks and John Chinn and Georgie Cottar had actually existed, *did* actually exist, except poor Bobby Wicks who died of cholera. They were, in fact, far more manifest to the mind of Johnny than the man privileged to chronicle their doings. It was beastly bad luck that Bobby Wicks had died: it always made him want to kick his best friend for at least an hour afterwards when he read that story. All the same, Bobby had not died in vain, for his cheery, unconscious heroism had kindled in the breast of at least one small boy a steady flame of patriotism and the passionate hope that when his time should come he, too, might serve and suffer with the men he hoped one day to lead.

That mild December morning, as he rode alone along the muddy lanes, Johnny's mind was full of the Mutiny, and his heart grew big within him as he thought of the men whose dangers his grandfather had been privileged to share.

When he got back to lunch he found a long telegram from the General saying that certain old friends who had come up for the Mutiny dinner had persuaded him to stay one more night in town, but that he would motor back very early on Christmas morning in plenty of time for church. Johnny felt a bit disappointed, but he went to tea with some cheery neighbours where there was assembled a large and youthful party, and he dined in solemn state with Ridgeway in attendance. After dinner he arranged his gifts for grandfather and the servants and was quite ready for bed when bed-time came. He said his prayers with his usual precipitation: but when he had finally besought blessings upon "father and mother and grandfather and all my kind friends" he found himself still upon his knees repeating:

"One service more we dare to ask:
Pray for us, heroes, pray,

That when Fate lays on us our task,
We do not shame the day."

"How rummy of me!" quoth Johnny to himself as he snuggled down in bed. "I've got that Mutiny dinner on the brain." And then he fell asleep.

Later on he began to dream. He dreamt that he was in the sick-room at school and that he had a very bad cough—a tickling, tiresome, choking cough. He implored the matron to give him some water, but she only laughed at him and hurried out of the room. And the cough grew worse and worse till he thought he should choke. It was so unlike matron, too, to be hard-hearted and unsympathetic, that Johnny grew very angry, and he tried to shout at her but the cough wouldn't let him. Still, he must have managed to make a considerable noise, for the sound of his own voice woke him up, and as he opened his eyes they began to smart violently. He sat up in bed still coughing and choking, and it was gradually revealed to him that the room was full of smoke.

Now Johnny had no fire in his bedroom, for the whole house was heated by hot pipes. Not long ago, too, grandfather had put in the electric light. Johnny turned on the switch at the head of his bed, but no light came.

He sat perfectly still for a few seconds realising the while that the house must assuredly be on fire somewhere. Then he leapt out of bed and flung his window wide open. He hung out of the window and filled his lungs with the good fresh air.

He was wideawake now and quite able to understand that there was danger. His first impulse was to get out of the window and scramble down into safety by the ivy on the wall. His room was on the first floor, the rooms were low and old-fashioned, and he had done it before. Just as he was preparing to scramble out he remembered the servants. The women all slept at the end of a long passage (which went the whole length of the house) through a swing door. Johnny's end was quite unoccupied, as grandfather had taken his own man with him; the lady who did the housekeeping had gone back to her own home for Christmas, and there were no visitors just then. Ridgeway slept in a wing room built over the pantry close to the back staircase. Half-way down the passage was the turret staircase, and in the turret hung the great bell to be rung to rouse the servants in case of fire or sudden illness.

Johnny drew in his head and turned back into his room. The smoke was not quite so bad now, but it was very dark; He opened the door, and as he did so there flowed in great waves and gusts of smoke that drove him back into the room again.

It would be much easier to get out of the window and go round to ring the front-door bell, or throw stones at the servants' windows, or do anything rather than face that stinging, stifling darkness which was not black but grey.

It drove him back to the window again, the window with its easy drop out into the sate, kind night of stars and watery moon and cold wet air.

But the servants! How was he to warn the servants?

And the fire might be spreading. He felt his way to the washstand and dipped one of the towels in water. He wrapped it round his neck like a muffler, covering mouth and nose, and then he opened his door again, ran down the smoke-packed passage as fast as he could; and up the little staircase to the belfry, where he fell gasping, for the acrid smoke was terrible.

Here it was better, for the belfry tower was open to the night. Johnny seized the rope and pulled for dear life. How long must he ring before they would all be roused?

It was a big, loud bell: he heard it clanging overhead, and insensibly it seemed to swing to the rhythm of these words:

"Pray for us, heroes, pray,
That when Fate lays on us our task,
We do not shame the day."

Johnny's arms were tired and his bare feet were cold. Would they hear? Had he rung long enough? Might he go back to his room now and get out of the window?

The smoke was creeping up into the belfry. It was the smoke, of course, that made the tears come into his eyes.

Clang, clang, clang, clang—clang, clang!

Johnny loosed the rope for a minute and listened.

Yes; he heard shouts.

They were roused, then: just a few more pulls and he might go.

The terrified maidservants came huddling down the back staircase and out at the back door. Men came from the stables, and the lodge, and the gardeners' cottages, and Ridgeway dropped from his window, for he could not face the smoke in the passage.

The fire was in the front of the house in the main wing; the dining room was undoubtedly in flames, and the men went round to the front with the hose while one of the grooms galloped off to the nearest town for the fire engine.

Ridgeway was the last to join the frightened group outside the back door, and his first question was, "Where's Master Johnny?"

It took several minutes of most violent language before he discovered that no one had seen Master Johnny, but his window was open, and he must have got out that way: "he was active as a cat."

But Johnny was not with the men.

"Who rang the alarm bell?" Ridgeway shouted.

Apparently no one had rung the alarm bell.

A ladder was set against Johnny's window, and Ridgeway went up and into Johnny's room.

Twice the volumes of smoke drove him back from the door, for Ridgeway had never done fire-drill at school, and knew nothing of the advantages of a wet towel; but the third time he made a dash down the passage and reached the belfry stairs. At the foot of the steps he trod upon something soft and, stooping, picked up Johnny in his arms and staggered back again.

When he appeared at the window with his burden the men sent up a cheer, but Ridgeway gave a hard, dry sob and muttered, "If 'e's dead I'm goin' back into the 'ouse; I'll never face the General."

All the same Ridgeway was the first to face the General when that aged warrior arrived at his drive gate early on Christmas morning. He faced the General with the intelligence that he would find his dining-room, his hall, and a great part of his staircase a mass of charred ruins by reason of the fusing of the wires of the recently installed electric light. And Ridgeway further related that to the General which almost consoled him for the state of chaos in which he found his household.

The General's own man had got out when Ridgeway stopped the motor at the drive gate. He and Ridgeway stood side by side at the door of the brougham while Ridgeway spoke.

"You've made it pretty clear that the boy saved the lot of you," said the General. "But who the dickens fetched the boy out of all that smother? Tell me that, now!"

Ridgeway passed his hand over his very rough chin and looked foolish, saying never a word.

"Get in, man!" said the General, "get in. Do you think we can loaf about here all day—get in!" and the General dragged Ridgeway into the motor with both hands.

As the motor rounded the last corner of the drive, the General beheld, as through a mist, a little figure in an Eton jacket standing outside the bulged and blackened front door.

The figure waved cheerfully and ran to assist the General to alight.

The old soldier grasped Johnny by the shoulder and shook him gently:

"You're a nice person to leave in charge!" he roared. "What have you got to say for yourself, hey?"

Johnny grinned. "You're very well up to time, sir," he said cheerily. "We'll have to have breakfast in the housekeeper's room, for you never saw such a beastly mess in all your life!"

XIII

A GIOTTO OF THE COTSWOLDS

When Mary Cardross first saw Jethro he was six years old, and still wore petticoats. He was not particularly small for his age, and his appearance was, to say the least of it, peculiar. A cotton frock, made with skirt and body like a housemaid's morning dress, reached to his ankles; and he seemed to have very little underneath, for this outer garment hung limp and straight from waist to heel, except on Sundays, when, fresh from the hands of his aunt, it stuck out all round like a lamp-shade. His hair, cropped very short round the edges, was several inches long on the crown. Mrs. Gegg, by courtesy his "aunt," did not even put a basin on his head by way of guide in the shearing, but, brushing all the hair forward from the centre of the crown, laid the scissors

against his forehead, and cut the hair close to the skin all round. It grew again quickly, and stuck out above his temples like a new straw thatch.

"Isn't he rather a big boy for petticoats?" Mary asked, as her landlady removed the supper, pausing at intervals to explain Jethro's presence under her roof.

"Yes, 'e be a biggish boy, but I hain't a-goin' to be at no expense for 'im as I can 'elp. 'E can wait cum Christmas for 'is trowsies. 'E ought to be thankful as 'e weren't tuk to the workus, an' me only 'is mother's cousin, though 'e *do* call me haunt. 'E be a great expense, and I've 'ad 'im this two year. The most onandiest, nothingly child you ever see,—always a-scribblin' and a-messin' and moonin'. I don't set no store by Jethro, I can tell you, Miss! 'E's got to be brought up 'ard to hearn 'is own livin'"—and Mrs. Gegg paused breathless. Mary said nothing, but she felt rather sorry for Jethro.

Had Mrs. Gegg lived anywhere but in the lovely, lonely Cotswold village perched like a smiling fastness in the midst of beech-clad hills, reached only by the loosest and worst of roads, she would hardly have dared to dress a six-year boy in such extraordinary fashion. Public opinion would have been too strong for her. But Nookham, with its dozen cottages, lived and let live in easy apathy, and Jethro in bitterness of spirit wore his cotton frock. Two years ago Mary had discovered Nookham. Friends had driven her over to have tea in the woods, and to gather the wild strawberries found there in such abundance. She fell in love with the place, and came again upon a private exploring expedition, when she discovered that lodgings were to be had at the post-office, in the house of one Mrs. Gegg. There she spent a most delightful fortnight, sketching. Never was more attentive and honest landlady, never cleaner, more orderly house! It is true that Mary's painting tackle greatly distressed her hostess, partaking as it did of the nature of things "messy and slummicky," which her soul abhorred. Otherwise, she liked Mary, as did most people; and she had in her way great toleration for the "curus ways" of the "gentry" generally, expecting less of them in the matter of common sense than she exacted from people of her own class. And now, after two years in Italy, Mary found herself once more in the dear Cotswold country, in the very middle of a perfect June. Nookham generally was unfeignedly pleased to see her again. Few strangers came to stay there, and the roads were too bad and too hilly for even the ubiquitous cyclist. The squire's house was three miles from the village, the vicarage two, and the tall lady with the abundant wavy grey hair and strong, kind face had made a very distinct and pleasant impression.

Mary did not catch a glimpse of Jethro during her first day until, happening at post-time to want a letter she had left in her bedroom, she ran upstairs to fetch it.

The room, with door flung wide, faced the narrow staircase. In the very middle of the floor stood Jethro, in rapt contemplation of a large photograph of Giovanni Bellini's Madonna,—the one in the sacristy of the Frari at Venice—which Mary had placed on the little mantelpiece.

The day was well on in the week, the cotton frock hung in limp and draggled folds about the childish limbs, and the queer little creature's attitude was almost pathetically boyish as he stood, legs far apart, his hands grasping the lilac cotton where pockets ought to have been.

For a full minute Mary stood watching him. He made no attempt to touch the picture; in fact—and afterwards the circumstance seemed significant—he stood at some distance from it, that he might see it whole.

Mary must have moved, for the stairs creaked. Jethro jumped, did not even turn his head to see who was coming, but darted under the bed with the instant speed of a startled squirrel. She came into the room, shut the door, and sat down on her trunk, remarking, "If you come out I'll show you some more pictures!" Dead silence for five minutes, while Mary sat patiently waiting. She was determined that she would in no way frighten or constrain the timid child, for it seemed to her that the little Cotswold peasant who stood gazing with absorbed interest at her favourite Madonna must be worth knowing.

"I can't think why you stay under there, Jethro," she said at last; "we could have such a nice time together if you would come out, and I must go directly to finish my letters."

But, like Brer Rabbit, Jethro "lay low and said nuffin'", so Mary was fain to go and finish her letters, determined to play a waiting game. From time to time she stopped writing, looking pained and puzzled. "It is dreadful that a little child should be so afraid of one," she said to herself; "what can they have done to him?" Presently Jethro rushed past the open door, and later on there came from the direction of the back kitchen a sound uncommonly like smacks.

Mrs. Gegg laid the supper as though she were dealing cards with the angry emphasis indulged in by certain Bridge players after a series of bad hands. Mary ventured on a timid remark to the effect that Nookham had changed but little during her two years absence. Mrs.

Gegg replied that "Squire didn't encourage no fancy building," and that therefore it was likely to remain the same for some time to come. Conversation languished, and she went into the garden to "take in" certain exquisitely white garments still spread upon the currant bushes while Mary stood at the front door waiting for the nightingale to "touch his lyre of gold," when another and very different sound broke into the scented stillness—a breathless, broken sound of sobs—a child's sobs. She listened for a moment, then turned and went back into the house to follow the sound. From the landing window she noted with relief that Mrs. Gegg was engaged in converse with a neighbour (Mary stood in great awe of her landlady); she mounted a ladder leading to the attic, and there, under the slates, lying full length on the outside of his clean little bed, was Jethro, sobbing with an *abandon* and intensity that left Mary in no doubt as to what she should do this time. Bumping her head violently, and nearly driving it through the slates in her haste, for she could by no means stand upright, she climbed in and reached the side of the bed.

Her entrance was so noisy that the child had plenty of time to vanish, as he had done in the afternoon; but he was evidently so astonished by her appearance that no thought of flight occurred to him; he even forgot to be frightened, left off crying, and asked eagerly:

"Did you 'urt your 'ead?"

"No, not much. I heard you crying, and came to see what was the matter."

Jethro looked queerer than ever. He wore a voluminous unbleached calico nightgown, several sizes too big for him; the big tears on his cheeks' shone like jewels in the soft June twilight, and the thatch of tow-coloured hair was rumped into a quick-set hedge above his great, grave forehead.

"I've bin beat," he whispered.

"Why, what had you done?"

"I thrown a stwun at Earny Mustoe akez 'e did call oi 'Jemima,' and it did break 's mother's windy."

"Is he bigger than you?"

"Yes, 'e be noine!"

"Then why didn't you go for him and hit him? You couldn't break any windows that way, and it would teach him better manners."

Jethro stared in astonishment at this war-like lady.

"But 'e be ever so much bigger nor me," he exclaimed, "and I be allays beat aterwards"; then, remembering his woes, "and it do 'urt so, it do," and Jethro began to wail again.

Mary gathered the woebegone little figure into her arms and sat down on the floor, saying cheerfully:

"Cheer up, old chap; I'll pay for that window, and you mustn't throw any more stones; and don't cry any more, and we'll have ever such nice times while I'm here."

It was evident that Jethro was not used to being cuddled. He sat stiff and solemn on her knee, staring at her with great puzzled eyes. She talked to him as tender women talk to children, and finally put him to bed, tucked him in, kissed and blessed him, and climbed down the ladder again. Much to her relief she saw that Mrs. Gegg was still in the garden.

Jethro lay awake, staring at a patch of moonlight on the whitewashed wall. Hazily, vaguely, there arose in his mind a collection that at one time some one always tucked him into bed—some one who looked kindly at him. He couldn't remember the face, but the eyes were like the tall lady's—like the lady's in the picture downstairs; and again Jethro wanted to cry, but not because he had been "beat." However, he would not cry; she had asked him not to, and she had such sharp ears, and she would come to see him every night, and she had lots more pictures. Here the tall lady and the lady in the picture became inextricably mixed up, and Jethro slept that blessed sleep of childhood which is oblivion.

"I'd just like to show you, Miss, a present as I've 'ad from my nephew down Cubberly way. 'E's on'y fifteen, and 'e's that clever with 'is fingers——" Mrs. Gegg held up for Mary's admiration a frame made of fir-cones which had been varnished and squeezed together till they looked like a hollow square of highly polished brown sausages. "There, Jethro, if you could make summut like that."

"I likes 'em better a-growin'," said Jethro, softly.

During the scornful scolding that followed Mary watched Jethro. His serene grey eyes under the square, peaceful forehead looked a trifle weary, and he sighed as his aunt harangued him, but he did not seem greatly disturbed. After all, whether people scolded or not, gracious, gentle things continued a-growin', and Jethro through the sweet uses of adversity had early learnt that "Nature, the kind old nurse," never refuses consolation to such of her children as seek it in sweet

solitary places with an understanding heart.

Mary found Jethro very difficult to get at. He followed her about, and would sit watching her paint for hours in silent, absolute absorption, but he very seldom spoke himself. One day, as they were walking together down the steep stony road leading to the woods, he suddenly clasped her round the knees, exclaiming, "You be such a dear 'ooman!"

Mary stooped hastily and kissed the little upturned face. In a life compassed about with much affection and many friends no one had ever spoken to her with such a rapture of appreciation, and she fell to thinking how little she had done to deserve it. Two days after she got a letter.

"The mater cannot write herself," it ran, "because she is busy with a big chest in the attic upon which the dust of ages has hitherto been allowed to rest in peace. From time to time you may hear her murmur, 'Six, and an average size. Poor little lad! What a shame!!—this will do, I think.' So you know what is going on. Do you remember the bundles? All neatly docketed—'To fit boy of twelve,' etc. A regular trousseau is coming, so tell that kiddie to cheer up."

Three days later Jethro appeared at school in all the glory of jacket and "trowsies"; and the very boy who had most grievously tormented him about his petticoats chastised another on his behalf who made derisive remarks about a "gal in trowsies." Thus the chief misery in Jethro's life was removed, and he felt that he bade fair to become a social success.

His aunt manifested no objection to the new clothes. A thrifty soul, she believed in taking what she could get, and remarked, quite good-naturedly, that Jethro did look a bit more like other folk now.

"Of a Saturday" Mrs. Gegg "hearth-stoned" the whole of her back kitchen till its spotlessness rivalled that of the whitewashed walls. The placid expectancy of Saturday evening had settled on the village. Mary, tired by her long day's painting, was resting upon the slippery horsehair sofa, and meditating on the impossibility of reproducing on canvas the brilliant transparency of young green larches, when her landlady burst into the room, positively breathless with passion. "Just you come 'ere, miss, and see what that, there mishtiful young imp o' darkness been and done: I'll warm 'im so's 'e shan't forget it in a 'urry!" Mary hastily followed the woman into the sacred back kitchen, and there in a corner near the pump crouched Jethro, one arm curved above his head to protect it from a renewal of the rain of blows that had just fallen, while the floor was decorated by a monochrome landscape, painted by Jethro with Mrs. Gegg's blue-bag.

Mary gazed at it with astonishment. With strong certainty of touch the child had splashed in by means of the coarse blue the stretch of hills that met his eyes every time he went out at Mrs. Gegg's front door. The queer impressionist sketch had atmosphere, distance, and, above all, perspective. "Oh, Mrs. Gegg!" cried Mary, holding back the angry little woman with her strong arms as she was advancing across the picture to wreak fresh vengeance upon Jethro, "leave it! leave it till Monday, and I'll give you blue and whitening to last you a twelve-month. It is a wonderful picture! Some day you will be proud of him. He couldn't help it. We none of us gave him anything to draw on. Why didn't you tell me, child, that you could draw like this?"

Astonishment was cooling Mrs. Gegg's wrath. She had heard, nay, upon one occasion seen, that a pavement artist in distant Gloucester earned good money, though it was but a poor trade. Then there was Miss Cardross, always messing with paints and things;—perhaps she really knew something about it. "If you will leave the picture where it is till Monday," continued Mary, "I will ride over to Colescombe to-morrow and persuade an artist friend to come and look at it, and we will see what can be done for Jethro. Please, Mrs. Gegg!" And Mary got her way.

* * * * *

"You must leave him where he is," said the great art critic to Mary when he had inspected the frescoed floor. "He may be a genius. I think he is. All the more reason to leave him alone just now. Give him paper and paints—lots of them; don't lose sight of him and we'll help him when the right time comes. It hasn't come yet."

So Mary left him in the peace of the kindly Cotswold hills. And while Bellini's Madonna smiles down upon him from the whitewashed attic wall, while sun and cloud make light and shadow for him on beech-clad slope and grassy plain, and life is full "of mysteries and presences, innumerable, of living things," we need not pity Jethro. For, even as one who wandered long ago upon the steeps of far Fièsole found infinite potentialities among solitary places and pleasant pastoral creatures, even so in time to come the little Cotswold peasant may enter into his inheritance in that kingdom where "every colour is lovely and every space is light. The world, the universe, is divine; all sadness is a part of harmony, and all gloom a part of peace."

XIV THE DAY AFTER

The election was over and Patsey was sad, for her father had lost his seat. Patsey could not altogether understand why her father should be so anxious to sit in that particular House in London when he had so many comfortable chairs in his own. But at eight years old a little girl cannot expect to understand everything, and she was a very humble-minded child. She loved her father dearly, and whatever he wanted, she wanted too, very much indeed; so that when she went downstairs that morning to pour out his coffee, and found him looking so pale and tired in spite of his gay pink coat and beautiful white breeches, for he was going out hunting, she gave him an extra big hug and laid her soft cheek against his, saying, "Dear, dear dad," quite a number of times, and big tears forced themselves out of her eyes and ran down her cheeks, although she did her best to keep them back. As her father kissed her he tasted the wet, salt little cheek, and held her away from him, exclaiming, "How now, Pat! What's the matter? You mustn't fret. We're sportsmen, you know, and we must take a defeat like gentlemen; no grouching. The umpire's decision has gone against us and we must abide by it. Look at me! If I'd been in I'd have been going off to make bad speeches in stuffy committee-rooms; as it is, I'm off for a good day's sport in beautiful soft weather. Which is best, do you think?"

Patsey tried to smile, but she knew very well which her father would have liked best, and her tears came afresh.

"He's a dirty Radical," she sobbed, "a nasty, common working man. I can't think how they could like him better than you—so clean and handsome and good."

Her father wiped the wet little face with his big silk handkerchief, and took her up on his knee.

"I'd rather you didn't repeat what you hear the servants say, Pat," he said gravely. "It's largely a case of 'let the best man win,' and we'll hope he has."

So Patsey cheered up, poured out her father's coffee, and they talked about pleasanter things than the election till she went out on to the steps to see him ride away.

Then everything seemed very flat, for life had been rather exciting lately. It is true that Patsey had never been allowed to take an active part in the election, her father expressing himself somewhat strongly in condemnation of such candidates as "turned their little daughters into sandwich-men and their young sons into phonographs"; but she had been permitted to wear a blue rosette when she drove into the town with her governess. And sometimes people who knew her cheered her as they passed, and it was pleasant to feel so important.

It was curious, too, that although all the servants were so loud in their abuse of the new member, they none of them seemed in the least cast down by the result of the election; and Patsey's gentle little soul was puzzled by a partisanship that loudly disparaged the conqueror while yet it held no sympathy for the vanquished.

All morning it rained, but after lunch the sun came out, and Patsey's governess, who had a cold, bade her put on her overshoes and go and play in the garden, for half an hour by herself.

Now, Patsey's father had given her a bicycle just a week before, and although she was not yet an expert rider, still, she could get along, and it struck her that it would be a good opportunity to practise by riding up and down the drive. A stray gardener helped her on, and she found herself riding so beautifully that when she came to the lodge and saw that the great gates were open, the spirit of adventure seized upon her and bore her through them, out on to the high road.

Patsey had never been in the road alone in all her life before, so that she felt most bold and daring, and the feeling was so new and delightful that she rode on for half a mile, finally turning into a quiet lane that led to the cemetery which lay a couple of miles outside the town. Here it was very muddy, and Patsey had not gone very far before her bicycle skidded violently. She tried to save herself with one foot, but it twisted under her, and she came down with the bicycle on the top of her.

When she tried to get up again she found that one of her ankles was horribly swollen and painful, and that she couldn't stand. It was a very woebegone little figure that sat weeping at the side of the road. The "fond adventure" had indeed ended disastrously, and Patsey bitterly repented her of her enterprise, and longed for her governess or nurse.

It was such a lonely road. Except on Sundays, when people went to take flowers to the cemetery, hardly any one went up or down, and the awful prospect of sitting there till some one

should come from home to look for her—and why should they look for her in that particular road?—confronted Patsey with chilly menace.

The January sunshine faded early, and she began to feel very cold.

Presently she heard quick footsteps coming from the direction of the cemetery, and a man appeared in sight. As he reached the prostrate bicycle and the doleful little figure seated beside it, he stopped, exclaiming, "Hullo! What's to do here? Have you tumbled off, my dear? I wouldn't sit there, though, it's so wet."

"I can't get up," poor Patsey faltered; "I've hurt my foot; it's all gone fat and funny, and it does pain so. I can't stand. Oh, could you? could you—call in at my home on your way back and tell them to send the carriage for me? It would be so very kind of you. Do you think you could —?"

The man stooped down and looked at the poor little foot. He touched it gently and shook his head, saying, "It's rather a bad sprain, I fear; just tell me where you live and I'll carry you home. Then they can get a doctor and have it fomented and bound. I'd best tie it up now as well as I can, so as not to shake you more than I can help."

The man took out a large handkerchief of brilliant yellow silk, and Patsey shuddered. "Oh, please don't!" she cried. "I mustn't wear anything yellow, not to-day of all days; it would be so disloyal to daddie. If it must be tied up, please take mine—but I don't think it need be."

As Patsey dragged a damp and dirty little square of once-white cambric from her pocket the man laughed.

"That's no use," he said. "If little Tory ladies go and sprain their ankles just like common folk, they must bear a bandage even if it's the wrong colour."

And without more ado this masterful man bound up the little foot with his gaudy handkerchief very deftly and kindly.

"I hope we shan't meet anybody," said Patsey, when he had lifted her into his arms, having carried the bicycle behind the hedge for safety. "It would be so unkind of me to wear yellow to-day."

The man turned and looked sharply at the pale little face so close to his own, and gave a low whistle.

"Do you know who I am?" Patsey asked with dignity.

"And do you know who *I* am?" demanded the man.

There flashed an illuminating ray of remembrance into Patsey's mind. She had seen this man before, and he was no other than the "Labour candidate" who had stolen her father's seat.

There was silence for a minute till Patsey said earnestly, "If you know who I am, you need not wonder that I object to wear anything yellow." Then, for Patsey's father had taught her that other people have political opinions too, "And perhaps you object just as much to carrying a little blue girl."

The man laughed and held her a little closer as he said, "Far from objecting, I like carrying this little blue girl exceedingly. It's a long time since I carried any little girl," he added sadly.

"Haven't you any little girls of your own?" she asked curiously.

"My little girl lies yonder," said the man, nodding his head in the direction of the cemetery.

Patsey lifted her arm and put it round his neck that he might carry her more easily, and, forgetting all about the yellow handkerchief, exclaimed, "How sad! I *am* so sorry. My mummy is buried there too. Was your little girl ill a long time? My mummy was, months and months. Was your little girl eight, too, like me?"

"She was just ten when she died," the man said quietly, "but she was nothing like so big or so heavy as you, poor little lass! She died because I could get neither food nor firing for her, and I've just been to her grave...." The man paused, and in quite a different tone continued, "And that's why I stand in your father's shoes to-day, little lady, and perhaps I may help to make it better for other little girls by and by."

"I wish my daddie had known," Patsey said softly. "He would have sent you everything you wanted for her; he would indeed. He's so good to the poor."

The man gave a hard little laugh.

"I've no doubt of it," he said, "but, you see, that's not what we want. We're not over-fond of charity, some of us. Besides, charity's a bit uncertain. What we want is to be able to give our little girls food and firing our own selves. Yes, charity's a bit uncertain and children's appetites uncommonly regular."

"Were you hungry and cold too?" asked Patsey.

Again the man laughed that queer, hard laugh. "It don't hurt a man to be hungry and cold

occasionally," he said grimly, "but too much of it breaks a man's spirit. It's seeing them belonging to him hungry and cold and not being able to help them that puts the devil into a man. I beg your pardon, little lady, but there's no other word."

By this time they had turned into Patsey's own drive. The sun was setting behind the house, gorgeous and golden, and the mellow light fell full on the face of the "dirty Radical" who carried Patsey. She considered him carefully. It was a sad face, strong and lined with hardship and suffering, but there was something in the expression of his eyes that made her forget his politics, and she patted his shoulder, saying warmly, "I hope you will succeed, indeed I do."

Her father, still in his muddy hunting things, was standing on the steps looking anxiously down the drive. When he saw them he ran forward, exclaiming anxiously, "Patsey, my darling, what has happened?"

"It's all right, daddie," Patsey called back. "I've had a spill off my bicycle, and this ... gentleman found me and has carried me all the way home."

Patsey's father smiled a whimsical smile as he held out his arms for her, and as the muddy little figure changed hands, he said, "You are evidently determined to benefit *all* your constituents, sir."

The Labour member smiled too, but his face was very sad as he answered, "You might have my place and welcome, if I could have what you hold in your arms."

Without another word he turned and walked swiftly down the drive. Patsey's father neither called after him, nor did he follow; but he held his little daughter very close.

That night Patsey added an extra petition to her usual prayers. It was: "Please, dear God, let the kind Radical man what carried me, get what he wants for all the other little girls."

XV A COUP D'ÉTAT

Roger stood at the nursery window apparently watching the driving rain, but in reality puzzling, with knit brows, over a situation he could by no means understand, although he was painfully conscious of its vague discomfort. When a small boy loves both his parents dearly, and it is gradually but most effectually brought home to him that he cannot show affection for the one without in some subtle fashion appearing to hurt the other, the said small boy finds himself in a *cul de sac* none the less final that its walls are by no means clearly defined. Older people than Roger realise that the only way out of a *cul de sac* is to go back the way you came; but he, having no idea how he had got there, could not do this; in fact, it was only that very morning that he awoke to the fact that he *was* there.

It was in this wise. His mother was changing the ornaments in the drawing-room—she had changed her drawing-room about once a week lately, lest it should get to look "set"—and she had moved the easel holding the big portrait of her uncle, the Dean, over to the corner by the piano. Roger assisted her, admiring her arrangement, as he admired everything about his mother, and she said,

"I hope you will grow up like your uncle Ambrose, sonnie!"

Roger was by no means sure that he echoed her wish. He had once visited the deanery and found the atmosphere somewhat oppressively dignified.

"Why, mother dear?" he asked.

"Because"—and a certain tone in her voice puzzled Roger—"he is a stainless gentleman."

"I think I'd rather be like father," he said meditatively; "that would do just as well. To be a dean you've got to be a parson first, and I'd much rather be a soldier, like father."

His mother turned her head hastily so that the child could not see her face.

"You can be like your uncle in character whatever your profession; it is there I would have you resemble him."

"But," interrupted Roger, "father's a stainless gentleman too, isn't he? And he's much more jollier than Uncle Ambrose."

His mother did not answer, and to the child such silence seemed charged with chilly omen. He did not ask her, as he longed to do, what she exactly meant by a stainless gentleman. He was sure that in some incomprehensible fashion the stainlessness of great-Uncle Ambrose reflected unfavourably upon his father and resented it accordingly. He was also sure that this enviable quality had nothing to do with personal cleanliness, for there was no one in the whole world so

clean and smart as father. Why, when he drove to a distant meet, he wore "two pinafores," one in front and one behind, to keep his leathers spotlessly white; the said pinafores, by the way, doing much towards reconciling Roger to the wearing of his bib at meals.

The nursery window was open and the soft spring rain whispered pleasant things to the grass; but Roger did not listen. For the first time in his life he was weighing evidence; and the worst of it was, that, do as he would, the bulk of the evidence all went into one scale.

"They're just as fond of *me*," he thought to himself, "but somehow they're never with me together." There were no jolly drives into the town now—those drives in the high dog-cart when he would sit between them rapturously thinking that never had little boy such resplendent parents. Now, mother always went in the "bucket" with his little sisters, and when father took him out driving, mother did not even come and stand on the steps to wave them a farewell. She never sat on father's knee now, or called him a "ridiculous boy," or untied his necktie, or ruffled his hair. She seemed always to sit as far off as possible, and when she did look at her big, jolly husband, there was that in her expression which Roger felt he would rather not understand.

The truth was that Roger the elder and Lettice his wife, having been at one time rather demonstratively fond of one another, found it somewhat difficult to keep up appearances since such time as began the state of affairs their little son so deprecated. Lettice certainly flattered herself upon the secrecy and dignity with which she attended to the linen less well-bred people will sometimes insist upon hanging up to the public gaze even before it has gone through the cleansing process, and was quite unconscious that all the while her servants discussed the affair exhaustively, her friends pronounced the position untenable, and her little son grieved and wondered, casting about in his child mind for some way of clearing an atmosphere which even he felt was so charged with electricity as to be well-nigh intolerable.

The rain ceased whispering, but the trees took up the story and rustled importantly, shaking their glistening leaves at the sun who winked lazily in the west. The two little sisters called to Roger to come and have tea with the dolls; but he shook his head impatiently, thrusting it between the bars of the window that he might not hear them. A robin on the hawthorn hedge below regarded him in friendly fashion and sang a song of coming summer; but Roger saw nothing but a blurred little splash of crimson against the green, for his eyes were full of tears.

"Father, what's a stainless gentleman?" he asked as they went together in the evening to feed the big carp in the pond.

Roger the elder stopped in the middle of the path. He took his cigar out of his mouth and cleared his throat.

"Well, sonnie, I suppose it's a man who runs very straight, who never plays the fool, and does idiotic things, for the doing of which he has to pay Jew prices—a very good man, you know. But why? What d'you want to know for?"

"Well, mother said Uncle Ambrose is a 'stainless gentleman,' and she hoped I'd be like him when I'm grown up."

"For the matter of that, sonnie, so do I. You couldn't have a better model."

"I'd rather be like you, fardie, dear—much rather." And Roger took his father's hand in both his own, and squeezed it hard.

The elder Roger said nothing for a minute, but he grew very red. How was he to tell the faithful little soul at his side that his ideal was by no means a high one?

"You'll grow up very much the sort of man you want to be, sonnie. So mind and want to be the best sort going."

"Well, 't all events, I shan't be like Uncle Ambrose. He's too fond of sitting still."

"You'll be fond of sitting still when you're his age," said his father, with a sigh of relief.

They fed the carp, and Roger almost forgot his troubles, till, on returning to the house, they saw his mother on the tennis court with the little girls. She called to him to come and play cricket with his sisters.

"Will you come too, father?" he asked, pulling at his father's hand.

The elder Roger looked somewhat wistfully at the little group inside the netting on the tennis court. His little daughters kissed their fingers to him, calling to him to come; but his wife had turned her back upon him, and she had a most expressive back. He shook his head at the children, muttering something about letters to write, and turned to walk slowly towards the house.

"I'll bowl to you if you come, Roger; the grass is really quite dry again!" called his mother. Roger stood still in the drive, looking from one to the other of his parents both with their backs to him. Lettice looked over her shoulder and saw her husband's departing figure. "Come, my son!"

she called, with a queer little catch in her sweet voice. "I've hardly seen you all day."

Roger went round the netting till he found an opening and pushed through. His mother came to meet him, and put her arm round his shoulders. He pointed to his father, who was walking slowly away with bent head.

"Don't you think fardie looks rather lonely?" he asked.

Lettice looked after her husband. "I don't think he is lonely, sonnie: he has so many—other friends." But the boy was not convinced.

Roger's mother bowls uncommonly well, but he did not enjoy the cricket. He kept contrasting it with that of last year. Then father always played too, and one day mother bowled him clean, and there was great shouting and excitement. "It was jollier cricket then!" he reflected sadly.

The elder Roger went and sat in the gun-room. He had to relight his cigar three times, and his reflections, although engrossing, did not seem pleasant.

"Will she never understand," he muttered, "that a man may care and yet play the giddy, and that he may play the giddy and not care a damn? What an almighty fool I've been!"

When the children had gone to bed Lettice went and sat in the newly arranged drawing-room.

"It's perfectly hideous!" she exclaimed; "I can't sit here!"

But she did sit there, staring at nothing for a good half-hour till the dressing-bell rang. In the evening she took up that very wise book, *On the Face of the Waters*, and read in what manner Kate Erleton had refused "her chance."

When little Roger woke next morning he remembered that something very pleasant was to happen that day. He was going with his father to the riding-school in the town to see a pony, and on that pony, if it proved suitable, he was to go hunting next winter. As the full significance of this tremendous occurrence was brought home to him in the shape of a pair of new and very stiff gaiters, he felt equal to negotiating the very biggest bullfinch; which may account for what happened half an hour later, as he stood in the hall waiting for the dog-cart.

The rain had come on again, heavy "Mayish rain," as Roger called it, but they didn't mind about that. His father was standing in the doorway looking very big in a wide white macintosh. His mother ran downstairs with her own macintosh cape for the little boy. As she reached the bottom step, the elder Roger came back into the hall. Perkins, who had been in "father's regiment" when father first joined, stood at the door with a rug over his arm, looking imperturbable as usual.

Lettice stooped to kiss her little son as she buttoned the cape at his neck. He caught at her hands as they fumbled with the stiff button, and said loudly,

"Kiss father too, mother dear, and wish us luck!"

Perkins turned his head quickly, looking back into the hall. Lettice felt the small insistent hands upon her own, and heard her husband's quick breathing just behind her. There flashed into her brain the thought that here and now was her "chance." She turned quickly and lifted up her small proud face towards her husband.

There was a flutter and flash of white macintosh in the dusky hall as Roger the elder caught his wife up in his arms and carried her into the dining-room. The door shut with a bang, and little Roger was left alone with Perkins, who blew his nose and waved the rug, exclaiming, in an excited whisper—

"Bless your 'eart, sir, you've done it!"

Roger stood on the steps and waited; the smart little groom drove the dog-cart round and round the drive; ten minutes passed, and still father did not come.

"I'm rather afraid we shall miss the 'ppointment," said Roger, and made as if to go after his parents into the dining-room; but Perkins caught him by the shoulder and pulled him out on to the steps again, exclaiming fiercely,

"No, you don't, Master Roger—not for *your* life!"

Another five minutes, then the dining-room door opened: with a swish and swither of silk petticoats his mother flew upstairs two steps at a time.

"Buck up!" her husband shouted after her, and his voice sounded as though he'd got a dreadful cold; then, to Roger, "Mother is coming too, to see about the pony; and just look what a lovely day it's turned."

Roger thrust his hand into his father's, who held it very tight, but he didn't say anything at all.

There are the makings of a statesman in Roger.

XVI
THE STACEYS OF ELCOMBE HOUSE

After Harry went to school Paul and I had breakfast as well as lunch with father and mother, unless there happened to be a great many visitors. This was interesting because the letters came at breakfast and we heard the news.

It is curious how the most epoch-making intelligence is often given quite quietly with no flourish of trumpets, no preparation; just as the most momentous decisions are almost always made at once, without much reflection.

In the middle of May—I remember it was such a beautiful morning and tulips blazed in the herbaceous border opposite the window—mother looked up from her letters and said: "Measles is very bad in Fiammetta's school. Mr. Glyn has taken her away, and as soon as the quarantine is over he wants us to have her here for the rest of the summer, as he needs to go to America this month."

I couldn't speak. It was so tremendous.

Fiammetta here! for the rest of the summer! and summer had only just begun.

"Well," said father, "that seems to me a very sound suggestion—but what'll he do with Miss Sparling?"

She was the lady who kept house for him.

"She'll go off on a round of visits and they'll shut the house. We were to have the child in any case in the holidays, so it's only a month or two sooner. It will be nice for you, Janey, to have her"—and mother smiled at me.

Nice for me!

I mumbled something suitable: but I felt too strongly to do more than mumble. There was a singing in my ears and a lump in my throat ... but father understood, for he said: "It will be pleasant to have the little blue maid again: eh, Janey?" and I nodded at father and father nodded at me. Then he opened the newspaper and didn't look at me any more, and I was grateful.

"I wonder," said Paul, "how many more plays she's been to. We shall be able to act them all when she's told us."

A year ago she had come to us, this child, so utterly different from any other child we knew; come to us, and, for me, had changed and widened and vitalised the whole essential part of my being.

At first I wasn't even sure that I liked her. She was so different: but gradually I discovered that in this difference lay her mysterious elusive charm.

Little blue-gowned Fiammetta, always quaint, always picturesque, always and entirely unexpected. At first her somewhat superior and grown-up attitude irritated us extremely, but very soon we found that this was but a thin veneer acquired by much contact with grown-up people of a type we seldom saw. Beneath it was the child, a veritable child—whimsical, imaginative affectionate, ever-various—with a power of suggesting and carrying through new and fascinating forms of play that even Paul could not equal, Paul who had imagination enough to stock ten families.

But we regarded the vagaries of our younger brother with suspicion and some scorn. He was so young. What is eight compared to eleven? And Harry, now alas! exiled at a preparatory school, was twelve. Harry, my guide, philosopher and friend, reft from me for long periods of the year.

We had seen her once since last summer—just once, in the Christmas holidays, when Harry, Paul and I, in charge of Miss Goodlake, our governess, went for two long, crowded, glorious days to London. We stayed out at Hampstead, where Mr. Glyn had taken a house that Fiammetta might as a day-girl go to a nice school there.

But when you are seeing things all day long you can't seem to see people, and Fiammetta herself was swamped in a sea of other wonders and impressions.

Now she was really coming back and I should get some good of her.

And the very week she came back we had to go from Friday to Monday to stay with Uncle Edward and Aunt Alice over at Elcombe House.

I never wanted to go there, and desired it less than ever just then; but Aunt Alice is mother's sister and it had been arranged for weeks, and when mother suggested that I couldn't go because Fiammetta was coming, they invited her too with the utmost cordiality. So there was no getting out of it.

As it happened, it proved a more amusing visit than usual.

"What's the matter with them, Janey, that you groan so?" Fiammetta asked that Friday morning. "Don't you *like* your cousins?"

Put crudely like that, it sounded rather bad. I hedged.

"I *like* them well enough, but I hate going there, to stay. It's so stiff somehow, everything's always arranged for one—you'll see."

"I like Teddy," Lucy announced—plump, placid Lucy, who had come into our room in nurse's wake while she packed our things for Sunday. "I *love* Teddy," Lucy continued, "he and me's both five."

"If," nurse remarked severely, "you was a bit more *like* your cousins, Miss Janey, it would be better for all parties. Very nicely brought-up young ladies they are, and full of accomplishments."

That was it. They *were* so full of accomplishments. Hermy (her name was Hermione), only a year my senior, was already learning to paint in oils and studied Italian. Viola, eighteen months younger, could play quite difficult music and danced by herself at tea-parties, clad in classic draperies. Teddy—it was father who called him Teddy, and the name stuck, though Uncle Edward disliked it extremely—was the best of them: moon-faced, good-natured and absolutely simple, a well-meaning, quite ordinary little boy with no airs or graces. Teddy, so Harry said, was "awfully decent."

"You haven't explained," Fiammetta insisted. "What's your uncle like?"

"It's no use," I exclaimed, "I can't explain—you wait. Perhaps," I added hopefully, "you'll like him."

When Uncle Edward bought Elcombe House, only eight miles off, we children rejoiced: for now, we thought, there could be no possible reason for the "Eeny-Peenies," as we called the girls, coming to stay with us. But we had reckoned without the hospitality of the Staceys. We were everlastingly being invited to stay with them, and of two evils this was by far the greater. They were always—Uncle Edward, the two governesses, Hermy and Vi—trying to improve us, especially me.

Paul didn't fit as to age, and his temperament was, apparently, even less adaptable than mine. Whenever Paul went, there was trouble. Lucy and Teddy were the best of friends, but nurse and the Staceys' nurse couldn't hit it off at all. Harry was safe at school, therefore the lot generally fell upon me to go ... and I hated it.

This time I felt it would not be so bad because Fiammetta was there, and Fiammetta was capable of holding her own with dozens of Staceys.

In the first place, she was a well-known poet's only child. They would respect her for that. In the second place, people who tried to patronise Fiammetta were riding for a fall. That I had seen proved, over and over again. Paul was like that too, but then Paul was only one of us, and they looked down on us. Uncle Edward looked down on father. I knew it, I felt it. I resented it intensely.

Uncle Edward had a way of condemning amusements that he didn't care about by calling them "rather horrid" in a high thin voice that was far more condemnatory than the loudest fulminations of ordinary folk. Both hunting and shooting fell under this ban, and father liked both. As for fishing, Uncle Edward considered it the last resource of the mentally effete. Agricultural pursuit; he dismissed as "rather bucolic," and father farmed his own land and was extremely keen about everything that concerned it. Whist and Bridge—Bridge had just begun to be popular—he described as "dreadful games"; in fact, he "loathed all cards" except Patience. He was an expert in Patience, knowing quite forty different kinds; but he didn't care for it unless at least three people watched him do it—which was dull for the selected three.

He was a slim, small man, whom no mortal ever saw without his pince-nez—I believe he slept in them—with a pale, regularly-featured face, clean-shaven and legal-looking. He was delicate, took immense care of himself, and cultivated a large and healthy crop of dislikes. His sense of smell was painfully acute, and many quite ordinary odours, that do not offend less sensitively constituted mortals, were, to him, quite unbearable. Tobacco he could not endure. When father went to Elcombe House he had to creep away to the furthest point of the most distant garden to enjoy the smoke he could in no wise forgo. And when he returned, Uncle Edward always sniffed delicately and looked pained.

A cut melon caused Uncle Edward to feel unwell, and I do believe if any one had eaten an apple in front of him he would have fainted outright.

We arrived just before tea. Hermy and Vi met us in the hall and walked upstairs one on either side of Fiammetta, leaving me to follow by myself. They showed us our rooms—we had one each—and they left me in mine while they both accompanied Fiammetta to hers.

After tea, presided over by Mademoiselle and Fräulein, Teddy suddenly demanded, "What have you done with the poet?"

"What poet?" asked Fiammetta, for Teddy's remark was evidently addressed to her, his round eyes never left her face.

"The poet you belongs to. Where have you put him?"

"I don't," Fiammetta said rather huffily, "*put* my father anywhere—do you?"

"He's not a poet," Teddy said, quite unmoved by her disapproval. "He's only an or'nary father."

"*Indeed* he's not," cried Viola; "he's very *ex*traordinary*—**most* gifted," she added complacently.

Teddy continued to stare at Fiammetta.

"You haven't *told* me," he continued.

"Told you *what*?"

"—where he is."

"He's in London, if you mean my daddie."

"*Must* he stay there?"

"Of course not, if he doesn't want to."

"Then why doesn't he come here with you?"

"Because he's in London, I tell you."

"Doesn't he *want* to come here?"

"I suppose not," said Fiammetta, whose patience was nearly exhausted. "Do you always ask so many questions?"

"I always *ask*," Teddy replied candidly, "but people never tells me all I want to know. Sometimes they don't even answer."

"I should think not," cried Viola. "A little boy like you! Run away and play with your horse and cart. Fiammetta has come to see *us*, not you."

"*Have* you?" the downright Teddy asked wistfully.

"I've come to see all of you," Fiammetta said graciously, "though I'm really staying with Janey, you know."

"Perhaps you'll come and stay with us too, mother said; without Janey, for a bit," Hermy suggested.

Fiammetta stared.

"Without Janey?" she repeated. "Why?"

Hermy looked rather uncomfortable.

"Well, in case Janey didn't care to come, you know," and Hermy put her arm round Fiammetta.

Fiammetta drew herself away: "I shouldn't like it at all without Janey, thank you," she said stiffly; "she's my greatest friend."

Hermy and Viola looked at each other and then at me, as though they were considering me in a new light. Teddy, who had not done his sister's bidding and was still hanging on the outskirts of our little group, said suddenly, "I'll come and stay with both of you whenever you ask me, wivout Nana," and he thrust a sticky little hand into mine. My heart went out to him, and I gave the hot small hand a squeeze. Teddy and I were of the inarticulate, but we understood one another.

Viola turned ostentatiously to Fiammetta. "Would you," she asked sweetly, "like to see me dance? Fräulein will play for me, and we have half an hour before we go down to father in the drawing-room."

"No, thank you," Fiammetta replied with the utmost decision: "I see plenty of girls dancing at school, and I can dance myself—perhaps you'd like to see *me* dance?"

"I think," Viola said hastily, "that we'd better neither of us dance just now, lest we get too hot. Shall we go out into the garden till reading time?"

This we did.

On the stroke of six a bell was rung from the front door and we all four went to the drawing-room, where Aunt Alice and Uncle Edward awaited us. It was his custom to read to his family every evening at this hour, unless there happened to be a garden-party. Whatever anybody was doing, they were haled to the drawing-room to hear Uncle Edward read aloud.

"Edward reads so beautifully," Aunt Alice always said, and I dare say he did. But no one always wants to listen to the most perfect reading, and this evening I noted with some consternation that Fiammetta was bored, and showed it.

She fidgeted, she yawned, she drummed with her fingers on the edge of her chair. Once she

shuffled her feet, and Uncle Edward actually stopped and looked severely at me. I know he gave me the credit for all the small disturbances that occurred that evening, whereas I was still as a mouse, and far too interested in Fiammetta's frank manifestations of *ennui* to have indulged in any myself.

At that time he was going through a course of Jane Austen, for whose works he had an enthusiastic admiration, and I remember thinking that he was rather like a Jane Austen person himself, and that she would have "done him" uncommonly well. The book he read was *Pride and Prejudice*, most witty and delightful to read in later life. But children miss the real savour of its caustic wit, and I know that it was as much over Fiammetta's head as over mine, even though she was so infinitely better versed in literature of all kinds than I. At seven Uncle Edward ceased, placing a marker in the page as he closed the book.

"Perhaps," he said, "Fiammetta already knows this book by heart and can tell me what comes next."

Fiammetta arose hastily from her chair with evident relief: "Oh, no," she said frankly, "that's not the sort of book one knows by heart. I don't think it's particularly interesting—do you?"

"I think it is a masterpiece," Uncle Edward replied, almost breathless with astonishment. "I hope that in a year or two Viola and Hermione will know it, and many others by the incomparable Jane, as well as they know their multiplication table."

"Do they know that awfully well?" asked Fiammetta. "I don't; the sevens and the nines are so muddling—my daddie quite agrees with me. May we go away now?"

In all my intercourse with Fiammetta, the thing that never failed of its joy and wonder was the way she nonplussed grown-up people. They seemed to have no suitable snub ready for her. She was not in the least impertinent, but neither was she deferential to their superior intelligence. In fact, she made us question sometimes whether they were so very intelligent. She lived on terms of such absolute equality with her father, such understanding affection existed between them, that it never occurred to Fiammetta to conceal her opinions or to pretend she liked things merely to please people who happened to be several years older than herself. She was quite prepared to show Uncle Edward good reasons for her lack of interest in *Pride and Prejudice* as frankly as she afterwards gave them to me. But she had no opportunity, for I remember Aunt Alice hustled us out into the garden with almost unseemly haste, and we were set to play golf croquet, in which game Viola and Hermione excelled, I was only moderately good, and Fiammetta couldn't play at all. Naturally she did not enjoy herself much.

By lunch time on Saturday she was, as she herself put it, "thoroughly issasperated" with things in general. Never for one moment were we left alone. Something was arranged for every minute. The Staceys believed in organised games; "innocent pastimes varied by intellectual pursuits" was Uncle Edward's curriculum, and it would have been excellent had there been rather less of the innocent pastimes. Until quite recently the Staceys had lived in towns, and they had yet to learn that in the country children can find their own amusements with the greatest ease: that Dame Nature is an excellent M.C., and that the queer plays children invent for themselves are far more entrancing than any game that is played by rule.

Fiammetta looked quite pale and exhausted after a morning spent in rounders, clumps, golf croquet (she rested and watched us during this, as she firmly refused to play, but Fräulein sat with her lest she should be dull), spelling-game, Puss-in-the-corner, and "Earth, air, fire, and water."

Observe the judicious admixture of active exercise and mental gymnastics.

While I was washing my hands for lunch she came into my room, shut my door—I'm afraid she banged it—locked it, and stood with her back against it.

"Janey, I want to go home," she announced. "I want to go back to the Court this afternoon. Will you ask them to drive us?"

"I can't," I exclaimed, aghast. "It would never do; we've been asked till Monday, and we must stay here till then."

"Why should I stay if I hate it?"

"Because it's all arranged; they'd never forgive us if we went home; it would be so rude."

She began to cry. "I'm so tired," she sobbed, "sick and tired of silly games that one can make so many mistakes in, and they keep showing you all the time. Janey, I can't go on with it."

I was horror-struck. The luncheon gong would ring in two minutes, and if Fiammetta was tear-stained there would be inquiries.

I flew to her with the towel in my wet hands, and put my arms round her. "Don't cry!" I besought her, "if you do, they'll think I've been pinching you, or something," and she began to

laugh. She dried her eyes on the towel and then said irrelevantly, "Paul didn't come. Why isn't he here, too, to help bear it?"

"He wasn't asked," I said. "He doesn't do here at all."

"I don't do either," she protested; "it's a shame. When I think of Paul wandering about in that dear garden, *doing exactly what he likes*, I could scream."

"For mercy's sake don't," I said. "They'd want to know why, and *then* what could you say?"

"Janey, after we've gone to bed and everything's quiet, may I come in and sleep with you? I wouldn't be so miserable then."

"It's a very little bed," I said dubiously, "and you're an awful fidget. I hear you in our room at home. You go round and round like a dog."

"I'll bring my bedclothes and sleep on the floor, and go back very early in the morning, then they'll never know."

To pacify her, I consented to this, well knowing which of us would sleep on the floor. In the afternoon they took us out in the motor, and this we enjoyed, for motors were then something of a novelty, and Uncle Edward did not come.

Tea passed off quite peacefully. After tea Viola again proposed to dance for us, and again Fiammetta politely but firmly gainsayed the suggestion unless she, too, might perform, which was not in the least what Viola wanted.

As the fateful hour of six approached I trembled, especially as Fiammetta left us without any explanation (we were gathered on the lawn in front of the drawing-room windows) and calmly walked into the house. I watched the slim blue figure vanish; presently she returned, carrying one of the Jungle books.

"What's the use of getting that just as we're going in to papa?" asked Hermy.

"It's because I've got to go in to Mr. Stacey that I've fetched it. I don't care for that book about Mr. d'Arcy, so I'll read this."

Hermy and Viola gasped, I quaked, Aunt Alice looked rather frightened; Fräulein and Mademoiselle regarded Fiammetta with silent admiration.

"I don't think papa would like you to do that, my dear," Aunt Alice said gently. "You see, if he is kind enough to read to us, the least we can do is to listen carefully."

"Why, if we don't want to?" Fiammetta persisted. "If I mayn't read in there, may I stay out here and read?"

"Papa likes us *all* to be present when he's so good as to read to us," Aunt Alice said more firmly. "It would never do for one of our guests to miss his reading. Give me that book, dear!"

Aunt Alice held out her hand for the book. Fiammetta put it behind her back: "Mrs. Stacey," she said earnestly, "I don't understand. Is it like church? Nurse says we go to church here because it's pleasing to the Almighty—we never go in London, daddie and I. Do we have to listen to Mr. Stacey because it's pleasing to the Almighty, or what?"

Aunt Alice lost her temper. "You must do as you are told," she said shortly. "Give me that book. I see papa at the window; he is ready for us."

With a sigh Fiammetta handed over the Jungle Book and we all filed into the drawing-room.

Uncle Edward sat in his usual chair, carefully placed so that the light fell at exactly the right angle upon his book. We all settled ourselves to listen respectfully, except Fiammetta, who, just as he was about to begin, stood up and said, "Mr. Stacey, do *you* mind if I go into the garden instead of listening?"

Uncle Edward gazed at Fiammetta in the utmost astonishment: "Don't you want to hear the reading?" he asked.

"Not a bit," Fiammetta said firmly. "I know you do it for kindness and all that, but it *does* bore me so. I asked Mrs. Stacey, but she seemed to think you'd mind ... you don't, *do* you?" and she smiled in friendliest fashion at Uncle Edward.

"It is, of course," he said slowly, "a matter of pure indifference to me whether you are present or not."

"Thank you *so* much," Fiammetta said sweetly. "You don't mind now, do you, dear Mrs. Stacey? And may I have the Jungle Book to take with me?"

She took the book from Aunt Alice's unresisting hands as she passed. She skipped out of the window and across the lawn. She arranged herself in a garden chair with a leg-rest, all in full view of the windows ... and Uncle Edward began to read.

He read for an hour and a half.

Even Aunt Alice looked three times at the clock during the last half-hour.

When at length he did finish, and Hermy and Viola and I were about to flee into the garden to

hunt for Fiammetta, who had long ago tired of the Jungle Book and wandered away, he stayed us with a motion of his hand.

"I hope," he said gravely, "that you will let this evening's incident be a lesson to you, an object-lesson as to how a guest should *not* behave."

Hermey and Viola looked duly disgusted at Fiammetta's conduct; I, as usual when confronted with Uncle Edward, looked foolish. None of the three of us made any remark. "Remember," he said, "that the perfect guest invariably falls in with every custom of his host. He becomes a part of the household. You understand?"

"Yes, papa," said Hermey and Viola in dutiful chorus; "we will always try to."

"And you, Janey, will you lay this lesson to heart?"

"Yes, Uncle Edward," I, too, said meekly; and then, feeling rather mean, I added, "but father says we ought to *ask* our guests if they like things."

"Certainly," he replied coldly, "in reason; but you cannot disorganise the entire working of a household to please a guest. Especially," he added, with evident annoyance, "when that guest happens to be a spoilt, conceited child."

"I don't think Fiammetta is conceited," I pleaded, "but she's used to saying right out when she hates things——"

"That will do, Janey," Aunt Alice interposed hastily. "Run away, children, and find Fiammetta."

As we ran, I reflected that Uncle Edward certainly did not himself fulfil his definition of the perfect guest. When he stayed with us, poor father couldn't smoke a single pipe in the house, and all fruits that had any sort of a smell were banished from the *menu*.

We found Fiammetta at last in the garage, conversing with the chauffeur.

"He's really a much more interesting man than Mr. Stacey," she confided to me that night when she came to sleep in my bed the floor *was* hard and rather cold—"he told me about all the accidents he's ever been in."

XVII

A SOLDIER'S BUTTON

His family could not understand why Teddy had such a passion for soldiers. Certainly his family neither inspired nor shared it.

Papa declared them to be "elementary persons of a low standard of intelligence."

Mummy was mildly negative in her views. She did not, like papa, express actual disapproval of them as a class; they may even have had a dimly-felt attraction for her—she was very like Teddy in some ways—but she was a devoted wife, and it would never have occurred to her to champion any cause or individual disapproved of by papa.

Teddy's sisters, both considerably older than he—for he was only four—were facile echoes of their parents. And, after all, there was no earthly reason why any of the family should take any particular interest in soldiers. They had seen very few. When they did happen to come across a body of men in uniform marching to the strains of a military band, they doubtless thrilled for a moment like everybody else; then the soldiers and all they stood for vanished from their minds as from their sight.

But it was otherwise with Teddy. He thought about soldiers, dreamed of soldiers, talked about soldiers, and asked incessant questions about soldiers all day long and with any one he could get to answer him. And this was the more surprising inasmuch as he was not naturally a talkative child, being of a somewhat taciturn and ruminative disposition. It annoyed papa, for, quiet and biddable as Teddy was in every other respect, his enthusiasm for the soldier subject was such that no amount of snubbing could keep him off it.

And it started this way. One year, on their way to the Highlands, they stayed in Edinburgh for the month of July. A friend of papa's lent them his flat. The flat was in Ramsay Gardens, and Teddy's nursery window looked over the Castle Esplanade. The Black Watch was stationed at the Castle just then, and from his window Teddy beheld them drilling. He was always seeing them when he went out, and whensoever he did see them, singly or in companies, he was thrilled to the centre of his little soul. It is believed that his nurse shared his enthusiasm, but this was not

known till long afterwards. But this much is certain, that when she and Teddy went out to take the air, whether he trotted by her side, or was seated proudly in his mail-cart, they seldom went in any direction that did not either lead to, or circulate round about, the evolutions of the Black Watch. Moreover, that regiment never marched in any direction whatsoever that Teddy and his nurse were not among the most palpitating of interested spectators.

Teddy's nurse was distinctly pleasing to the eye. Plump, fresh-coloured and very neat in her becoming uniform, she was of that superior order of nurses who are trained in institutions guaranteed to turn out guardians of the young not only medically competent to deal with every known form of infantile disease, but so deeply versed in psychology as to be able to draw out all that is best, and suppress anything that is evil, in a child's character.

Mummy had selected her with extreme care, and Teddy was almost entirely in her charge. Mummy went out a good deal, for both she and papa had many friends in Edinburgh whom they had not seen for a very long time. His sisters were under the dominion of a Fräulein, so he and his nurse were left almost entirely to their own devices.

It was a beautiful July, and they were hardly ever kept indoors by bad weather. Teddy's cheeks grew round and rosy, his eyes bright and interested, so that his parents declared the keen bracing air was doing him all the good in the world. Up to that time he had been rather a pale, phlegmatic child.

To get from Princes Street to Ramsay Gardens one has to mount an exceedingly steep hill, pretty stiff walking for a pedestrian, and real hard work when you've got to push a mail-cart with a solid small boy in it. Yet very often his nurse would take Teddy to Princes Street Gardens in the afternoon, and generally on such occasions the band of the Black Watch discoursed sweet music from the band-stand.

On the return journey there always appeared some kindly kilted figure anxious to "gie the bairn a hurl" up the steepest part of the hill. Nurse was always very staid and dignified on such occasions. She accepted assistance, it is true, but with reservations. Moreover, she even tried to check Teddy's efforts in the way of conversation with his escort by time-worn aphorisms to the effect that little boys should be seen and not heard. But here she failed signally.

"When I'm a man," said Teddy, during one of these delicious "hurrls," "I hope I sail be a gate big soldier like you."

"You mean, my dear, that you hope you'll be an officer," nurse remarked loftily.

"A have British officer," Teddy repeated obediently.

"That's the ticket," he of the kilt agreed cordially, quite unconscious of the implied snub. "I'd like fine to serve under ye mysel'."

"I expect you'll be an officer too by then," Teddy suggested.

The big soldier chuckled. "I'm no for onnything o' that sort," he said, shaking his head. "I'm for the Resairve—when I marry," he added, with a side glance at Teddy's pretty nurse.

"That will do, Mr. Macdonald," she said, laying a neatly-gloved hand on the handle of the mail-cart. "I can manage myself now; we are past the steepest part."

The soldier obediently relinquished the mail-cart. He saluted Teddy, and Teddy saluted him with great solemnity. Then, with quite equal solemnity he winked, and swung away down the hill again.

Papa's friend had lent his servants as well as his flat, and among them was a highland housemaid, called Campbell by the authorities but known among her fellows as Girzie. And so Teddy knew her. Of course, nurse was far too grand a person to consort with the other servants on familiar terms. She might, on occasion, when nobody else was present, unbend a little towards a sergeant-major in his splendid uniform, but she rigorously enforced the distance her "training" put between her and the servants, and they not even of her employer's household. All the same, nurse made no objection when Girzie offered to look after Teddy on such occasions as she wanted an afternoon off in the society of that same sergeant-major. And Girzie, who adored Teddy, was most accommodating.

Now Girzie had a brother in the Black Watch. It is true he was "only just a soldier," as Teddy put it, to distinguish him from the more highly-placed acquaintance of nurse, but he looked upon it as a distinct advantage, for under Girzie's guardianship he was allowed to converse freely with the short, thick-set man, who was so agreeably ready to answer questions.

From him Teddy learnt the true significance of dirks and sporrans and philabegs and plaids and badges, and many other things. The letter R was still a difficulty with Teddy, and he felt rather out of it among people who seemed to take a positive delight in giving that letter an almost undue prominence. Yet, though Girzie's brother did exclaim rather often, "eh! what's that

you're sayin'?" they got on famously on the whole; and though it may not be wholly flattering to be addressed as "the wee stoot yen," yet Teddy overlooked the familiarity because of the affection in its tone.

He was something of an Elizabethan in his simplicity and jovial sense of fellowship with his kind. And the truth is that the atmosphere of Teddy's home was somewhat rarefied.

Papa was a Superior Person, quite excellent and kind in all his domestic relations, but in many respects what more ordinary mortals called a crank.

He had views, strong views, and he was apt to enforce them: not only upon his family, whom, of course, in consequence of these very views, he felt bound to influence, but also upon outsiders, who, if of a hasty disposition, were apt to wish papa at Jericho, or even in some still warmer place. He was also a person of many and vigorous antipathies, which he seemed to think entitled him to special consideration. Therefore did Teddy feel that the simple and jovial persons he encountered in Edinburgh filled a hitherto unsatisfied want in his nature, and he loved them dearly.

And they loved him; for the "wee stoot yen" was irresistibly frank and friendly and few of us are impervious to the flattery of such respectful admiration as Teddy's round face and blue eyes plainly manifested whenever he came across any of his friends in the Black Watch.

One day when he was out with Girzie she took him to the Arcade in Princes Street, and there bought him a doll dressed as a Highlander. Teddy was charmed with the present, though he could have wished that the china face under the fierce busby had been a thought less chubby and simpering, and what really did worry him was a feeling that there was something not quite right about the uniform. He didn't know what it was, and he was too well-bred and grateful to Girzie for her kind present to find any fault; but when on the way up the hill they met her brother, he at once pointed out several discrepancies, which he commanded Girzie to alter, explaining how it should be done. Girzie carried out his instructions that night, and next day they christened the doll "Colin Dougal," after the said brother, and it became Teddy's most precious possession.

Colin Dougal slept with him, ousting from that proud post a fluffy bird attached to an elastic that had hitherto possessed the privilege. Colin Dougal accompanied him in his mail-cart, and sat beside him at nursery meals; and to Colin Dougal Teddy used to sing, over and over again, the refrain of an old song he had learned from Girzie:—

"My love, she's in Dumbarton,
Whaur they weir the tartan,
Whaur they weir the tartan—
Faur abin the knee!"

It seemed quite fitting that anybody's love should dwell in a part of the country where they wore that entrancing costume, and Teddy felt certain that Dumbarton must be a specially delightful place, and was quite drawn to the lady. But always after singing it he was assailed by doubts as to whether Colin Dougal's tartan was quite short enough. Girzie had shortened it, but the exigencies of his china legs precluded the strict brevity of a kilt as worn by the Black Watch. Still, the tartan was the right tartan, and that was something.

The pleasant July days, so long and light, slipped speedily away, till an afternoon came when Teddy, returning from a walk with Girzie, found the nursery full of boxes, and nurse, who demanded the immediate surrender of Colin Dougal that she might pack him.

The little boy clasped his doll more firmly in his arms, looked round the dismantled nursery, and grim foreboding laid a chilly hand upon his heart.

"What do you want to pack for?" he asked breathlessly.

"Because we're going by an early train to-morrow, and mummy says everything must be ready to-night."

"Going!" he gasped. "Going where?"

"We're all going to Kingussie for August."

"I'm not going, I don't want to go. I want to stay here, wiv all my fends.... Do you," he asked anxiously, "want to go to Kingussie?"

Nurse looked flushed and rather cross.

"I'm not asked," she muttered, "what I want, nor you neither, Teddy. Give me that doll at once, and I'll pack him with the other toys."

Teddy stared stonily at her, nor made the smallest effort to surrender his doll.

"I'm not going," he said firmly, "not to-morrow. Why, I haven't said good-bye to none of them, have you?"

"I don't know what you're talking about," said nurse huffily; "give me that doll at once, you know I don't allow disobedience."

And as she spoke she made a grab at the doll.

Teddy held on with all his strength. They were starting for Kingussie a day earlier than had been originally intended, and it had only been decided upon that morning. Mummy had taken it upon herself to send Girzie out with Teddy, leaving nurse free to pack. This had upset all nurse's plans, and left Sergeant-Major Macdonald kicking his heels during a vain wait at the bottom of the hill, while Girzie and Teddy went off in quite another direction. Therefore nurse was decidedly irritable, and rather roughly tried to pull Colin Dougal out of Teddy's arms.

For a full minute Teddy held on with all his little strength, then suddenly and despairingly let go. And at the same instant nurse also let go, remembering that it was undignified to struggle with a small child for the possession of a china doll.

Colin Dougal fell with a thump upon the floor, one of his china legs broke right in two, and the severed half leapt gaily under a chair.

Teddy took a deep breath and yelled and yelled and yelled.

Papa and mummy heard him in the drawing-room, and rushed to the nursery to see what had happened.

He was standing stock still just inside the door. Nurse had picked up Colin Dougal and the bit of his leg, and was vainly trying to explain to her demented charge that it could easily be mended.

But Teddy struck at her with both his hands, and refused to be comforted. He also continued to bawl with unabated vigour after his parents had entered the room.

"What's this? What's this?" exclaimed papa.

"Are you hurt, my precious?" mummy inquired tenderly, as she knelt beside her little boy.

Teddy did not repulse his mother, and managed to ejaculate in the middle of a roar, "I don't *want* to go to Kingussie!"

The accident to Colin Dougal seemed a minor woe, caused by, and included in, this devastating news of departure.

"Nonsense!" papa exclaimed, looking pained; "not want to go to Kingussie! Why, it's country—real, beautiful, quiet country—far better than this place, with those infernal bugles braying from morning till night, and the horrid band, and air those tramping soldiers. You'll love Kingussie."

Teddy stopped afresh in the midst of renewed efforts in the way of yells to hiccough indignantly "not—'fernal bugles!"

Papa looked rather surprised, but his pained look returned as Teddy started to shout again at the top of his voice.

Nurse, taking advantage of the general confusion, packed Colin Dougal, and actually wrapped up the piece of his leg in a separate bit of paper with cold-blooded detachment.

Mummy reasoned, papa reasoned, and nurse, who had by this time recovered her Institutional serenity, spoke soothingly: but all to no avail. Teddy continued to scream, to lose his breath, and then roar with renewed vigour when he had got it again.

He really made a great to-do.

Finally papa and mummy departed in despair. Nurse went on packing, and Girzie, who had been listening at the end of the passage with her hand against her heart, came in and took the tired, miserable little figure into her kind strong arms and sat down on a chair.

"Eh, Master Teddy, and what'll the soldiers be thinkin' this night, to hear such an awfu' stramash in this respectable house ... an' both the windows open? They'll be fair affrontet to think the young gentleman they thought such a heap on could cry like a randy wife. They puir soldiers won't know what to make of it at all, at all."

And Girzie shook her head as though overcome with care.

Teddy sat up and stared at her, and though his breath still came in sobs he made no noise.

"Will they mind, Girzie?" he asked anxiously. "Will they 'eally mind?"

"Mind!" Girzie repeated. "Mind! They'll just be that upset—and you almost like one o' them."

"Colin Dougal's broken his leg."

"Well, he'll get over that. My brother broke his leg at the football, and look at him now!"

"But we're going away, Girzie, ... and I haven't said good-bye to nobody, not to your Colin

Dougal nor no one."

"Never fear but he'll see ye to say good-bye—but not if you cry—an' you going to be a grand officer gentleman some day. Soldiers don't cry, laddie. It would be the very last thing they'd think of doing."

"Not if they're hurted in their hearts?—nor never?"

"Not that any other person could see or hear them, you may depend on that. And you mustn't cry either, any way not so loud that folk could hear ye right across the Esplanade. Listen, laddie, we'll no forget you. My brother's just fair taken up wi' you, and he's sent you this—for a bit keepsake. It's one o' his buttons made into a safety-pin, and when you're a wee thing bigger you'll wear it to hold down your tie ... if nurse'll let you," she added hastily, with an anxious glance at nurse, who continued to pack in absorbed silence.

Eagerly Teddy untied the little packet, and there was a real soldier's button mounted as a safety-pin.

"When can I have a tie?" he asked eagerly.

Nurse came over to them and stood looking down at the little pin. Her face softened. "I've got one rather like that, myself," she said. "You can fasten it in your blouse whether you have a tie or not. No one would notice."

"Can I wear it always?" he asked.

"Yes, if you like," nurse said graciously, "and perhaps it will help you to remember not to cry when you fall down."

Girzie said nothing, but she fastened the brooch so that the button shone resplendent just above the ribbons that tied Teddy's sailor blouse.

"I will remember," he said solemnly.

"Are you sorry you were so naughty?" nurse asked, ever desirous to improve the occasion.

"No," said Teddy firmly. "I hate Kingussie."

But after all he didn't hate Kingussie. He would have liked it immensely but that it rained nearly all the time. July seemed to have used up all the nice weather, and August was very cold and wet. He got one chill on the top of another, and sneezed and snuffled, and snuffled and sneezed, and lost all the pretty pink colour in his cheeks that he had gained in Edinburgh.

Kingussie is a beautiful place with woods and streams and a glorious golf links covered with short springy turf. Their lodgings were right on the top of a hill, and the view from the windows was very lovely, but even the loveliest view palls when it can only be seen through a veil of driving rain.

Towards the end of their stay Teddy alarmed his family by falling really ill. The local doctor took a gloomy view of his case, and talked of unripe blackberries and appendicitis. Papa thereupon carried the whole family back to Edinburgh before the end of the month. This time they stayed at the Caledonian Hotel, where the noise of Princes Street and the constant trains tried papa even more than the infernal bugles in Ramsay Gardens.

A great doctor, who had not yet started for his holiday, was consulted about Teddy, and he was even graver than the doctor up in Kingussie, and said there must be an operation at once.

That was a puzzling day for Teddy.

He was kept in bed till evening, and nurse and everybody were extraordinarily kind to him.

Then mummy came and sat beside him and held his hand, and told him that he was to go that night to another house, and that the next day the great doctor would do something for him that would make him quite well.

"Why can't he do it here?" Teddy asked.

It seemed that people didn't have these things done in hotels; that doctors were particular men who liked to make people well in specially chosen houses called Nursing Homes, and that Teddy was to go to one of those homes that very night in a taxi-cab.

"Will my nurse come?" he asked anxiously.

"I will come," said mummy, and her voice sounded as if she, too, had got one of the Kingussie colds.

"Not nurse," he repeated, rather puzzled. "Who will dress me?"

"There are lots of nice nurses in the Home who can do that, but you won't be dressed just at first, you know. The doctor will want to keep you in bed a little while after the operation."

"What's a operation? What's it do to you?"

But this mummy did not seem able to explain very clearly, and Teddy began to feel rather doubtful about the whole thing.

"Will it hurt?" he asked at last.

"Not at the time, my precious," said mummy, "but afterwards it may. I'm afraid it will, rather. I'm afraid it may hurt a good deal. But you will try to be brave. I know you will be brave."

"A bave—Bittish—officer——" Teddy muttered. Then, turning his big, bright eyes upon his mother, he asked eagerly: "Can I wear my button?"

Mummy did not understand, but nurse did, and when it was all explained he was assured that he should wear his button.

Then they dressed him, and nurse packed a little suit-case, with Colin Dougal in it, and all his new pyjamas and his dressing-gown, and he and Mummy went alone together to that strange house full of nurses.

A great many odd things happened that night, and Teddy simply couldn't have borne the strangeness of it all if his button had not been fastened on the pocket of the jacket of his pyjamas: they were real pyjamas, two garments, not baby ones fastened together.

He didn't sleep very well that night, but as often as he woke up he touched his button and repeated to himself "Guadeloupe, Martinique, Selingapatam," which are the first three of the long list of battles fought by the Black Watch. Girzie's brother could say them all, and Teddy loved to hear him roll them out in his strong Scottish voice, and tried to learn them himself, but they are mostly very long names, and only the first three remained in his mind.

Every one was most kind, but it was depressing not to have any breakfast. Mummy's cold seemed to get worse, and one of the nurses suggested that it would be better if she did not come as far as the operating-room lest she should give it to Teddy.

His heart was thumping in his ears. He kissed mummy, he kissed Colin Dougal, who simpered sweetly as usual (his leg hardly showed at all) and was quite unmoved; and then, with lips that trembled, he whispered "Bave Bittish officer" to himself over and over again.

He put one hand into that of the kind nurse, and held his button with the other, and together they went down a long passage into a room that was walled and floored with white tiles. It had no chairs in it, only tables, one of them long and narrow and high, right in the middle of the room. Two doctors were waiting for them, and the one Teddy had seen at the hotel had his coat off as if he was going to play some game. He looked very kindly at Teddy as they came in. "You're a man," he said. "I can see that."

"I sall not ky," Teddy said in rather a shaky voice. "I sall not ky, because I'm going to be a soldier, and they don't, you know."

"I guessed that, the minute I saw you," said the doctor. "We like soldiers here, they get well extra quick. Up with you, and you mustn't mind when we put that funny thing over your face."

Teddy lay down on the high narrow table. He looked up anxiously at the doctor he didn't know. "You won't take my button away, will you, not when you make me go to sleep?"

"Keep a tight hold of it," said the doctor, "and you'll find it there when you wake up. No one would dream of touching it."

A soft rubber mask was pressed on Teddy's face; it was not pleasant, but it did not hurt. Then came a roaring in his ears like the burn at Kingussie when it had rained more than usual.

"A—bave Bittish—Guadeloupe, Martinique——"

The burn had swept little Teddy away into oblivion, but even there the small hand was closed tightly over the soldier's button.

That night the doctor congratulated papa both upon the entire success of the operation and on the splendid military training he had given his little son.

XVIII PAUL AND THE PLAYWRIGHT

"I was eight yesterday," said Paul to Thor, "so this week's different. I'm different. I'm older—five years older than you, dear, though you are so big."

Thor wagged his tail and looked sympathetic. A deerhound contrives to express more by his looks than most humans, and Paul talked so continually to Thor that the great dog always seemed to understand.

"So," Paul continued, "I think it's time we went about a bit and looked for an adventure—like *him*, you know. We've been awfully good for ever so long. You haven't stole anything, nor chased

the sheep, nor ate anybody's slipper, and I haven't gone off for the day, or smacked Lucy, or read a book at meals. We've been sort of saints, and it's time we did something, or we'll be turning into kind of angels—and they always die, you know, and we've no time for that: we've got ever such a deal to see to. Come on, my dear, nobody wants us. Let's walk and walk till we find somethin' instastin'."

Paul wasted no time in preparations. He didn't even wait to put on his boots. He was already equipped with his favourite weapon, a smooth roller-like piece of wood about a foot long, which had originally been used as a support for photographs. They had been rolled round it for postal purposes. Paul annexed it when he was about three, christened it his "chuncheon" (in those days "r's" were a difficulty,) and had treasured it ever since.

Once Dorcas, the under-nurse, tidied it away in her excess of zeal, when his grief was so uncontrollable that the whole household turned out to hunt for it, and it was finally rescued from the dustbin by cook.

Before setting out he would fain have divested himself of his smock, but a smock is a tiresome garment securely fastened at the back by means of treacherous little loops and buttons, quite too complex to be successfully tackled by the wearer. He did his best, however, to turn it into a doublet by tying a piece of string as tightly as possible round his waist, and through the string he thrust his trusty "chuncheon." He pulled his dilapidated cotton hat well over his eyes, and, lest any of the authorities should look out of the window and inquire his intentions, he set off down the drive very slowly, as though bound for nowhere in particular.

Nurse saw him strolling towards the gate, but that was nothing; he was always strolling about the garden with Thor—the only wonder was that some five other dogs had not already joined them.

Mrs. Button at the lodge saw him go by as she was hanging out sheets on the line, and they "changed the weather and passed the time of day," but she only thought he was going across to the village shop for something, so she was not curious or suspicious either.

At the "Cat and Compasses" Paul stopped. Mr. Mumford, the landlord, was standing in the doorway leaning on a hoe. They greeted each other suitably, and Paul remarked, "Miss Goodlake's stopped in bed. She's got a headache——"

"Sorry to 'ear it, I'm sure," Mr. Mumford replied sympathetically. "Per'aps the sun 'ave been a bit too strong for she."

"Janey and Fiammetta," Paul continued, unconcerned as to the causes of Miss Goodlake's headache, "are doing their lessons alone. They're hearing each other, and they said I disturbed them, so Thor and I've come off together."

He paused and looked expectantly at Mr. Mumford, as though waiting for a suggestion of some sort.

Mr. Mumford is shaped rather like a pair of bellows with two substantial legs instead of one slim one. He completely filled his own doorway, and perspiring and benevolent, looked down at Paul.

"I wish as I could ast you to come in and set a bit, Master Paul," he said apologetically, "but my missus she be a-cleanin', and when a woman gets a-cleanin', the 'ouse beant no place for the likes of we. Not a moment's peace or quiet to be 'ad. *You* knows what 'a' be, doan't 'ee, Master Paul?"

Here Mr. Mumford winked at Paul, who wagged his head sympathetically as the summer stillness was broken by the clashing of pails, the sound of falling brooms, and a strident voice exclaimed "Sammler! you get along down garden an' weed them there parsnips. That bed be disgrace to be'old. You take 'oe along; be off now, don't 'ee stand gossipin' there, ye lazy varmint, you!"

With a groan Mr. Mumford seized the hoe, turned back into the bar, and disappeared from view. Paul, congratulating Thor on the fact that neither of them had a missus who insisted on the weeding of parsnips on such a hot morning, strolled through the village. It was not yet ten o'clock, and no one was to be seen. All the women were busy indoors, the men at work. The sky was blue, the sun was hot, and a ribbon of white road lay before them "beckoning and winding." So he and Thor set off at a good pace, and Paul muttered as he went, "He would have given his housekeeper and his niece for a fair opportunity of kicking the traitor Galabon," adding thoughtfully, "They'd be about as bad as a missus, I expect."

Of course the quotation came from the Book of the Moment, which, just then, happened to be Don Quixote. He had found the Mad Knight in the attic, an old translation in four volumes, published in 1810, with a map and many steel engravings. He read it right through with his usual

absorbed interest, but expressed regret that there was such "an awful lot about lovers and that." The Don's passion for the peerless Dulcinea he did not attempt to understand, and the long love stories of other people interspersed throughout bored him. But the adventures thrilled him, and Sancho Panza's was a character that he got on terms with at once. There was something dear and familiar about the sturdy Sancho: something of Mr. Mumford.

For although, so far as Paul knew, Mr. Mumford never went further afield than Garchester, still he was confident that, did occasion arise, Mr. Mumford would not fail him. Paul often pictured himself, attended by this faithful henchman, riding forth on two of his father's best hunters, to seek their fortunes in an unknown world.

It is true that he had never in so many words mooted the idea to Mr. Mumford in any of their more intimate conversations, but he felt assured that Mr. Mumford would never suffer him to set out alone and unaided.

He was, perhaps, a thought disappointed that this boon companion had not suggested going with him that very morning, but he acquitted him of all intentional disloyalty, when he reflected on the compelling qualities of the voice that haled the unwilling Sammler to the parsnip bed. He was sure Mr. Mumford would have preferred to accompany him—which is quite likely.

It was impossible to be Don Quixote without an attendant; so, somewhat regretfully, Paul fell back upon the beloved Boots, the resourceful and ever-conquering third son of his favourite Fairy Book.

Here, Thor was quite in the picture.

It is true that in *Tales from the Norse* there isn't much about dogs. Horses play all the larger parts, but "lots of animals come in," and Paul liked that. "After all," he remarked complacently to Thor, "we shan't have to keep on being in love on such a hot morning."

Paul's view of love-making strongly resembled that of cook, who, when she caught Greenwood, the groom, kissing the kitchenmaid, boxed their several ears, but related the incident quite dispassionately to mother, concluding her recital with the remark, "I don't hold with it myself, but there—I suppose it's pleasing to some."

Paul, too, was quite ready to allow that it might be "pleasing to some"; but his mood that morning was not attuned to the contemplation of transcendentally beautiful ladies. He pined for the society of a like-minded bachelor, a jolly bachelor of sociable habits, who would understand and sympathise with a desire to be free for a while from the tyranny of the tempestuous petticoat.

So they strolled along in the middle of the winding road for nearly a couple of miles, then an open gate into an unfamiliar field invited them, and, they went in and crossed it. Paul climbed and Thor leapt the gate into the next. There were sheep in that field, but Thor resisted temptation, and rested quietly with his master under the shade of an elm. On again across more fields, meeting with no adventures whatsoever. All the trolls, giants, witches, lions, pirates, knights and princesses seemed to have remained indoors or underground that morning.

A man shouted at them once, but he was too far off to discover whether his words were friendly or the reverse. Previous experience, however, led Paul to believe they were in some way "be off out of that-ish!" and he hurried away in an opposite direction. His feet ached and the soles of his shoes felt very thin. He decided that the moment they struck the road again he'd make for the very first house in sight and ask for some water for both of them.

At last they reached a field bordered by a road. They pushed through a gap in the hedge and found themselves not far from four cross roads and a church. Paul made for the church, for as a rule where churches are, houses are not far off—and, sure enough, right opposite the church gate was one that led into somebody's drive with an exceedingly trim lodge on the left-hand side.

He paused, undecided for a moment whether to go round to the back door, which would be certain to be open, and ask for water from the lady of the lodge, or go right up the drive and see what the people of the house were like.

If he went to the back and rapped with his knuckles a woman would come out—he was sure of that. She might be washing; she might be displeased at the interruption; she would be almost certain to disapprove of Thor.

He decided to go up to the house.

Here, as everywhere else that morning, there was not a soul in sight and it was very still. The sun was high in the heavens, and the great lawns in front of the house stretched almost shadowless—green and shaven and smooth. It was a pretty house: irregular, long and low, covered with creepers, with sloping roofs, clustering chimneys, and kindly-looking gables—a restful house, Paul thought wistfully. Would they let him go in and sit a bit?

The open, front door was hooded by a deep sunblind, but he peeped underneath and beheld a

cool dark hall, absolutely untenanted; and here, too, the same soft, all-pervading silence. It was very hot out on the gravel drive; there seemed no shadows anywhere. Even a cedar-tree on the far side of a wide lawn, though it looked dark and cool, threw hardly any shade.

Thor's tongue was hanging out, and he turned his beautiful grave eyes on his master with the clear question, "How long are we to stand here?"

Presently Paul became conscious of a faint sound: a sharp, irregular, clipped sort of sound, that was neither a tap nor a click, but a cross between the two.

The country-bred child is a connoisseur in sounds, and here was one quite new to him. Thor, too, heard it, and looked inquiring.

They moved away in its direction and came upon another door. This, too, had its sunblind. This, too, was open, and the curious sound was coming from the room within that door.

Paul dived underneath the sunblind and Thor followed him.

They found themselves in what appeared to be a small square porch leading to the room within. It contained nothing but a fixed basin with a tap and a towel-rail. Here at all events was water.

Paul ran some into the basin, and Thor put his paws on the edge, reared his great body, sloped his head, and drank greedily. And all the time that curious noise continued, that indescribable irregularly recurrent sound, that was half tap, half click, with a mysterious scrape occurring every thirty seconds or so. When Thor had finished his drink, Paul formed his own hands into a cup and drank from them; he whispered to Thor to lie down, and stood himself in the open doorway leading to the room whence the sound came.

He forgot how his feet ached, he forgot how desperately hungry he was, for he felt that, at last, he had come up with the adventure he had been, questing all that long hot morning.

Never had he beheld such a delightful room. It was large and high, with two big wide-open windows, which, however, were not like ordinary windows, for they started ever so far from the ground, like those in a studio. The panelling, where it could be seen for books, was white; but there was no glare, for books were everywhere, books in many-hued bindings, making irregular patches of subdued colour. Nearly all looked as though they had sat long in their shelves, and wore the pleasant faded tints that time brings to things cared-for and well-loved. There was one line of vivid red that Paul recognised with a little thrill (for we had it at home) as the "Elephant" edition of "*The man who made Mowgli*." But these were on a high shelf, and the steps were too far off for him to drag them over without making a noise. Besides, for once, it was not the books that most interested Paul; it was what he afterwards described as "a kind-of-man-ness" about the room.

"It was all such a jolly muddle and so comfortable."

If there were many books there were even more papers. He didn't mean newspapers and magazines, though there were plenty of them—it was the quantities of letters that impressed him. Never had he seen so many letters, not even at Christmas. They were strewn about everywhere, and on the floor behind the great, double, knee-hole table, an open trunk was lying full of them—stuffed in pell-mell, anyhow.

All the furniture was big and solid and comfortable. There were two pianos—"a big one and a little one"; a huge sofa that invited repose on the part of the slothful; great, deep chairs; steady tables; nothing to upset anywhere; no tiresome "frippery" things.

And seated at the knee-hole table was a man who wore spectacles: a biggish man going bald, with grey hair, grey moustache, and short, closely-trimmed grey beard. Paul decided that he liked the look of him, and that there was something familiar in his appearance; that he had met this man before somewhere in a story. He knitted his brows and thought deeply, never taking his eyes off him, but he couldn't place him. Nevertheless he was sure of him. He was one of the understanding. "He didn't look a 'run-away-and-play' sort of a man," Paul said afterwards, "nor the sort who says 'my boy,' and he didn't ever—not once."

It was he who was making that queer noise. He was playing with both hands on a kind of instrument.

Paul accepted the noise as some novel and not very agreeable form of music. He guessed the man was musical from the fact that he had two pianos. But why, having two real pianos, he should play on that horrid little one, puzzled Paul extremely. It was not nearly so pleasing to the ear as one he himself possessed, which you played by thumping the keys with a hammer made of cork. It was possible to get some sort of tune out of that.

Click-click—click-click-click— the man could play very fast. He used both hands, and was so absorbed in the tune he was trying to make that he never noticed Paul. He appeared to change

his music very often, and it seemed rather a business to get it fixed in the stand, and one thing that interested Paul was that when he chose a new piece he always put in a black sheet of paper behind it. Just inside the door Paul stood gazing absorbedly. Had the man looked up he must have seen him.

"I'll wait till he's finished practising," Paul resolved, "then we'll talk."

The door was at the side, not in the middle of the end wall, and that wall was entirely covered by a huge bookcase—by stretching out his hand he could have taken a book from the shelves, and he was greatly tempted. But he thought it would hardly be polite, as the man was there. Had the room been empty he would have had no such scruples.

He was tired, so he sat down on the floor and leant against the lintel of the open door.

"I wish he'd play a tunier tune," he thought.

Thor lay full length in the little room with the basin, his nose between his paws, his speaking eyes fixed on his master. There was no sound at all except that eternal click-click.

"I kept thinking," Paul said afterwards, "how splendid it would have been to play 'Camptown Races' against Harry. I'd have had the biggest piano and drowned him." Harry could play "Cock o' the North" on the black notes. Paul could thump out "Camptown Races" with one finger! Occasionally, when they got the chance, they would perform against each other, one on the schoolroom the other on the drawing-room piano. Paul was envious of Harry's achievement, but the black notes were beyond him, and "Cock o' the North" skips about so.

If you start "Camptown Races" on F natural it's all plain sailing; the same note is repeated so often that it is not difficult.

Paul stretched out his legs luxuriously and pictured the amazing row he and Harry could produce on those two pianos in what he was pleased to call their "duet."

Presently the man stopped playing on his unmelodious instrument and, looking over his spectacles across the room towards the door, saw Paul. He immediately took off his glasses, and his eyes were blue and keen and kind.

Paul scrambled to his feet. "How d'you do?" he said politely. "I just called in as I was passing."

The man looked rather astonished. "Where were you going?" he asked.

Paul came slowly across the room until he stood close by the big desk. "Nowhere in particular. We've just come out for the day."

"We!" the man repeated. "Are there any more of you?" And he looked rather anxious.

"Only Thor," Paul answered reassuringly. "He's sitting in the little room with the basin—I hope you don't mind. We both drank some water, but we didn't wash—not without leave. May Thor come in?"

"He'd better, I think," said the man.

"You may come in, my dear," Paul said, quietly, without raising his voice, and Thor, large, deliberate, and graceful, strolled into the room, looked inquiringly at the man, wagged his tail gently, and came and stood by his master.

"This is Thor," said Paul. "Do you mind him?"

"Not a bit!" said the man. "I like him."

"Sometimes," Paul remarked, "people are afraid he'll upset things; he's so large, you know.... But it wouldn't be easy to upset things here. Would you mind telling me why you kept playing that funny tune? Do you think it's pretty?"

"Tune?" the man repeated. "When?"

"Just a minute ago—ever since I came in, *and* outside. I heard you; it's what made me come. I couldn't think what it was."

"Can you read?" asked the man.

"Read!" Paul exclaimed. "I should think so; years and years ago."

The man handed him one of the pages he had been playing.

"That's what I was doing," he said.

"Why, it's print!" cried Paul.

"Exactly; nicer than hand-writing, isn't it?"

Paul's quick eyes devoured the page.

"Like Shakespeare," he added.

The man laughed. "I only wish it was," he said.

"It's a play, anyway, isn't it?"

"It is."

"And you've been making it up as you go along?"

"Well, hardly that, but I scribble it down first, you know."

"Does it spell for you?" Paul asked breathlessly.

"No, it doesn't, bother it—that's where it's rather sniffy sometimes."

"When I'm grown up," Paul said solemnly, "and rich—I hope I'll be rich—I'll have one of those, but I'll get one that does the spelling as well. I suppose they *are* made."

"I haven't come across one yet," said the man; "when I do I shall buy it at once——"

"And you'll tell me, won't you?" Paul said eagerly.

"I'll let you know very first thing!"

"Would you like me to read some more of your interesting play?" he asked. "I can't quite make out what it's all about beginning in the miggles like this."

"I don't think I'd read it just now," said the man. "You see, I want to talk to you. I want to know all sorts of things."

"I came in on purpose to have a chat," Paul remarked genially. "Do you mind if I sit down? My feet do ache so—Lie down, my dear; the gentleman doesn't mind you."

The man pulled up a comfortable chair for Paul. Thor lay down at his feet, and then their host, in his chair by the desk, swung round and faced them.

"I suppose now," said Paul, "you haven't got a missus, have you?"

"What makes you think that?" asked the man.

"Well, you see, there's such a muddle of papers, isn't there? She'd never let you keep it like that. Mr. Mumford says his missus is always cleanin' and sortin' and putting things away. Not," he added truthfully, "that Mr. Mumford gets many letters—I've never seen any in his house."

"It's not always like this," pleaded the man. "Sometimes it's awfully tidy."

"Oh, but I like it like this," Paul exclaimed eagerly. "Have you a housekeeper and a niece by any chance? Do they tidy for you?"

"Why a housekeeper *and* a niece?" asked the man.

"He had, you know—Don Quixote. I've been playing at him a good deal lately."

"Do you generally play at the people you read about?"

"Always," Paul said solemnly. "What would be the good of reading about them else?"

"I suppose it's a good plan," the man said musingly; "it must lead you into many adventures."

"It does," Paul said solemnly. "*This* is one of them, and you, I suppose, are a sort of magician, since you make plays. Do people *really* act them?"

"Not as often as I could wish," the man said, "... but it's great fun all the same."

"Do *you* play at being the people?"

The man shook his head. "I'm afraid not," he said sadly. Then more to himself than to Paul—"That's the hardest thing of all to do; to look on is much easier."

"I don't care for looking on," said Paul decidedly. "I want to *be* it all the time."

"I suppose we all do to begin with, and then ... we find out that lookers-on see most of the game."

"I don't care much about seeing games. I'd rather play them; it's much more fun really. Truly it is," he said earnestly.

"Doubtless you are right," the man said courteously, "but, you see, we don't all care for the same games."

"When I'm grown up—and rich," Paul announced, "I shall write books——"

"You're wise to be rich first," murmured the man.

"I shall write books," Paul continued, "with that little piano, and when I'm not writing I shall play at being all the people in my books—one after the other—at least, all the nice ones, who are successful."

"Are the nice ones always successful?"

"In the end, always. Of course, they have trials and things."

"What about Don Quixote?" asked the man.

Paul looked unhappy. "It worries me," he said. "It worries me dreadfully. He was so nice and so silly and"—the corners of Paul's mouth went down—"and ... he died in the end."

"I quite agree with you," said the man. "It *is* worrying. Don't let us talk about it."

Thor suddenly sat up on his haunches and tried to lick Paul's face.

"You seem," said Paul, "to be very fond of reading, you've such a splendid lot of books. Do you ever, by any chance, read at meals?"

Paul held him with stern, searching eyes.

"Only when I'm alone," the man said primly.

"Never when people are there?" Paul asked, fixing him with a gaze that seemed to search his

very soul.

"Well ... only at tea-time ... occasionally.... Why do you ask?"

"Because," Paul answered, "they're all so down on me for doing it. I always want to read at tea-time, and they won't let me. Now I shall tell them you do it; that'll surprise 'em."

"Oh, don't!" the man urged, "don't give me away. They'd be so shocked."

"Of course, I shan't say anything if you'd rather I didn't," Paul remarked magnanimously, "but I thought if I just mentioned a grown-up gentleman did it they couldn't be so down on me! ... But I truly won't if you'd rather not. I guessed you did it the minute I saw you."

"I'm quite certain neither of us ought to," said the man, "but it *is* a temptation ... when the conversation is dull."

"It's often jolly dull," Paul groaned—and at that moment a gong sounded.

"That's for luncheon," said the man. "Are you hungry?"

"I'm starving, and do you think there will be any little bits for Thor?"

"Sure of it," said the man. "Would you like to wash? And do you require any ... assistance?"

The man looked down at Paul; he had to look rather a long way, for Paul was very small for his age. Perhaps it was that made him ask. Anyway Paul was not offended.

"I can wash all right," he said, "but nurse generally gives my hair a bit of a do—but if you don't mind I don't."

They went up some steps and through a glass door into another room—more like other people's rooms this—tidy and arranged like other drawing-rooms, then across the hall to the dining-room, where an elderly parlour-maid with a kind face put a fat book on Paul's chair to make it high enough.

He was desperately hungry, and the lunch was very good, but he couldn't have enjoyed it as much if the kind-looking parlour-maid had not brought a big plate of scraps for Thor, and spread a duster under it.

Paul liked his host. He liked the sense of good fellowship, the absence of patronage, the unusual reticence that abstained from questions as to why he was there at all.

"Do you know my father?" he asked presently.

"I'm afraid not," said the man, "but if you tell me his name I dare say I may have heard of him."

"He's not at all like me," Paul announced. "He's awfully sensible, every one says that, but he's a most good-natured man and kind as kind. Surely you must know Squire Staniland?"

The man shook his head. "I'm afraid not, though I have heard his name."

"What county are we in?" asked Paul.

The man told him, and it was not our county.

"Then we've walked right into another shire," Paul exclaimed. "*What* a way we've come! That's why you don't know father."

"What about your people?" asked the man. "Won't they wonder where you are?"

"They'll *wonder*," said Paul, "and they won't be best pleased, but they won't send out search-parties till evening because I've done it before."

"Oh, you're given to wandering, are you? Don't you think I'd better take you home in the motor?"

"And Thor?" Paul asked anxiously. "He mustn't run with it. Motors go too fast for dogs. Father says so."

"And Thor," said the man. "He can come inside with us."

They had coffee, which pleased Paul greatly, and he confided to his friend that he had never had a cup all to himself before, only the sugar at the bottom of other people's cups if he could get at them before they were cleared away.

Motors were something of a novelty then, and Paul thought it very exciting to go in one. Thor was suspicious and refused to go in before his master, but followed him obediently when Paul got in first.

"We can't have a motor," he remarked, as they slid down the drive, "it would break Button's heart, father says, and we're very fond of horses, though I like the dogs best myself. Did your coachman mind very much?"

"My coachman got so frail and ill he couldn't drive any more, and it would have broken *his* heart to have any one else drive his horses, so I had to get a motor, because I'm such a long way from the station. He didn't mind that so much."

"It's the same reason really," said Paul. "Did he get better?"

"He'll never be any better, but I think he's pretty comfortable."

Paul was certain he was.

After all it wasn't such a very long way by the road, though it was in another county. The motor stopped at the drive gate, Paul and Thor descended, for, despite entreaties, this hospitable man refused to come up to the house.

"You'll let me know when you've found the printing thing that spells right, won't you?" Paul called out at parting.

"I most certainly will," the man called back, "and if you find it first I expect you to tell me."

* * * * *

Paul's family did not share the reticence of his late host. He was catechised at long length, and would assuredly have been punished but for father's intervention. Father, who refused to be anxious or excited when his younger son played the prodigal, seemed rather to sympathise with his wandering propensities. "As if anything could happen to the boy, with that great dog always at his heels," he said scornfully, when, before lunch, we had all suggested the manifold disasters that might have befallen Paul. "It's no use expecting a boy to stay in the grounds for ever. Let him go out and tramp the country occasionally, and when he comes back take no notice, and he'll soon tire of it. Paul likes to make a sensation. It would be quite flat and tame if we were none of us the least concerned as to where he has been. You may be sure he'll fall on his feet whatever way he goes—he's that sort."

All very well for father, who was the least inquisitive man on earth, but Fiammetta and I were bursting with curiosity, and I noticed mother hovered near during Paul's recital of his adventures.

Just at bed-time he discovered that he had left his "chuncheon" behind. He remembered that it "stuck into him rather" as he sat talking to the man who wrote plays just before lunch, and he had slipped it out of the string round his waist and laid it at the back of his chair.

"You'll never see it again," said Fiammetta. "Somebody's sure to throw it away."

Paul looked sad. Then his face brightened—"I don't think so," he said. "Nothing's ever thrown away out of that room."

"How do you know?" asked mother.

"He hasn't got a missus," Paul said, "anybody could see that. He does *exactly* what he likes. No one tidies his things. He hasn't got one."

"Perhaps he'll throw it away himself," Fiammetta persisted.

"I don't believe it," cried Paul, on the verge of tears. "He wouldn't do such a thing. He's not that kind of person."

"You'll never see that old truncheon again," Fiammetta remarked with a superior finality that drove Paul to make reprisals.

He stoutly maintained his belief in his friend, but he was plainly anxious, for he knew that he could never find his way again to that other county. He had wandered there, haphazard, across fields, and never noticed the roads on the return journey—he was so busy talking to his friend. He added a petition to his prayers that the beloved "chuncheon" might be restored to him, and "so," as Mr. Pepys would say, "to bed."

Next morning his faith was justified. It arrived by post, in a neat parcel sealed at each end, and inside, printed by the little piano, "I hope you were not worried about it. I found the weapon when I got back."

"There," said Paul, "didn't I say so? I *knew* he wasn't a throwing-away sort of man."

XIX A MISFIT

Ronnie left the beach and climbed the steep slope till he reached the summit, where rough grass and stones edged golden cornfields that stretched inland as far as the eye could see.

No one noticed that he had gone. Miss Biddle, the holiday governess, sat reading in the shade of the cliff, absorbed in *The Blue Necklace*. His cousins, Cedric and Githa, both older than he, were building an elaborate sand-castle, according to a diagram spread on the sand, and held in place by stones laid on the four corners.

When he reached the top he turned his back upon the beach, and sat down on a big stone,

elbows on knees, and hands clasped under the sharp little chin that rested on them. The yellow cornfields became blurred and dim as he gazed, for Ronnie was lonely and dreadfully homesick. Everybody he cared for seemed so far away—even Uncle Gerald, the kind and understanding, was shooting in Scotland, and seemed as remote as father and mother in India.

The big tears brimmed over and fell. Then everything grew clear again. It was very pretty, the corn billowing in golden waves under the soft wind; but its beauty did not cheer him. Rather did he remember dismally that last time he sat beside it insects, that he decided must be singularly silent and stealthy mosquitoes, came out and bit him so that he was all over itching lumps afterwards. All the same, he didn't move: he was too miserable. Moreover he had that morning come to the conclusion that something must be done. He had no idea what. But ideas come with reflection. So, after a sniff or two, he unclasped his hands, polished his nose with his sleeve, and then sat very still, going over in his mind all the time since he came Home, to try to discover why there should be what he called "a kind-of-a-ness" over everything.

He was quite fair. He recognised that it was partly his own fault for getting fever in the cold weather. Then, too, fate had conspired against him, for the Friths were coming Home in the middle of May. If they hadn't been sailing then, there would have been nobody to send him with. He had been coming for good next hot weather, when he would be seven, with mother and baby-brother. They were coming then for certain. But a whole year, to a child, seems an interminable, abysmal space, that no hopes can bridge.

He had known all along that he was to go to Aunt Hildegarde till mother came back—Aunt Hildegarde, who lived in a place called Golder's Green. He knew that there was an Uncle Edward and two cousins, in fact he faintly remembered having seen them last time he came Home; but as he was only three then his impressions were somewhat hazy.

Perhaps if he had come straight to these relatives he might have shaken down better, but the Fates had settled otherwise. Just as the P. & O. reached Marseilles, Cedric and Githa got measles, and Aunt Hildegarde, who was most conscientious, decided that she couldn't possibly allow Ronnie to run the risk of infection. She therefore appealed to Uncle Gerald to take him till all danger was past.

This, had Ronnie known it, was asking a good deal; for Uncle Gerald, who was his father's uncle, was an elderly bachelor of fairly fixed habits. Nevertheless, as he was fond of Ronnie's parents, and there really seemed to be nobody else, he agreed to take the little boy till such time as the nursery at Golder's Green was ready to receive him. He even came up himself to Charing Cross to meet the P. & O. express, and took over Ronnie from kind Mrs. Frith, who, with three children of her own to look after, had yet found room in her heart to love Ronnie quite a lot. As he sat there in the sunshine gazing at the golden waves, he thought of the blue green waves that washed around the big home-bound steamer, and in remembering the voyage, unconsciously compared his aunt and Mrs. Frith, wondering why it was Aunt Hildegarde made you "feel so different." Mrs. Frith was often hasty—four children and an ayah in the Red Sea are enough to put an edge on the smoothest temper—but she was always fair even in her hastiness. And she judged the exasperating conduct of Ronnie with precisely the same amount of irritation as she brought to bear on that of her own offspring. Aunt Hildegarde kept a quite separate compartment in her mind for the consideration of Ronnie. He was conscious of this and resented it. Then memory swung back to Uncle Gerald—Uncle Gerald coming down the drive in a cloud of dogs.

As he thought of the dogs the big tears welled up again and rolled down his cheeks. Everything about that first day in England seemed to stand out before him in a series of pictures like those he had once seen at a theatre in India. There was all the bustle and rushing at Charing Cross. Uncle Gerald, tall, with closely-trimmed grey beard, and kind keen eyes under his broad forehead—such a lot of forehead Uncle Gerald had. Ronnie even remembered hearing Mrs. Frith say, "Oh, he's a dear little soul, very talkative and officious, but quite affectionate; cheerful too—which is a great matter with children, don't you think?" Then there was a scramble for luggage. Ronnie's little cabin trunk was disentangled. He was embraced by all the Frith family and ayah, and, hand in hand with this tall, unknown Uncle Gerald, hurried down the big station to a taxi-cab. They drove across London to another station—Paddington it was called, where they had tea—and into the train again for another journey. Then, in the slowly fading spring light, a long drive in a motor through green country lanes till they turned into some big gates and drove up to a house whence issued a most tremendous barking and yapping. The door was opened and four dogs rushed out—long-bodied, rough-haired West Highland terriers, their colour ranging from almost black to lightish grey—who jumped all over Uncle Gerald with noisy manifestations of delight, sniffed curiously at Ronnie, and as he was not in the least afraid of them, took him into

favour at once and jumped on him—Collum and Puddock and Mona their mother, and frisky, cheeky little Rannoch, who was no relation to any of them, and took the greatest liberties with all three.

All Uncle Gerald's servants had been with him for untold ages, and all were elderly excepting the housemaid, who had only been there a short ten years, and occasionally was still spoken of as "that new girl." Her name was Grace, and she came from somewhere near Perth, and it was to her care that Ronnie was entrusted for such matters as bathing and dressing and hair-brushing.

Before he slept that night he knew all about Grace, and decided that she was a person to be cultivated. But he felt that about all of them. His coming into that silent (save for the dogs), regular house was something of an adventure. The household rose to it, and the loquacious, inquisitive, lively little boy never even knocked at their hearts, but walked straight in and took possession. He decided that England was a nice place: a bit cold, perhaps, when one got up in the morning, but very pretty and full of interesting things to do. He gardened with the three gardeners, wasting hours of their time, and starting endless horticultural experiments which were wholly without result. He cleaned the motor with Robinson and got so wet that Grace, looking out of the pantry window, caught him and changed all his clothes, which he thought very unnecessary. It was her one fault—she was always so suspicious of damp.

He penetrated to the kitchen, and discussed its small resemblance to an Indian kitchen with Mrs. Robinson, who was Robinson's wife. He was very fond of telling them about India, and thoroughly enjoyed their respectful astonishment at some of his tallest stories, and when he wasn't telling things himself he asked questions. All day long he asked questions, so that, when he was safe in bed and asleep, Uncle Gerald would take down large heavy tomes from the book-cases and prime himself with useful knowledge for the morrow.

Into every corner of that big old Cotswold house did Ronnie poke his inquisitive curly head, and the more he saw of it the better he liked it. It was such a kind, welcoming sort of house. Of course, sometimes he wanted his mother pretty badly, and then he sought Uncle Gerald, who seemed to know exactly what was wrong, and no matter what he was doing would find time for a homesick little boy; and by the charm of his conversation, and sometimes without any conversation at all, would so steep Ronnie in an atmosphere of warm friendship that the curious ache would depart, leaving no remembrance of it.

And now, as he sat looking into the forest of corn, there came to his mind a piece of poetry that he had learned to please Uncle Gerald. It was a very great adventure that led to the learning of these verses, and Ronnie thrilled with the remembrance. One night early in that June, one never-to-be-forgotten night, Uncle Gerald came into his room and woke him up, made Grace put on his clothes, and then wrapped him up in a blanket and carried him out to the back of the house where there was a little copse.

The dogs were not allowed to come.

It was a brilliant moonlight night—almost like a night in India, except that it was nothing like so warm. The copse looked very black against the sky, but they didn't go into it; they stayed outside just beside the wire fence, and some way off he could see the servants standing in a group.

"I felt I must wake you," Uncle Gerald whispered, just as though he were at a concert and feared to disturb the artists; "it's the first of the nightingales—listen!"

Ronnie held his breath and listened with all his might; but at first all he could hear was a soft, whispering sort of note that seemed to say Tiô, Tiô, Tiô, Tiô, Tiô, Tiô, Tiô, Tiô, Tik!

He pressed his cheek against Uncle Gerald's and yawned. The soft note changed to a full-throated song, full of trills and cascades and roulades and occasional odd chuckles. He supposed it was very wonderful (though he infinitely preferred Robinson's whistling of "The Sailor's Star"), but he was not so much interested in the nightingales as in the night. It was so big and mysterious and scented and silvery out in that moonshine, so warm and safe in Uncle Gerald's arms. It was such *fun* to be out so late, and to hear nightingales like a grown-up person.

Ronnie's little soul was flooded with an immense content.

They listened for what seemed to him a very long time, and he was nearly falling asleep again when Uncle Gerald said suddenly, still in that hushed, concert-y sort of voice, "There! isn't that fine? But I must take you home to bed." And as they went back Uncle Gerald repeated some poetry to himself. Ronnie didn't understand it in the least, but next day asked his uncle to "tell again that bit about fairy lands for lawns."

Uncle Gerald laughed and said it wasn't quite that, but he "told it again," and then suggested that it would be nice if Ronnie, having heard one, learned what a poet called Keats had said about

a nightingale: and Ronnie, who had a quick ear and retentive memory, learned two long verses—the end of the poem, Uncle Gerald said, and used to repeat them to his uncle to their mutual pride and satisfaction.

And now as he sat beside this cornfield there sounded in his head the lines—

"Perhaps the self-same song that found a path
Through the sad heart of Ruth, when, sick for home,
She stood in tears among the alien corn;

* * * * *

Forlorn! the very word is like a bell...."

That was just what Ronnie was. He spared no pity for Ruth, though he knew all about her—for Uncle Gerald had told him. At all events *she* had not had to go and live with an aunt at Golder's Green, and with odious, priggish, plump cousins, who made fun of the way he talked, and took no interest whatever in India.

He detested Golder's Green. The house seemed so small and pokey, and the garden so prim, after the great rooms in India and Uncle Gerald's kindly, wandering old house and big friendly garden. The trim roads and jumbled, pretty little houses weighed upon him with a deadly weight of depression, though he couldn't have told why. There were no dogs either, only a large aloof cat called "Ra," that Aunt Hildegarde used to enthrone on a cushion, placed on a kind of pillar, while she and visiting ladies, attired in straight, sad-coloured garments, sandals, and digitated socks, sat round about upon the floor and enthused upon his wondrous beauty and wisdom. Ronnie would have liked Ra, if he might have stroked and cuddled him, but the children were not allowed to touch him, as he was supposed to be fierce and resentful of such attentions.

Ronnie was always in trouble, always doing or, even more often, saying what he ought not. Seeing ladies who wore veils on their heads, and had bare feet and sandals, he asked if they were ayahs; on being told hastily "of course not," he suggested that they were Parsi ladies, and was severely snubbed in consequence.

He was slow and clumsy over the little handicrafts his cousins practised with such skill and industry, and when Cedric and Githa irritated him beyond bearing he tried to beat them, which caused a frightful commotion and filled the whole household with consternation.

His aunt and uncle were not like Uncle Gerald in the matter of answering questions. To be sure, they told him all sorts of things he didn't particularly want to know, or knew already; but they refused to answer questions. They held his cousins up to him as models, a fatal thing to do, and they made no allowance for a lonely little boy suddenly transported to an entirely new environment. They were cold, too, sniffy and uninterested in all he had to say about Uncle Gerald, and this he resented extremely. He could not know that they were a centre of light and leading in the most superior set in Golder's Green, and that there existed between them and Uncle Gerald the deep-seated, never-expressed, hearty dislike of the *poseur* for the simple and sincere.

Had he but known it, Uncle Gerald took care that he never came across them more often than the very remote connection warranted. But Aunt Hildegarde was mother's only sister, and she seemed the natural guardian for Ronnie, and Uncle Gerald never interfered in other people's concerns. But he had his doubts, and his heart was sore for the frank, talkative little boy when he left him.

Nobody was actively unkind. He had plenty to eat, a nice room which he shared with Cedric, who was destined for a school all fads and flannel-shirts, and already could make his own bed and empty his washing-basin—matters wherein Ronnie was hopelessly ignorant, and showed no aptitude when Cedric tried to teach him. That was the mischief: Cedric and Githa were always teaching, and let him know it; and it roused every evil disposition in Ronnie; so that he was rapidly becoming a sort of Ishmael both in feeling and in fact.

Then Miss Biddle brought them to the seaside, while aunt and uncle went for a walking tour in Wales.

The soft wind blew a cloud over the sun. Ronnie shivered and arose from his stone. Cedric and Githa were still absorbed in their plan. Miss Biddle was breathlessly following the fortunes of "The Hon. Jane." Ronnie, wilfully disobedient, decided to go for a walk by himself along the edge of the cornfield. No ideas had come to him except the omnipresent determination to go back to Uncle Gerald till mother should come Home.

But how?

He was sensible and sophisticated enough to know he couldn't walk there, and that he hadn't enough money to go by train. He had, to be precise, exactly one penny in the world; the weekly penny given to each of them every Monday by Miss Biddle on behalf of Uncle Edward. He couldn't write, and he knew that it would both distress and annoy his aunt if she heard that he was unhappy in her house. She would never *see* he was unhappy; he was sure of that. She would only see that he was "unpleasant."

He stumped along, picking his way through the stones and thistles, big with an entirely vague purpose, when suddenly he came upon a man sitting, as he himself had been sitting a few minutes ago, on a big stone; only this man had a blotting-pad upon his knees and was writing very fast. He wore a panama hat tilted almost over his nose to shelter his eyes, big round spectacles with tortoise-shell rims, and as he finished a sheet he laid it on a pile of others that, like Cedric's plan, were kept from blowing away by the stones laid upon them. Ronnie watched him breathlessly. How fast he wrote! Uncle Gerald could write like that, and daddie ... and thinking of daddie there came into his mind the picture of a busy Eastern street, and the *likhnè-wālā* (letter-writer) sitting on the curbstone in the sunshine ready to write letters for those who could not write themselves ... if they could pay him.

"Was this man a *likhnè-wālā*?"

He looked like a *sahib*, but then so did Robinson, and he was Uncle Gerald's *gharri-wallah*.

Ronnie drew a little nearer. If this man was a *likhnè-wālā*, would he—oh, would he—write a letter for *one anna*?

Ronnie felt it was a very small sum to offer, but the man looked kind, and he could write so fast. It wouldn't take him long.

Perhaps if he was approached very politely.... Ronnie crept a bit nearer and the man looked up and saw him.

The little boy joined his hands, and touching his forehead bowed his body, as he had seen men in India bow when they came before his father to ask for something.

"Sahib," he said earnestly, "could you write a letter for one anna?"

"Hullo, shrimp!" said the man. "Have you sprung right out of the Shiny into here?"

"I know it's very little monies," Ronnie continued apologetically, "*very* little monies, but I do want that letter wrote, so badly. I've truly got one anna; here it is."

The man held out his hand, and Ronnie laid the penny on his palm.

The man closed his hand upon it.

"Now," he said, "what shall I write?"

He took a fresh sheet of paper and looked at Ronnie, and the little boy saw that the eyes behind the round glasses were bright and kind.

"Dear Uncle Gerald," Ronnie began. "Please come. I do not like it here. I want to come back to you. It is forlorn here, not fairylands—"

"Eh, what's that?" asked the man. "You dictate very fast. 'Not fairylands'? Yes?"

"I am mizzabel," Ronnie continued. "Please come quickly and take me away. Cejic and Githa do not like me. They are so pompshus—"

"What's that?" asked the man.

"I do not like them," Ronnie went on. "I like the dogs much better; kiss them all on their foreheads for me, not their noses, they are too wet, especially Rannoch. Please come quick. I am so mizzable. Your loving Ronnie.... That's all, thank you."

"Mizzable, eh?" the man repeated. "Is it indiscreet to ask why?"

"I don't know exactly myself," said Ronnie. "It just *is*."

"Ah," said the man. "I know that; that's the very worst kind. Long since you came Home?"

"Oh, very long," Ronnie answered sadly. "Ages and ages."

"Hm-m-m!" said the man. "With relations?"

"Yes, but Uncle Gerald's a relation too, you know, only he's a nice one—oh, a 'dorable relation."

"How is it you're here and not with him then?" asked the man.

"It was arranged," Ronnie said solemnly. "*I* didn't do it."

"I see," said the man. "'It was an order.' And what will the parents out in the Shiny say?"

Ronnie looked grave. "I b'lieve they'd like it," he said, after a moment's thought. "*They* 'dore Uncle Gerald too."

"Hm-m-m! Seems a popular person," said the man. "What's his name?"

"Same as daddie's and mine."

"Yes, and yours?"

"Ronald Forsyth Hardy."

"Then he's Gerald Hardy, I suppose? And where is he at present?"

"Scotland," said Ronnie promptly.

"But that's a bit vague. What part of Scotland?"

"Oh, they're sure to know him there; he goes every year; he told me so."

"Were you there with him?"

"No, I was in his own bungalow. He went to Scotland after I left."

"Can you remember the name of his bungalow?"

"Yes: Longhope."

"Any station?"

"There *is* a station, but it's very far off, and I don't remember its name. Won't my letter get to him?" the little boy asked anxiously.

The man looked through his bright spectacles right into Ronnie's large brown eyes. He noticed that the child was very thin, and that he hunched his shoulders and drooped his head.

The man laid his writing-pad upon the ground and lifted Ronnie on to his knee.

"Old chap," he said, "you've got the blues, and you're a bit of a misfit. That's what's the matter with you. But it won't last. Believe me, it won't last. I'll do my best to find this Uncle Gerald of yours. I'm going to town this afternoon, and I'll look him up in Burke."

"Oh, he's not in Burke," Ronnie declared positively. "He's in Scotland; he's wrote to me from there."

"All right," said the man. "I'll try and get the letter to him somehow. But you mustn't expect too much. It may not be over-easy for Uncle Gerald to do anything, and it takes a deuce of a time for letters to get to Scotland."

"Longer than to Burke?"

"Hark!" said the man. "Isn't that some one calling?"

"It's for me," exclaimed Ronnie, jumping off his knee. "I expect it's time to go to dinner. You won't forget? You do promise? You won't tell them?" For he saw Miss Biddle and Cedric and Githa arrive breathlessly at the top of the slope.

"Honest Injun," said the man. "But it'll take a good week. Then you'll hear *something*, if Uncle Gerald's the man I take him for."

They shook hands. Miss Biddle and his cousins were quite close, and he turned to meet them. Their questions and reproaches passed over his head lightly. He didn't care. He had *done* something at last, and he believed in the likhnè-wālā.

"How long is a week?" he asked, when the enormity of his conduct had been thoroughly threshed out.

"Seven days, of course. You *are* an ignorant little boy," said Githa.

* * * * *

As it happened, Uncle Gerald *was* in Burke, so the likhnè-wālā found his home address, and Ronnie's letter reached him three days later, when he came back from a long day on the moors. There was another letter also, from the likhnè-wālā, and in it he used the very phrase he had used to Ronnie. "I fear," he said, "the little chap is a misfit, and it's a painful game to play when one is a kiddy. He looked peaked and thin and timid, and he ought to be such a jolly little chap."

He said a great many other things, did the likhnè-wālā, and the name he signed at the end of his letter was one well known to Uncle Gerald as the author of certain books he knew and cared for.

* * * * *

The week dragged on. It rained a lot and the days were long for Ronnie in the seaside lodgings. He kept count of the days, though, and at last it reached the sixth day from the time he met the likhnè-wālā, and no answer had come to his letter. Yet he never doubted him. He was convinced that somehow or other his letter would reach Uncle Gerald.

It was on Monday he had met the likhnè-wālā, and on Saturday evening after tea it cleared up and they went out to the sands. They were to return to Golder's Green next week, and Ronnie dreaded it unspeakably, for he felt that if nothing happened before he did that, then he was indeed abandoned and forlorn. Cedric and Githa would not let him dig with them because his methods were too erratic. Miss Biddle had finished *The Blue Necklace*, and started on *Love is a Snare*, and found it equally enthralling.

Ronnie was digging by himself, a lonely little figure apart from the rest, and talking to himself as he worked. He had built a bungalow, and had just flattened out the compound round about it, and was beginning on the servants' quarters, when he looked up to see a solitary figure coming across the ribbed and glistening sand. The tide was out, and there seemed miles of beach between him and the sea. They had had their tea extra early, and the beach was almost deserted, for it was just five o'clock. Ronnie watched the distant figure, and his heart seemed to jump up and turn over, for there was something dear and familiar about it, and yet ... he didn't dare to hope.

Then suddenly his long sight told him there was no mistake. It was, it *was* the Uncle Gerald of his hopes and dreams! He started to run, and the figure made the glad assurance doubly sure by taking off its hat and waving it. Then Ronnie saw the dear, tall forehead, that, as he once pointed out to his uncle, "went right over to the back"; after that there could be no mistake.

"I never thought you would come," he said, safe in the shelter of those kind arms, "and if you did I always thought all the dogs would be bound to come too."

The likhnè-wālā was quite right when he said it would not be "over-easy" for Uncle Gerald. It wasn't.

It required a deal of diplomacy, and only Uncle Gerald's charm and tact carried the matter through without a serious breach between the Golder's Green relations and Ronnie's parents. It cost a small fortune in cables, too.

But in the end it was managed, and Ronnie went back to Longhope, where he fitted so uncommonly well.

"I must say," said Uncle Gerald, "you've a nice taste in amanuenses."

"What's that?" asked Ronnie.

"Well, I believe you call it a likhnè-wālā," said Uncle Gerald. "Both are long, rather clumsy names, and there's not much to choose between them."

"He was a nice likhnè-wālā," said Ronnie; "and very cheap."

XX

THE CONTAGION OF HONOUR

It's a far cry from cantonments in a town in Northern India to a village in the Cotswolds, and events had moved so fast in the last four months that for a while Robin felt rather breathless and bewildered.

He was not yet six years old, but he had been through the Suez Canal six times.

The first times he couldn't remember at all, the second two passages only faintly, but the last two were vivid and epoch-making.

They came so close together, too.

Had any one just then asked Robin to define war, he would have tried to explain that it meant continual departure from where you happened to be, separation and loss, that through it all—like the refrain of a marching tune—there sounded stanzas of joyous excitement; but these passed quickly, leaving silence and desolation for those left behind.

Of one thing he was certain: war meant movement. No grown-up person could keep in one place for any length of time when there was war. In April, when the hot weather set in, he and mummy and ayah and Jean went to the hills, as usual; but daddy stayed in cantonments. Long before the hot weather was over they all went back. There was much bustle and activity, and the Sikhs all looked very cheerful indeed.

Then came more moves.

Daddy went first this time, and took the regiment with him; but he wasn't going Home.

Mummy and the children went next, leaving a weeping ayah at the new Alexandra Dock in Bombay.

The voyage was long and wearisome in a very crowded boat, where there were many other children and anxious-looking mummies, but no sahibs—no sahibs at all.

When they arrived in England, they all came to live with grandfather and Aunt Monica at the Vicarage, and, though this was very different from India, and not nearly so gay and cheerful, it was quite bearable till mummy went too.

That was a wholly unexpected blow. Soldiers' children, especially the children of soldiers serving abroad, early realise that a mysterious power called "the Service" may at any moment

snatch daddy away. It may be that he has to go where they cannot follow, or that he has to stay and they have to go. In any case, it means separation.

But mummies are different. They belong—most of all when children are quite small.

Yet Robin's mother had gone.

As he pattered up and down the rather wet path that Saturday afternoon, he was remembering a conversation he had heard in the verandah just before the regiment left India. He was building a temple on the floor with his bricks, and mummy was very rapidly turning the heel of a sock while Major Booth talked to her. Major Booth was their doctor, and a very good doctor too.

"It's frightful waste, you know," Major Booth said, in a grumbling voice, "for you to go and rust in a remote village doing nursemaid to a couple of kids."

"You see, they happen to be my kids," mummy answered quietly.

"That's no argument just now," he retorted. "They are healthy, jolly kids; they've got a competent aunt—you told me so yourself. They'll be perfectly well cared for whether you are there or not—and you're wanted, I tell you."

Mummy gave a little gasp. "Oh, man!" she cried, "why do you dangle the unattainable before my eyes? You know I'm just dying to go ... but I've taken on another job ... and there are plenty without me. I won't butt in—"

"Will you go if you're asked for?"

"If I'm asked for!" Mummy repeated the words scornfully. "Of course I'd go."

Robin looked up from his temple.

"Go where?" he asked. "Can I come, too?"

"Don't you worry, sonny dear," mummy said, and her voice sounded flat and tired. "I don't for one moment suppose they'll want me. I only wish they would. 'That's all shove be'ind me—long ago and far away,'" she quoted, while Major Booth shook his head in violent dissent.

They talked of other things that did not particularly interest Robin till he went away, but as Major Booth ran down the verandah steps he had called out: "Mind, it's a bandabost! You come if you're asked for."

Robin remembered that very distinctly.

When they had been four weeks at the Vicarage, when they were just settling down to the quiet life there, the summons came.

It seems that Robin's mummy, before there was any Robin or Jean or even daddy, had been a particularly first-class surgical nurse, and not only that, but an Army nurse. She never talked about it, but Major Booth had discovered it soon after she came to India with daddy. They were out in camp, and there was a bad accident to one of the soldiers, and mummy just took charge and helped Major Booth as only a skilful nurse can help.

After that, if sudden illness or accidents occurred where no trained nurses were handy, people rather got into the way of sending for mummy to lend a hand.

And now they had sent for her to nurse wounded soldiers at a base hospital.

She explained this to Robin the night before she left, as he sat on her knee all ready for bed in front of the nursery fire. He remembered the feel of the nursery fender, the warm wire bars, as he pressed his feet against them.

Mummy did not deny that she was immensely proud and glad to go—it was such an honour to be allowed to do anything—but she hated leaving Robin and Jean. Still, in war we must all give up something. He had to give up his daddy and his mummy—"a good deal for a little boy," she added.

Would he be good and try to please Aunt Monica and the new nurse, and encourage Jean to be good, and not fret, and try to help all he could?

Just then Robin felt so solemn and exalted that it seemed he could give up anything to help the poor wounded soldiers, and so he said. And after his prayers, mummy tucked him into bed and kissed him, and whispered the things mummies do whisper at such times. Her eyes tasted salt when he kissed them, dragging her head down with his two arms that he might do it—mummy was so tall—and the next day she went away.

She had been gone five whole weeks, and Christmas was not far off, and that Friday afternoon Robin wanted her most desperately, for somehow everything had gone wrong.

It began with digging trenches.

Now to dig a trench properly, as in war, you must lie on your tummy and throw the earth up in front of you; if you stood up, the enemy would pot you—that's an understood thing.

But they didn't seem to realise this at the Vicarage. For when Robin essayed to do it in his

own garden—a nice large plot at the far end of the kitchen garden that grandfather had given him for his very own—he naturally got what nurse called "all over mould," and she was far from pleased, the less so in that Jean, coming with nurse to find him, immediately flung herself face downwards in the adjacent carrot-bed in imitation of her brother.

Jean was pretty, and every one fell in love with her at first sight; but Robin was what nurse called a "very or'nary child," and visiting strangers showed no inclination to make a fuss of him.

Grandfather was a very old gentleman, and Aunt Monica was always busy with parish work. Robin had heard his father say that she was "as good as three curates" to grandfather. Therefore did he find himself wishing that she had been, less capable, for, he reasoned, if Aunt Monica was equal to three curates now, and a visiting curate whom Robin liked exceedingly was still necessary—had she been rather less efficient, two visiting curates might have been required. Or, better still, the present one might have been permanent. And this, from Robin's point of view, was most desirable.

The visiting curate came every Sunday to intone the service, read the lessons, help in the Sunday-school, and take the children's service in the afternoon, and he always lunched at the Vicarage.

He was tall, with a cheerful red face and broad shoulders, which made a most comfortable seat for little boys. Moreover, he was a most accomplished person. He could waggle his ears without moving his head, and move his hair up and down without disarranging a muscle of his face. He could shut one eye—"shut flat," Robin called it, "no wrinkles"—and stare at you with the other, and he could wink each eye in succession, in a fashion that conveyed infinite possibilities of merriment. And all these things he contrived to do at the solemn Sunday luncheon when neither grandfather nor Aunt Monica happened to be looking.

Then there was Pollard.

Pollard was the gardener. He was not a gifted being like the curate. By no stretch of imagination could he be regarded as entertaining. He was a stocky, silent young man, whose conversation consisted mainly of "Yes, Mazter Robin"; "Noa, little gentleman"; or, "I don't 'old with it myself, young zur," when Robin solicited his opinions about the war and kindred subjects.

Yet there was something in his bearing that subtly conveyed to the lonely little boy the fact that in Pollard he had a friend, and a rather admiring friend at that, and Robin followed him about like a small dog.

Yes, Pollard was a comfort.

He spied him now wheeling a barrow loaded with what Pollard himself called "dong," with a spade resting on the top of the heap.

"Wait for me, Pollard—wait for me!" called the clear little voice. The man stopped, and when Robin caught him up, they went together to the flower-garden, where Pollard was preparing the ground for a hedge of sweet peas next year.

Here Robin was thrilled to perceive that Pollard started to dig a trench. He was a capital digger, throwing up great spadefuls of soil, and the trench was beautifully even.

"They'd like you to help them in Belgium," Robin exclaimed admiringly, "you're so strong—only you couldn't do it that way."

Pollard rested on his spade. "Well, there now, Mazter Robin," he exclaimed, "be you agoin' to teach Oi to dig at this time o' day?"

"Not standing up like that," Robin continued, as though he had not heard—"not to begin with. You'd get shot directly. Can you do it as well lying down?"

"Lyin' down!" Pollard repeated. "Lyin' down! 'Ooever 'eard o' diggin' lyin' down?"

"Soldiers do," Robin answered. "They have to. I can a little, too, only the soil here sticks to one so."

"Do you mean as they lays flat on their backs and scrabbles sideways with a trowel?" asked Pollard, fairly puzzled.

"No, no," exclaimed Robin, "front ways, of course. I could show you in a minute if nurse wasn't so cross. You throw it up in front of you so's to hide you, and when the hill in front's high enough, and your hole is deep enough, then you can stand up, stooping, and dig your way. I've got one in my garden, not a good one, 'cos nurse stopped me, but you should see soldiers do it!"

And just then nurse came to look for Robin, and took him indoors because it was getting dark.

Pollard continued to dig thoughtfully. From time to time he paused, leant upon his spade and scratched his head. By the time he had prepared the ground for the sweet peas it was just about dark, but before he went home he visited Robin's garden. Here he tried digging a trench in

military fashion, and exceedingly hard work he found it.

* * * * *

From time to time precious letters came to Robin—from daddy in the trenches (how he longed to see *those* trenches!), and from mother in her hospital. Aunt Monica was very kind about those letters; she read them aloud over and over again, till Robin knew them by heart and imparted their contents to Pollard, who always appeared much edified, though he was a man of few words.

On the end of a barn that he passed every day between his mother's cottage and the Vicarage, there were posters which declared in flaming, foot-long letters that his "King and Country" needed him, and adjuring him to join the Army NOW for the war, and so on.

Hitherto, Pollard had regarded the war entirely from the outside. "Soldierin' bain't for the likes of me," he said, and his mother quite agreed with him. Some was "fond of a bit of soldiering" even in peace; and it was quite natural and suitable that such should join the "Tarriers." For them, of course, the call to arms was imperative, and Pollard took it for granted that they should obey and march away, and be seen no more. He was quite content that they should do so. But, with regard to himself, such a course seemed neither sensible nor feasible.

"What'd I do with a gun, let alone a bay'nit?" he would inquire facetiously. "I shouldn't know which end to catch 'old on 'im. What good 'ud a' be?"

Lately, though, there had stirred in his mind a tiny, creeping doubt as to whether it was quite justifiable to remain in this state of ignorance. Much talk with Robin, or rather much listening to the talk of Robin, had opened new vistas of possibility to Pollard. He realised in a dim, kindly way that the child was homesick and lonely, and longing for his parents; yet the little boy never wished they had not gone. The Major's letters, too, repeated word for word by his little son, so simple and plain in their language, yet told heroic things of the doings of his men, and these men Pollard knew were "poor Injuns"—"blackies" he had called them, till Robin, indignantly denied that they were anything of the sort.

It began to dawn upon Pollard that the heathen in his blindness, who had crossed the seas to fight for old England, was perhaps doing more to uphold her honour than certain young Englishmen who *could* go, and remained peacefully at home. He had inquired of Robin as to their worship of "wood and stone," but Robin could throw no light upon this, declaring, indeed, that his father's Sikhs "were very religious men, very religious, indeed." So there was another illusion gone.

Pollard became more and more uncomfortable and uncertain. The red posters seemed to reproach him, but the trench finished him altogether.

As he walked home that night as much "all over mould" as Robin had been earlier in the day, the good, clean smell of the wet earth in his nostrils seemed to go to his head like wine, for he kept on muttering to himself: "There be summat as I can do, any'ow."

The thought that a man who could dig might be of use "over there" was positively staggering in its intensity.

* * * * *

Robin was allowed to sit up half an hour later on a Saturday evening, and during that half-hour Aunt Monica read to him or played spillikins with him, or helped him to stick in his little flags on the big map mummy had given him before she left.

That evening they did the map, for there were a lot of new flags to stick in for Russia. When nurse came for him, as they climbed the broad staircase together, she said in quite an excited voice: "You have done it this time, Master Robin; Pollard's gone for a soldier."

"Gone!" Robin exclaimed aghast, "and never said good-bye, nor anything!"

"Well, not exactly gone; but 'e's 'listed in the 'Gloucesters—did it this afternoon over to Cissister. An' it's all you; he says so."

"Me!" cried Robin—by this time they were in the nursery. "I never sent him. I like him. I don't want him to go."

"Well, anyway, he's been and done it this afternoon, and his mother's in the kitchen this minute in a fine takin'. And it's all along of you and your talk, she says."

Robin pondered. "Of course, he's right to go," he said slowly; "but, truly, I never asked him to."

"I don't know who'll do the garden," nurse said, still in the same thrilled, impressive voice, "or what Vicar'll say, or Miss Rivers."

"Will Aunt Monica be angry?" Robin asked, vaguely troubled. It was bad enough to lose Pollard, but if everybody blamed *him* for it ... and just then who should come into the nursery but grandfather himself.

He came very slowly, for he was an old, old gentleman.

Robin was standing by the fire with nothing on but his vest and his stockings.

When grandfather reached the hearthrug, he held out his hand. "Grandson," he said, solemnly, "I congratulate you. You've managed to do what none of the rest of us could do. You've roused a spark of patriotism in Pollard. Aunt Monica and I are proud of you."

It was very wonderful to shake hands with grandfather like that, and to have him there looking down at one so kindly through his gold-rimmed glasses. Robin was not at all sure what it all meant, except that grandfather and Aunt Monica were not angry, neither with Pollard nor with him. But he did connect Pollard's sudden action with all he had told him about daddy and mummy and the Sikhs.

"I suppose," he said thoughtfully, "he kind of caught it."

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