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Содержание

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PROLOGUE.
IN WHICH THE AUTHOR SEEKS TO CAST THE RESPONSIBILITY OF THIS STORY UPON ANOTHER

At the corner of a long, straight, brick-built street in the far East End of London – one of those lifeless streets, made of two drab walls upon which the level lines, formed by the precisely even window-sills and doorsteps, stretch in weary perspective from end to end, suggesting petrified diagrams proving dead problems – stands a house that ever draws me to it; so that often, when least conscious of my footsteps, I awake to find myself hurrying through noisy, crowded thoroughfares, where flaring naphtha lamps illumine fierce, patient, leaden-coloured faces; through dim-lit, empty streets, where monstrous shadows come and go upon the close-drawn blinds; through narrow, noisome streets, where the gutters swarm with children, and each ever-open doorway vomits riot; past reeking corners, and across waste places, till at last I reach the dreary goal of my memory-driven desire, and, coming to a halt beside the broken railings, find rest.

The house, larger than its fellows, built when the street was still a country lane, edging the marshes, strikes a strange note of individuality amid the surrounding harmony of hideousness. It is encompassed on two sides by what was once a garden, though now but a barren patch of stones and dust where clothes – it is odd any one should have thought of washing – hang in perpetuity; while about the door continue the remnants of a porch, which the stucco falling has left exposed in all its naked insincerity.

Occasionally I drift hitherward in the day time, when slatternly women gossip round the area gates, and the silence is broken by the hoarse, wailing cry of "Coals – any coals – three and sixpence a sack – co-o-o-als!" chanted in a tone that absence of response has stamped with chronic melancholy; but then the street knows me not, and my old friend of the corner, ashamed of its shabbiness in the unpitying sunlight, turns its face away, and will not see me as I pass.

Not until the Night, merciful alone of all things to the ugly, draws her veil across its sordid features will it, as some fond old nurse, sought out in after years, open wide its arms to welcome me. Then the teeming life it now shelters, hushed for a time within its walls, the flickering flare from the "King of Prussia" opposite extinguished, will it talk with me of the past, asking me many questions, reminding me of many things I had forgotten. Then into the silent street come the well-remembered footsteps; in and out the creaking gate pass, not seeing me, the well-remembered faces; and we talk concerning them; as two cronies, turning the torn leaves of some old album where the faded portraits in forgotten fashions, speak together in low tones of those now dead or scattered, with now a smile and now a sigh, and many an "Ah me!" or "Dear, dear!"

This bent, worn man, coming towards us with quick impatient steps, which yet cease every fifty yards or so, while he pauses, leaning heavily upon his high Malacca cane: "It is a handsome face, is it not?" I ask, as I gaze upon it, shadow framed.

"Aye, handsome enough," answers the old House; "and handsomer still it must have been before you and I knew it, before mean care had furrowed it with fretful lines."

"I never could make out," continues the old House, musingly, "whom you took after; for they were a handsome pair, your father and your mother, though Lord! what a couple of children!"

"Children!" I say in surprise, for my father must have been past five and thirty before the House could have known him, and my mother's face is very close to mine, in the darkness, so that I see the many grey hairs mingling with the bonny brown.

"Children," repeats the old House, irritably, so it seems to me, not liking, perhaps, its opinions questioned, a failing common to old folk; "the most helpless pair of children I ever set eyes upon. Who but a child, I should like to know, would have conceived the notion of repairing his fortune by becoming a solicitor at thirty-eight, or, having conceived such a notion, would have selected the outskirts of Poplar as a likely centre in which to put up his door-plate?"

"It was considered to be a rising neighbourhood," I reply, a little resentful. No son cares to hear the family wisdom criticised, even though at the bottom of his heart he may be in agreement with the critic. "All sorts and conditions of men, whose affairs were in connection with the sea would, it was thought, come to reside hereabout, so as to be near to the new docks; and had they, it is not unreasonable to suppose they would have quarrelled and disputed with one another, much to the advantage of a cute solicitor, convenient to their hand."

"Stuff and nonsense," retorts the old House, shortly; "why, the mere smell of the place would have been sufficient to keep a sensible man away. And" – the grim brick face before me twists itself into a goblin smile – "he, of all men in the world, as 'the cute solicitor,' giving advice to shady clients, eager to get out of trouble by the shortest way, can you fancy it! he who for two years starved himself, living on five shillings a week – that was before you came to London, when he was here alone. Even your mother knew nothing of it till years afterwards – so that no man should be a penny the poorer for having trusted his good name. Do you think the crew of chandlers and brokers, dock hustlers and freight wreckers would have found him a useful man of business, even had they come to settle here?"

I have no answer; nor does the old House wait for any, but talks on.

"And your mother! would any but a child have taken that soft-tongued wanton to her bosom, and not have seen through acting so transparent? Would any but the veriest child that never ought to have been let out into the world by itself have thought to dree her weird in such folly? Children! poor babies they were, both of them."

"Tell me," I say – for at such times all my stock of common sense is not sufficient to convince me that the old House is but clay. From its walls so full of voices, from its floors so thick with footsteps, surely it has learned to live; as a violin, long played on, comes to learn at last a music of its own. "Tell me, I was but a child to whom life speaks in a strange tongue, was there any truth in the story?"

"Truth!" snaps out the old House; "just truth enough to plant a lie upon; and Lord knows not much ground is needed for that weed. I saw what I saw, and I know what I know. Your mother had a good man, and your father a true wife, but it was the old story: a man's way is not a woman's way, and a woman's way is not a man's way, so there lives ever doubt between them."

"But they came together in the end," I say, remembering.

"Aye, in the end," answers the House. "That is when you begin to understand, you men and women, when you come to the end."

The grave face of a not too recently washed angel peeps shyly at me through the railings, then, as I turn my head, darts back and disappears.

"What has become of her?" I ask.

"She? Oh, she is well enough," replies the House. "She lives close here. You must have passed the shop. You might have seen her had you looked in. She weighs fourteen stone, about; and has nine children living. She would be pleased to see you."

"Thank you," I say, with a laugh that is not wholly a laugh; "I do not think I will call." But I still hear the pit-pat of her tiny feet, dying down the long street.

The faces thicken round me. A large looming, rubicund visage smiles kindly on me, bringing back into my heart the old, odd mingling of instinctive liking held in check by conscientious

disapproval. I turn from it, and see a massive, clean-shaven face, with the ugliest mouth and the loveliest eyes I ever have known in a man.

"Was he as bad, do you think, as they said?" I ask of my ancient friend.

"Shouldn't wonder," the old House answers. "I never knew a worse – nor a better."

The wind whisks it aside, leaving to view a little old woman, hobbling nimbly by aid of a stick. Three corkscrew curls each side of her head bob with each step she takes, and as she draws near to me, making the most alarming grimaces, I hear her whisper, as though confiding to herself some fascinating secret, "I'd like to skin 'em. I'd like to skin 'em all. I'd like to skin 'em all alive!"

It sounds a fiendish sentiment, yet I only laugh, and the little old lady, with a final facial contortion surpassing all dreams, limps beyond my ken.

Then, as though choosing contrasts, follows a fair, laughing face. I saw it in the life only a few hours ago – at least, not it, but the poor daub that Evil has painted over it, hating the sweetness underlying. And as I stand gazing at it, wishing it were of the dead who change not, there drifts back from the shadows that other face, the one of the wicked mouth and the tender eyes, so that I stand again helpless between the two I loved so well, he from whom I learned my first steps in manhood, she from whom I caught my first glimpse of the beauty and the mystery of woman. And again the cry rises from my heart, "Whose fault was it – yours or hers?" And again I hear his mocking laugh as he answers, "Whose fault? God made us." And thinking of her and of the love I bore her, which was as the love of a young pilgrim to a saint, it comes into my blood to hate him. But when I look into his eyes and see the pain that lives there, my pity grows stronger than my misery, and I can only echo his words, "God made us."

Merry faces and sad, fair faces and foul, they ride upon the wind; but the centre round which they circle remains always the one: a little lad with golden curls more suitable to a girl than to a boy, with shy, awkward ways and a silent tongue, and a grave, old-fashioned face.

And, turning from him to my old brick friend, I ask: "Would he know me, could he see me, do you think?"

"How should he," answers the old House, "you are so different to what he would expect. Would you recognise your own ghost, think you?"

"It is sad to think he would not recognise me," I say.

"It might be sadder if he did," grumbles the old House.

We both remained silent for awhile; but I know of what the old House is thinking. Soon it speaks as I expected.

"You – writer of stories, why don't you write a book about him? There is something that you know."

It is the favourite theme of the old House. I never visit it but it suggests to me this idea.

"But he has done nothing?" I say.

"He has lived," answers the old House. "Is not that enough?"

"Aye, but only in London in these prosaic modern times," I persist. "How of such can one make a story that shall interest the people?"

The old House waxes impatient of me.

"'The people!'" it retorts, "what are you all but children in a dim-lit room, waiting until one by one you are called out to sleep. And one mounts upon a stool and tells a tale to the others who have gathered round. Who shall say what will please them, what will not."

Returning home with musing footsteps through the softly breathing streets, I ponder the words of the old House. Is it but as some foolish mother thinking all the world interested in her child, or may there lie wisdom in its counsel? Then to my guidance or misguidance comes the thought of a certain small section of the Public who often of an evening commands of me a story; and who, when I have told her of the dreadful giants and of the gallant youths who slay them, of the wood-cutter's sons who rescue maidens from Ogre-guarded castles; of the Princesses the most beautiful in all the

world, of the Princes with magic swords, still unsatisfied, creeps closer yet, saying: “Now tell me a real story,” adding for my comprehending: “You know: about a little girl who lived in a big house with her father and mother, and who was sometimes naughty, you know.”

So perhaps among the many there may be some who for a moment will turn aside from tales of haughty Heroes, ruffling it in Court and Camp, to listen to the story of a very ordinary lad who lived with very ordinary folk in a modern London street, and who grew up to be a very ordinary sort of man, loving a little and grieving a little, helping a few and harming a few, struggling and failing and hoping; and if any such there be, let them come round me.

But let not those who come to me grow indignant as they listen, saying: “This rascal tells us but a humdrum story, where nothing is as it should be;” for I warn all beforehand that I tell but of things that I have seen. My villains, I fear, are but poor sinners, not altogether bad; and my good men but sorry saints. My princes do not always slay their dragons; alas, sometimes, the dragon eats the prince. The wicked fairies often prove more powerful than the good. The magic thread leads sometimes wrong, and even the hero is not always brave and true.

So let those come round me only who will be content to hear but their own story, told by another, saying as they listen, “So dreamt I. Ah, yes, that is true, I remember.”

BOOK I

CHAPTER I
PAUL, ARRIVED IN A STRANGE LAND, LEARNS MANY THINGS, AND GOES TO MEET THE MAN IN GREY

Fate intended me for a singularly fortunate man. Properly, I ought to have been born in June, which being, as is well known, the luckiest month in all the year for such events, should, by thoughtful parents, be more generally selected. How it was I came to be born in May, which is, on the other hand, of all the twelve the most unlucky, as I have proved, I leave to those more conversant with the subject to explain. An early nurse, the first human being of whom I have any distinct recollection, unhesitatingly attributed the unfortunate fact to my natural impatience; which quality she at the same time predicted would lead me into even greater trouble, a prophecy impressed by future events with the stamp of prescience. It was from this same bony lady that I likewise learned the manner of my coming. It seems that I arrived, quite unexpectedly, two hours after news had reached the house of the ruin of my father's mines through inundation; misfortunes, as it was expounded to me, never coming singly in this world to any one. That all things might be of a piece, my poor mother, attempting to reach the bell, fell against and broke the cheval-glass, thus further saddening herself with the conviction – for no amount of reasoning ever succeeded in purging her Welsh blood of its natural superstition – that whatever might be the result of future battles with my evil star, the first seven years of tiny existence had been, by her act, doomed to disaster.

"And I must confess," added the knobbly Mrs. Fursey, with a sigh, "it does look as though there must be some truth in the saying, after all."

"Then ain't I a lucky little boy?" I asked. For hitherto it had been Mrs. Fursey's method to impress upon me my exceptional good fortune. That I could and did, involuntarily, retire to bed at six, while less happily placed children were deprived of their natural rest until eight or nine o'clock, had always been held up to me as an astounding piece of luck. Some little boys had not a bed at all; for the which, in my more riotous moments, I envied them. Again, that at the first sign of a cold it became my unavoidable privilege to lunch off linseed gruel and sup off brimstone and treacle – a compound named with deliberate intent to deceive the innocent, the treacle, so far as taste is concerned, being wickedly subordinated to the brimstone – was another example of Fortune's favouritism: other little boys were so astoundingly unlucky as to be left alone when they felt ill. If further proof were needed to convince that I had been signalled out by Providence as its especial protege, there remained always the circumstance that I possessed Mrs. Fursey for my nurse. The suggestion that I was not altogether the luckiest of children was a new departure.

The good dame evidently perceived her error, and made haste to correct it.

"Oh, you! You are lucky enough," she replied; "I was thinking of your poor mother."

"Isn't mamma lucky?"

"Well, she hasn't been too lucky since you came."

"Wasn't it lucky, her having me?"

"I can't say it was, at that particular time."

"Didn't she want me?"

Mrs. Fursey was one of those well-meaning persons who are of opinion that the only reasonable attitude of childhood should be that of perpetual apology for its existence.

"Well, I daresay she could have done without you," was the answer.

I can see the picture plainly still. I am sitting on a low chair before the nursery fire, one knee supported in my locked hands, meanwhile Mrs. Fursey's needle grated with monotonous regularity against her thimble. At that moment knocked at my small soul for the first time the problem of life.

Suddenly, without moving, I said:

"Then why did she take me in?"

The rasping click of the needle on the thimble ceased abruptly.

"Took you in! What's the child talking about? Who's took you in?"

"Why, mamma. If she didn't want me, why did she take me in?"

But even while, with heart full of dignified resentment, I propounded this, as I proudly felt, logically unanswerable question, I was glad that she had. The vision of my being refused at the bedroom window presented itself to my imagination. I saw the stork, perplexed and annoyed, looking as I had sometimes seen Tom Pinfold look when the fish he had been holding out by the tail had been sniffed at by Anna, and the kitchen door shut in his face. Would the stork also have gone away thoughtfully scratching his head with one of those long, compass-like legs of his, and muttering to himself. And here, incidentally, I fell a-wondering how the stork had carried me. In the garden I had often watched a blackbird carrying a worm, and the worm, though no doubt really safe enough, had always appeared to me nervous and uncomfortable. Had I wriggled and squirmed in like fashion? And where would the stork have taken me to then? Possibly to Mrs. Fursey's: their cottage was the nearest. But I felt sure Mrs. Fursey would not have taken me in; and next to them, at the first house in the village, lived Mr. Chumdley, the cobbler, who was lame, and who sat all day hammering boots with very dirty hands, in a little cave half under the ground, his whole appearance suggesting a poor-spirited ogre. I should have hated being his little boy. Possibly nobody would have taken me in. I grew pensive, thinking of myself as the rejected of all the village. What would the stork have done with me, left on his hands, so to speak. The reflection prompted a fresh question.

"Nurse, where did I come from?"

"Why, I've told you often. The stork brought you."

"Yes, I know. But where did the stork get me from?" Mrs. Fursey paused for quite a long while before replying. Possibly she was reflecting whether such answer might not make me unduly conceited. Eventually she must have decided to run that risk; other opportunities could be relied upon for neutralising the effect.

"Oh, from Heaven."

"But I thought Heaven was a place where you went to," I answered; "not where you comed from." I know I said "comed," for I remember that at this period my irregular verbs were a bewildering anxiety to my poor mother. "Comed" and "goned," which I had worked out for myself, were particular favourites of mine.

Mrs. Fursey passed over my grammar in dignified silence. She had been pointedly requested not to trouble herself with that part of my education, my mother holding that diverging opinions upon the same subject only confused a child.

"You came from Heaven," repeated Mrs. Fursey, "and you'll go to Heaven – if you're good."

"Do all little boys and girls come from Heaven?"

"So they say." Mrs. Fursey's tone implied that she was stating what might possibly be but a popular fallacy, for which she individually took no responsibility.

"And did you come from Heaven, Mrs. Fursey?" Mrs. Fursey's reply to this was decidedly more emphatic.

"Of course I did. Where do you think I came from?"

At once, I am ashamed to say, Heaven lost its exalted position in my eyes. Even before this, it had puzzled me that everybody I knew should be going there – for so I was always assured; now, connected as it appeared to be with the origin of Mrs. Fursey, much of its charm disappeared.

But this was not all. Mrs. Fursey's information had suggested to me a fresh grief. I stopped not to console myself with the reflection that my fate had been but the fate of all little boys and girls. With a child's egoism I seized only upon my own particular case.

"Didn't they want me in Heaven then, either?" I asked. "Weren't they fond of me up there?"

The misery in my voice must have penetrated even Mrs. Fursey's bosom, for she answered more sympathetically than usual.

"Oh, they liked you well enough, I daresay. I like you, but I like to get rid of you sometimes." There could be no doubt as to this last. Even at the time, I often doubted whether that six o'clock bedtime was not occasionally half-past five.

The answer comforted me not. It remained clear that I was not wanted either in Heaven nor upon the earth. God did not want me. He was glad to get rid of me. My mother did not want me. She could have done without me. Nobody wanted me. Why was I here?

And then, as the sudden opening and shutting of the door of a dark room, came into my childish brain the feeling that Something, somewhere, must have need of me, or I could not be, Something I felt I belonged to and that belonged to me, Something that was as much a part of me as I of It. The feeling came back to me more than once during my childhood, though I could never put it into words. Years later the son of the Portuguese Jew explained to me my thought. But all that I myself could have told was that in that moment I knew for the first time that I lived, that I was I.

The next instant all was dark again, and I once more a puzzled little boy, sitting by a nursery fire, asking of a village dame questions concerning life.

Suddenly a new thought came to me, or rather the recollection of an old.

"Nurse, why haven't we got a husband?"

Mrs. Fursey left off her sewing, and stared at me.

"What maggot has the child got into its head now?" was her observation; "who hasn't got a husband?"

"Why, mamma."

"Don't talk nonsense, Master Paul; you know your mamma has got a husband."

"No, she ain't."

"And don't contradict. Your mamma's husband is your papa, who lives in London."

"What's the good of *him*!"

Mrs. Fursey's reply appeared to me to be unnecessarily vehement.

"You wicked child, you; where's your commandments? Your father is in London working hard to earn money to keep you in idleness, and you sit there and say 'What's the good of him!' I'd be ashamed to be such an ungrateful little brat."

I had not meant to be ungrateful. My words were but the repetition of a conversation I had overheard the day before between my mother and my aunt.

Had said my aunt: "There she goes, moping again. Drat me if ever I saw such a thing to mope as a woman."

My aunt was entitled to preach on the subject. She herself grumbled all day about all things, but she did it cheerfully.

My mother was standing with her hands clasped behind her – a favourite attitude of hers – gazing through the high French window into the garden beyond. It must have been spring time, for I remember the white and yellow crocuses decking the grass.

"I want a husband," had answered my mother, in a tone so ludicrously childish that at sound of it I had looked up from the fairy story I was reading, half expectant to find her changed into a little girl; "I hate not having a husband."

"Help us and save us," my aunt had retorted; "how many more does a girl want? She's got one."

"What's the good of him all that way off," had pouted my mother; "I want him here where I can get at him."

I had often heard of this father of mine, who lived far away in London, and to whom we owed all the blessings of life; but my childish endeavours to square information with reflection had resulted in my assigning to him an entirely spiritual existence. I agreed with my mother that such an one, however to be revered, was no substitute for the flesh and blood father possessed by luckier folk – the big, strong, masculine thing that would carry a fellow pig-a-back round the garden, or take a chap to sail in boats.

"You don't understand me, nurse," I explained; "what I mean is a husband you can get at."

"Well, and you'll 'get at him,' poor gentleman, one of these days," answered Mrs. Fursey. "When he's ready for you he'll send for you, and then you'll go to him in London."

I felt that still Mrs. Fursey didn't understand. But I foresaw that further explanation would only shock her, so contented myself with a simple, matter-of-fact question.

"How do you get to London; do you have to die first?"

"I do think," said Mrs. Fursey, in the voice of resigned despair rather than of surprise, "that, without exception, you are the silliest little boy I ever came across. I've no patience with you."

"I am very sorry, nurse," I answered; "I thought – "

"Then," interrupted Mrs. Fursey, in the voice of many generations, "you shouldn't think. London," continued the good dame, her experience no doubt suggesting that the shortest road to peace would be through my understanding of this matter, "is a big town, and you go there in a train. Some time – soon now – your father will write to your mother that everything is ready. Then you and your mother and your aunt will leave this place and go to London, and I shall be rid of you."

"And shan't we come back here ever any more?"

"Never again."

"And I'll never play in the garden again, never go down to the pebble-ridge to tea, or to Jacob's tower?"

"Never again." I think Mrs. Fursey took a pleasure in the phrase. It sounded, as she said it, like something out of the prayer-book.

"And I'll never see Anna, or Tom Pinfold, or old Yeo, or Pincher, or you, ever any more?" In this moment of the crumbling from under me of all my footholds I would have clung even to that dry tuft, Mrs. Fursey herself.

"Never any more. You'll go away and begin an entirely new life. And I do hope, Master Paul," added Mrs. Fursey, piously, "it may be a better one. That you will make up your mind to – "

But Mrs. Fursey's well-meant exhortations, whatever they may have been, fell upon deaf ears. Here was I face to face with yet another problem. This life into which I had fallen: it was understandable! One went away, leaving the pleasant places that one knew, never to return to them. One left one's labour and one's play to enter upon a new existence in a strange land. One parted from the friends one had always known, one saw them never again. Life was indeed a strange thing; and, would a body comprehend it, then must a body sit staring into the fire, thinking very hard, unheedful of all idle chatter.

That night, when my mother came to kiss me good-night, I turned my face to the wall and pretended to be asleep, for children as well as grown-ups have their foolish moods; but when I felt the soft curls brush my cheek, my pride gave way, and clasping my arms about her neck, and drawing her face still closer down to mine; I voiced the question that all the evening had been knocking at my heart:

"I suppose you couldn't send me back now, could you? You see, you've had me so long."

"Send you back?"

"Yes. I'd be too big for the stork to carry now, wouldn't I?"

My mother knelt down beside the bed so that her face and mine were on a level, and looking into her eyes, the fear that had been haunting me fell from me.

"Who has been talking foolishly to a foolish little boy?" asked my mother, keeping my arms still clasped about her neck.

"Oh, nurse and I were discussing things, you know," I answered, "and she said you could have done without me." Somehow, I did not mind repeating the words now; clearly it could have been but Mrs. Fursey's fun.

My mother drew me closer to her.

"And what made her think that?"

"Well, you see," I replied, "I came at a very awkward time, didn't I; when you had a lot of other troubles."

My mother laughed, but the next moment looked grave again.

"I did not know you thought about such things," she said; "we must be more together, you and I, Paul, and you shall tell me all you think, because nurse does not quite understand you. It is true what she said about the trouble; it came just at that time. But I could not have done without you. I was very unhappy, and you were sent to comfort me and help me to bear it." I liked this explanation better.

"Then it was lucky, your having me?" I said. Again my mother laughed, and again there followed that graver look upon her childish face.

"Will you remember what I am going to say?" She spoke so earnestly that I, wriggling into a sitting posture, became earnest also.

"I'll try," I answered; "but I ain't got a very good memory, have I?"

"Not very," smiled my mother; "but if you think about it a good deal it will not leave you. When you are a good boy, and later on, when you are a good man, then I am the luckiest little mother in all the world. And every time you fail, that means bad luck for me. You will remember that after I'm gone, when you are a big man, won't you, Paul?"

So, both of us quite serious, I promised; and though I smile now when I remember, seeing before me those two earnest, childish faces, yet I think, however little success it may be I have to boast of, it would perhaps have been still less had I entirely forgotten.

From that day my mother waxes in my memory; Mrs. Fursey, of the many promontories, waning. There were sunny mornings in the neglected garden, where the leaves played round us while we worked and read; twilight evenings in the window seat where, half hidden by the dark red curtains, we would talk in whispers, why I know not, of good men and noble women, ogres, fairies, saints and demons; they were pleasant days.

Possibly our curriculum lacked method; maybe it was too varied and extensive for my age, in consequence of which chronology became confused within my brain, and fact and fiction more confounded than has usually been considered permissible, even in history. I saw Aphrodite, ready armed and risen from the sea, move with stately grace to meet King Canute, who, throned upon the sand, bade her come no further lest she should wet his feet. In forest glade I saw King Rufus fall from a poisoned arrow shot by Robin Hood; but thanks to sweet Queen Eleanor, who sucked the poison from his wound, I knew he lived. Oliver Cromwell, having killed King Charles, married his widow, and was in turn stabbed by Hamlet. Ulysses, in the Argo, it was fixed upon my mind, had discovered America. Romulus and Remus had slain the wolf and rescued Little Red Riding Hood. Good King Arthur, for letting the cakes burn, had been murdered by his uncle in the Tower of London. Prometheus, bound to the Rock, had been saved by good St. George. Paris had given the apple to William Tell. What matter! the information was there. It needed rearranging, that was all.

Sometimes, of an afternoon, we would climb the steep winding pathway through the woods, past awful precipices, spirit-haunted, by grassy swards where fairies danced o' nights, by briar and bracken sheltered Caves where fearsome creatures lurked, till high above the creeping sea we would reach the open plateau where rose old Jacob's ruined tower. "Jacob's Folly" it was more often called about the country side, and by some "The Devil's Tower;" for legend had it that there old Jacob and his master, the Devil, had often met in windy weather to wave false wrecking lights to troubled ships. Who "old Jacob" was, I never, that I can remember, learned, nor how nor why he built the Tower.

Certain only it is his memory was unpopular, and the fisher folk would swear that still on stormy nights strange lights would gleam and flash from the ivy-curtained windows of his Folly.

But in day time no spot was more inviting, the short moss-grass before its shattered door, the lichen on its crumbling stones. From its topmost platform one saw the distant mountains, faint like spectres, and the silent ships that came and vanished; and about one's feet the pleasant farm lands and the grave, sweet river.

Smaller and poorer the world has grown since then. Now, behind those hills lie naught but smoky towns and dingy villages; but then they screened a land of wonder where princesses dwelt in castles, where the cities were of gold. Now the ocean is but six days' journey wide, ending at the New York Custom House. Then, had one set one's sail upon it, one would have travelled far and far, beyond the golden moonlight, beyond the gate of clouds; to the magic land of the blood red shore, t'other side o' the sun. I never dreamt in those days a world could be so small.

Upon the topmost platform a wooden seat ran round within the parapet, and sitting there hand in hand, sheltered from the wind which ever blew about the tower, my mother would people for me all the earth and air with the forms of myth and legend – perhaps unwisely, yet I do not know. I took no harm from it, good rather, I think. They were beautiful fancies, most of them; or so my mother turned them, making for love and pity, as do all the tales that live, whether poems or old wives fables. But at that time of course they had no meaning for me other than the literal; so that my mother, looking into my eyes, would often hasten to add: "But that, you know, is only an old superstition, and of course there are no such things nowadays." Yet, forgetful sometimes of the time, and overtaken homeward by the shadows, we would hasten swiftly through the darkening path, holding each other tightly by the hand.

Spring had waxed to summer, summer waned to autumn. Then my aunt and I one morning, waiting at the breakfast table, saw through the open window my mother skipping, dancing, pirouetting up the garden path. She held a letter open in her hand, which as she drew near she waved about her head, singing:

"Saturday, Sunday, Monday, Tuesday, then comes Wednesday morning."

She caught me to her and began dancing with me round the room.

Observed my aunt, who continued steadily to eat bread and butter:

"Just like 'em all. Goes mad with joy. What for? Because she's going to leave a decent house, to live in a poky hole in the East End of London, and keep one servant."

To my aunt the second person ever remained a grammatical superfluity. Invariably she spoke not to but of a person, throwing out her conversation in the form of commentary. This had the advantage of permitting the party intended to ignore it as mere impersonal philosophy. Seeing it was generally uncomplimentary, most people preferred so to regard it; but my mother had never succeeded in schooling herself to indifference.

"It's not a poky hole," she replied; "it's an old-fashioned house, near the river."

"Plaistow marshes!" ejaculated my aunt, "calls it the river!"

"So it is the river," returned my mother; "the river is the other side of the marshes."

"Let's hope it will always stop there," said my aunt.

"And it's got a garden," continued my mother, ignoring my aunt's last remark; "which is quite an unusual feature in a London house. And it isn't the East End of London; it is a rising suburb. And you won't make me miserable because I am too happy."

"Drat the woman!" said my aunt, "why can't she sit down and give us our tea before it's all cold?"

"You are a disagreeable thing!" said my mother.

"Not half milk," said my aunt. My aunt was never in the least disturbed by other people's opinion of her, which was perhaps well for her.

For three days my mother packed and sang; and a dozen times a day unpacked and laughed, looking for things wanted that were always found at the very bottom of the very last box looked into,

so that Anna, waiting for a certain undergarment of my aunt's which shall be nameless, suggested a saving of time:

"If I were you, ma'am," said Anna, "I'd look into the last box you're going to look into first."

But it was found eventually in the first box-the box, that is, my mother had intended to search first, but which, acting on Anna's suggestion, she had reserved till the last. This caused my mother to be quite short with Anna, who she said had wasted her time. But by Tuesday afternoon all stood ready: we were to start early Wednesday morning.

That evening, missing my mother in the house, I sought her in the garden and found her, as I had expected, on her favourite seat under the great lime tree; but to my surprise there were tears in her eyes.

"But I thought you were glad we were going," I said.

"So I am," answered my mother, drying her eyes only to make room for fresh tears.

"Then why are you crying?"

"Because I'm sorry to leave here."

Grown-up folks with their contradictory ways were a continual puzzle to me in those days; I am not sure I quite understand them even now, myself included.

We were up and off next day before the dawn. The sun rose as the wagon reached the top of the hill; and there we paused and took our farewell look at Old Jacob's Tower. My mother cried a little behind her veil; but my aunt only said, "I never did care for earwigs in my tea;" and as for myself I was too excited and expectant to feel much sentiment about anything.

On the journey I sat next to an exceptionally large and heavy man, who in his sleep – and he slept often – imagined me to be a piece of stuffing out of place. Then, grunting and wriggling, he would endeavour to rub me out, until the continued irritation of my head between the window and his back would cause him to awake, when he would look down upon me reprovingly but not unkindly, observing to the carriage generally: "It's a funny thing, ain't it, nobody's ever made a boy yet that could keep still for ten seconds." After which he would pat me heartily on the head, to show he was not vexed with me, and fall to sleep again upon me. He was a good-tempered man.

My mother sat occupied chiefly with her own thoughts, and my aunt had found a congenial companion in a lady who had had her cap basket sat upon; so I was left mainly to my own resources. When I could get my head free of the big man's back, I gazed out of the window, and watched the flying fragments as we shed the world. Now a village would fall from us, now the yellow corn-land would cling to us for awhile, or a wood catch at our rushing feet, and sometimes a strong town would stop us, and hold us, panting for a space. Or, my eyes weary, I would sit and listen to the hoarse singing of the wheels beneath my feet. It was a monotonous chaunt, ever the same two lines:

"Here we suffer grief and pain,
Here we meet to part again,"

followed by a low, rumbling laugh. Sometimes fortissimo, sometimes pianissimo; now vivace, now largo; but ever those same two lines, and ever followed by the same low, rumbling laugh; still to this day the iron wheels sing to me that same song.

Later on I also must have slept, for I dreamt that as the result of my having engaged in single combat with a dragon, the dragon, ignoring all the rules of Fairyland, had swallowed me. It was hot and stuffy in the dragon's stomach. He had, so it appeared to me, disgracefully overeaten himself; there were hundreds of us there, entirely undigested, including Mother Hubbard and a gentleman named Johnson, against whom, at that period, I entertained a strong prejudice by reason of our divergent views upon the subject of spelling. Even in this hour of our mutual discomfort Johnson would not leave me alone, but persisted in asking me how I spelt Jonah. Nobody was looking, so I kicked him. He sprang up and came after me. I tried to run away, but became wedged between Hop-o'-my-Thumb

and Julius Caesar. I suppose our tearing about must have hurt the dragon, for at that moment he gave vent to a most fearful scream, and I awoke to find the fat man rubbing his left shin, while we struggled slowly, with steps growing ever feebler, against a sea of brick that every moment closed in closer round us.

We scrambled out of the carriage into a great echoing cave that might have been the dragon's home, where, to my alarm, my mother was immediately swooped down upon by a strange man in grey.

"Why's he do that?" I asked of my aunt.

"Because he's a fool," answered my aunt; "they all are."

He put my mother down and came towards us. He was a tall, thin man, with eyes one felt one would never be afraid of; and instinctively even then I associated him in my mind with windmills and a lank white horse.

"Why, how he's grown," said the grey man, raising me in his arms until my mother beside me appeared to me in a new light as quite a little person; "and solid too."

My mother whispered something. I think from her face, for I knew the signs, it was praise of me.

"And he's going to be our new fortune," she added aloud, as the grey man lowered me.

"Then," said my aunt, who had this while been sitting rigid upon a flat black box, "don't drop him down a coal-mine. That's all I say."

I wondered at the time why the grey man's pale face should flush so crimson, and why my mother should whisper angrily:

"How can you be so wicked, Fanny? How dare you say such a thing?"

"I only said 'don't drop him down a coal-mine,'" returned my aunt, apparently much surprised; "you don't want to drop him down a coal-mine, do you?"

We passed through glittering, joyous streets, piled high each side with all the good things of the earth; toys and baubles, jewels and gold, things good to eat and good to drink, things good to wear and good to see; through pleasant ways where fountains splashed and flowers bloomed. The people wore bright clothes, had happy faces. They rode in beautiful carriages, they strolled about, greeting one another with smiles. The children ran and laughed. London, thought I to myself, is the city of the fairies.

It passed, and we sank into a grim city of hoarse, roaring streets, wherein the endless throngs swirled and surged as I had seen the yellow waters curve and fret, contending, where the river pauses, rock-bound. Here were no bright costumes, no bright faces, none stayed to greet another; all was stern, and swift, and voiceless. London, then, said I to myself, is the city of the giants. They must live in these towering castles side by side, and these hurrying thousands are their driven slaves.

But this passed also, and we sank lower yet until we reached a third city, where a pale mist filled each sombre street. None of the beautiful things of the world were to be seen here, but only the things coarse and ugly. And wearily to and fro its sunless passages trudged with heavy steps a weary people, coarse-clad, and with dull, listless faces. And London, I knew, was the city of the gnomes who labour sadly all their lives, imprisoned underground; and a terror seized me lest I, too, should remain chained here, deep down below the fairy city that was already but a dream.

We stopped at last in a long, unfinished street. I remember our pushing our way through a group of dirty urchins, all of whom, my aunt remarked in passing, ought to be skinned. It was my aunt's one prescription for all to whom she took objection; but really in the present instance I think it would have been of service; nothing else whatever could have restored them to cleanliness. Then the door closed behind us with an echoing clang, and the small, cold rooms came forward stiffly to greet us.

The man in grey went to the one window and drew back the curtain; it was growing dusk now. My aunt sat on a straight, hard chair and stared fixedly at the three-armed gaselier. My mother stood in the centre of the room with one small ungloved hand upon the table, and I noticed – for I was very near – that the poor little one-legged thing was trembling.

"Of course it's not what you've been accustomed to, Maggie," said the man in grey; "but it's only for a little while."

He spoke in a new, angry voice; but I could not see his face, his back being to the light.

My mother drew his arms around us both.

"It is the best home in all the world," she said; and thus we stayed for awhile.

"Nonsense," said my aunt, suddenly; and this aroused us; "it's a poky hole, as I told her it would be. Let her thank the Lord she's got a man clever enough to get her out of it. I know him; he never could rest where he was put. Now he's at the bottom; he'll go up."

It sounded to me a very disagreeable speech; but the grey man laughed – I had not heard him laugh till then – and my mother ran to my aunt and kissed her; and somehow the room seemed to become lighter.

For some reason I slept downstairs that night, on the floor, behind a screen improvised out of a clothes horse and a blanket; and later in the evening the clatter of knives and forks and the sound of subdued voices awoke me. My aunt had apparently gone to bed; my mother and the man in grey were talking together over their supper.

"We must buy land," said the voice of the grey man; "London is coming this way. The Somebodies" (I forget the name my father mentioned) "made all their money by buying up land round New York for a mere song. Then, as the city spread, they became worth millions."

"But where will you get the money from, Luke?" asked the voice of my mother.

The voice of the grey man answered airily:

"Oh, that's merely a matter of business. You grant a mortgage. The property goes up in value. You borrow more. Then you buy more – and so on."

"I see," said my mother.

"Being on the spot gives one such an advantage," said the grey man. "I shall know just when to buy. It's a great thing, being on the spot."

"Of course, it must be," said my mother.

I suppose I must have dozed, for the next words I heard the grey man say were:

"Of course you have the park opposite, but then the house is small."

"But shall we need a very large one?" asked my mother.

"One never knows," said the grey man. "If I should go into Parliament – "

At this point a hissing sound arose from the neighbourhood of the fire.

"It *looks*," said my mother, "as if it were done."

"If you will hold the dish," said the grey man, "I think I can pour it in without spilling."

Again I must have dozed.

"It depends," said the grey man, "upon what he is going to be. For the classics, of course, Oxford."

"He's going to be very clever," said my mother. She spoke as one who knows.

"We'll hope so," said the grey man.

"I shouldn't be surprised," said my mother, "if he turned out a poet."

The grey man said something in a low tone that I did not hear.

"I'm not so sure," answered my mother, "it's in the blood. I've often thought that you, Luke, ought to have been a poet."

"I never had the time," said the grey man. "There were one or two little things – "

"They were very beautiful," interrupted my mother. The clatter of the knives and forks continued undisturbed for a few moments. Then continued the grey man:

"There would be no harm, provided I made enough. It's the law of nature. One generation earns, the next spends. We must see. In any case, I think I should prefer Oxford for him."

"It will be so hard parting from him," said my mother.

"There will be the vacations," said the grey man, "when we shall travel."

CHAPTER II.
IN WHICH PAUL MAKES ACQUAINTANCE OF THE MAN WITH THE UGLY MOUTH

The case of my father and mother was not normal. You understand they had been separated for some years, and though they were not young in age – indeed, before my childish eyes they loomed quite ancient folk, and in fact my father must have been nearly forty and my mother quit of thirty – yet, as you will come to think yourself, no doubt, during the course of my story, they were in all the essentials of life little more than boy and girl. This I came to see later on, but at that time, had I been consulted by enquiring maid or bachelor, I might unwittingly have given wrong impressions concerning marriage in the general. I should have described a husband as a man who could never rest quite content unless his wife were by his side; who twenty times a day would call from his office door: "Maggie, are you doing anything important? I want to talk to you about a matter of business." … "Maggie, are you alone? Oh, all right, I'll come down." Of a wife I should have said she was a woman whose eyes were ever love-lit when resting on her man; who was glad where he was and troubled where he was not. But in every case this might not have been correct.

Also, I should have had something to say concerning the alarms and excursions attending residence with any married couple. I should have recommended the holding up of feet under the table lest, mistaken for other feet, they should be trodden on and pressed. Also, I should have advised against entry into any room unpreceded by what in Stageland is termed "noise without." It is somewhat disconcerting to the nervous incomer to be met, the door still in his hand, by a sound as of people springing suddenly into the air, followed by a weird scuttling of feet, and then to discover the occupants sitting stiffly in opposite corners, deeply engaged in book or needlework. But, as I have said, with regard to some households, such precautions might be needless.

Personally, I fear, I exercised little or no controlling influence upon my parents in this respect, my intrusions coming soon to be greeted with: "Oh, it's only Spud," in a tone of relief, accompanied generally by the sofa cushion; but of my aunt they stood more in awe. Not that she ever said anything, and, indeed, to do her justice, in her efforts to spare their feelings she erred, if at all, on the side of excess. Never did she move a footstep about the house except to the music of a sustained and penetrating cough. As my father once remarked, ungratefully, I must confess, the volume of bark produced by my aunt in a single day would have done credit to the dying efforts of a hospital load of consumptives; to a robust and perfectly healthy lady the cost in nervous force must have been prodigious. Also, that no fear should live with them that her eyes had seen aught not intended for them, she would invariably enter backwards any room in which they might be, closing the door loudly and with difficulty before turning round: and through dark passages she would walk singing. No woman alive could have done more; yet – such is human nature! – neither my father nor my mother was grateful to her, so far as I could judge.

Indeed, strange as it may appear, the more sympathetic towards them she showed herself, the more irritated against her did they become.

"I believe, Fanny, you hate seeing Luke and me happy together," said my mother one day, coming up from the kitchen to find my aunt preparing for entry into the drawing-room by dropping teaspoons at five-second intervals outside the door: "Don't make yourself so ridiculous." My mother spoke really quite unkindly.

"Hate it!" replied my aunt. "Why should I? Why shouldn't a pair of turtle doves bill and coo, when their united age is only a little over seventy, the pretty dears?" The mildness of my aunt's answers often surprised me.

As for my father, he grew positively vindictive. I remember the occasion well. It was the first, though not the last time I knew him lose his temper. What brought up the subject I forget, but my father stopped suddenly; we were walking by the canal bank.

"Your aunt" – my father may not have intended it, but his tone and manner when speaking of my aunt always conveyed to me the impression that he regarded me as personally responsible for her existence. This used to weigh upon me. "Your aunt is the most cantankerous, the most – " he broke off, and shook his fist towards the setting sun. "I wish to God," said my father, "your aunt had a comfortable little income of her own, with a freehold cottage in the country, by God I do!" But the next moment, ashamed, I suppose, of his brutality: "Not but what sometimes, of course, she can be very nice, you know," he added; "don't tell your mother what I said just now."

Another who followed with sympathetic interest the domestic comedy was Susan, our maid-of-all-work, the first of a long and varied series, extending unto the advent of Amy, to whom the blessing of Heaven. Susan was a stout and elderly female, liable to sudden fits of sleepiness, the result, we were given to understand, of trouble; but her heart, it was her own proud boast, was always in the right place. She could never look at my father and mother sitting anywhere near each other but she must flop down and weep awhile; the sight of connubial bliss always reminding her, so she would explain, of the past glories of her own married state.

Though an earnest enquirer, I was never able myself to grasp the ins and outs of this past married life of Susan's. Whether her answers were purposely framed to elude curiosity, or whether they were the result of a naturally incoherent mind, I cannot say. Their tendency was to convey confusion.

On Monday I have seen Susan shed tears of regret into the Brussels sprouts, that she had been debarred by the pressure of other duties from lately watering "his" grave, which, I gathered, was at Manor Park. While on Tuesday I have listened, blood chilled, to the recital of her intentions should she ever again enjoy the luxury of getting her fingers near the scruff of his neck.

"But, I thought, Susan, he was dead," was my very natural comment upon this outbreak.

"So did I, Master Paul," was Susan's rejoinder; "that was his artfulness."

"Then he isn't buried in Manor Park Cemetery?"

"Not yet; but he'll wish he was, the half-baked monkey, when I get hold of him."

"Then he wasn't a good man?"

"Who?"

"Your husband."

"Who says he ain't a good man?" It was Susan's flying leaps from tense to tense that most bewildered me. "If anybody says he ain't I'll gouge their eye out!"

I hastened to assure Susan that my observation had been intended in the nature of enquiry, not of assertion.

"Brings me a bottle of gin – for my headaches – every time he comes home," continued Susan, showing cause for opinion, "every blessed time."

And at some such point as this I would retire to the clearer atmosphere of German grammar or mixed fractions.

We suffered a good deal from Susan one way and another; for having regard to the admirable position of her heart, we all felt it our duty to overlook mere failings of the flesh – all but my aunt, that is, who never made any pretence of being a sentimentalist.

"She's a lazy hussy," was the opinion expressed of her one morning by my aunt, who was rinsing; "a gulping, snorting, lazy hussy, that's what she is." There was some excuse for my aunt's indignation. It was then eleven o'clock and Susan was still sleeping off an attack of what she called "new-ralgy."

"She has seen a good deal of trouble," said my mother, who was wiping.

"And if she was my cook and housemaid," replied my aunt, "she would see more, the slut!"

"She's not a good servant in many respects," admitted my mother, "but I think she's good-hearted."

"Oh, drat her heart," was my aunt's retort. "The right place for that heart of hers is on the doorstep. And that's where I'd put it, and her and her box alongside it, if I had my way."

The departure of Susan did take place not long afterwards. It occurred one Saturday night. My mother came upstairs looking pale.

"Luke," she said, "do please run for the doctor."

"What's the matter?" asked my father.

"Susan," gasped my mother, "she's lying on the kitchen floor breathing in the strangest fashion and quite unable to speak."

"I'll go for Washburn," said my father; "if I am quick I shall catch him at the dispensary."

Five minutes later my father came back panting, followed by the doctor. This was a big, black-bearded man; added to which he had the knack of looking bigger than even he really was. He came down the kitchen stairs two at a time, shaking the whole house. He brushed my mother aside, and bent over the unconscious Susan, who was on her back with her mouth wide open. Then he rose and looked at my father and mother, who were watching him with troubled faces; and then he opened his mouth, and there came from it a roar of laughter, the like of which sound I had never heard.

The next moment he had seized a pail half full of water and had flung it over the woman. She opened her eyes and sat up.

"Feeling better?" said the doctor, with the pail still in his hand; "have another dose?"

Susan began to gather herself together with the evident intention of expressing her feelings; but before she could find the first word, he had pushed the three of us outside and slammed the door behind us.

From the top of the stairs we could hear Susan's thick, rancorous voice raging fiercer and fiercer, drowned every now and then by the man's savage roar of laughter. And, when for want of breath she would flag for a moment, he would yell out encouragement to her, shouting: "Bravo! Go it, my beauty, give it tongue! Bark, bark! I love to hear you," applauding her, clapping his hands and stamping his feet.

"What a beast of a man," said my mother.

"He is really a most interesting man when you come to know him," explained my father.

Replied my mother, stiffly: "I don't ever mean to know him." But it is only concerning the past that we possess knowledge.

The riot from below ceased at length, and was followed by a new voice, speaking quietly and emphatically, and then we heard the doctor's step again upon the stairs.

My mother held her purse open in her hand, and as the man entered the room she went forward to meet him.

"How much do we owe you, Doctor?" said my mother. She spoke in a voice trembling with severity.

He closed the purse and gently pushed it back towards her.

"A glass of beer and a chop, Mrs. Kelver," he answered, "which I am coming back in an hour to cook for myself. And as you will be without any servant," he continued, while my mother stood staring at him incapable of utterance, "you had better let me cook some for you at the same time. I am an expert at grilling chops."

"But, really, Doctor – " my mother began. He laid his huge hand upon her shoulder, and my mother sat down upon the nearest chair.

"My dear lady," he said, "she's a person you never ought to have had inside your house. She's promised me to be gone in half an hour, and I'm coming back to see she keeps her word. Give her a month's wages, and have a clear fire ready for me." And before my mother could reply, he had slammed the front door.

"What a very odd sort of a man," said my mother, recovering herself.

"He's a character," said my father; "you might not think it, but he's worshipped about here."

"I hardly know what to make of him," said my mother; "I suppose I had better go out and get some chops;" which she did.

Susan went, as sober as a judge on Friday, as the saying is, her great anxiety being to get out of the house before the doctor returned. The doctor himself arrived true to his time, and I lay awake – for no human being ever slept or felt he wanted to sleep while Dr. Washburn was anywhere near – and listened to the gusts of laughter that swept continually through the house. Even my aunt laughed that supper time, and when the doctor himself laughed it seemed to me that the bed shook under me. Not liking to be out of it, I did what spoilt little boys and even spoilt little girls sometimes will do under similar stress of feeling, wrapped the blanket round my legs and pattered down, with my face set to express the sudden desire of a sensitive and possibly short-lived child for parents' love. My mother pretended to be angry, but that I knew was only her company manners. Besides, I really had, if not exactly a pain, an extremely uncomfortable sensation (one common to me about that period) as of having swallowed the dome of St. Paul's. The doctor said it was a frequent complaint with children, the result of too early hours and too much study; and, taking me on his knee, wrote then and there a diet chart for me, which included one tablespoonful of golden syrup four times a day, and one ounce of sherbet to be placed upon the tongue and taken neat ten minutes before each meal.

That evening will always live in my remembrance. My mother was brighter than I had ever seen her. A flush was on her cheek and a sparkle in her eye, and looking across at her as she sat holding a small painted screen to shield her face from the fire, the sense of beauty became suddenly born within me, and answering an impulse I could not have explained, I slipped down, still with my blanket around me, from the doctor's knee, and squatted on the edge of the fender, from where, when I thought no one was noticing me, I could steal furtive glances up into her face.

So also my father seemed to me to have become all at once bigger and more dignified, talking with a vigour and an enjoyment that sat newly on him. Aunt Fan was quite witty and agreeable – for her; and even I asked one or two questions, at which, for some reason or another, everybody laughed; which determined me to remember and ask those same questions again on some future occasion.

That was the great charm of the man, that by the magnetic spell of his magnificent vitality he drew from everyone their best. In his company clever people waxed intellectual giants, while the dull sat amazed at their own originality. Conversing with him, Podsnap might have been piquant, Dogberry incisive. But better than all else, I found it listening to his own talk. Of what he spoke I could tell you no more than could the children of Hamelin have told the tune the Pied Piper played. I only know that at the tangled music of his strong voice the walls of the mean room faded away, and that beyond I saw a brave, laughing world that called to me; a world full of joyous fight, where some won and some lost. But that mattered not a jot, because whatever else came of it there was a right royal game for all; a world where merry gentlemen feared neither life nor death, and Fate was but the Master of the Revels.

Such was my first introduction to Dr. Washburn, or to give him the name by which he was known in every slum and alley of that quarter, Dr. Fighting Hal; and in a minor key that evening was an index to the whole man. Often he would wrinkle his nose as a dog before it bites, and then he was more brute than man – brutish in his instincts, in his appetites, brutish in his pleasure, brutish in his fun. Or his deep blue eyes would grow soft as a mother's, and then you might have thought him an angel in a soft felt hat and a coat so loose-fitting as to suggest the possibility of his wings being folded away underneath. Often have I tried to make up my mind whether it has been better for me or worse that I ever came to know him; but as easy would it be for the tree to say whether the rushing winds and the wild rains have shaped it or mis-shaped.

Susan's place remained vacant for some time. My mother would explain to the few friends who occasionally came from afar to see us, that her "housemaid" she had been compelled to suddenly discharge, and that we were waiting for the arrival of a new and better specimen. But the months passed and we still waited, and my father on the rare days when a client would ring the office

bell, would, after pausing a decent interval, open the front door himself, and then call downstairs indignantly and loudly, to know why "Jane" or "Mary" could not attend to their work. And my mother, that the bread-boy or the milkman might not put it about the neighbourhood that the Kelvers in the big corner house kept no servant, would hide herself behind a thick veil and fetch all things herself from streets a long way off.

For this family of whom I am writing were, I confess, weak and human. Their poverty they were ashamed of as though it were a crime, and in consequence their life was more full of paltry and useless subterfuge than should be perhaps the life of brave men and women. The larder, I fancy, was very often bare, but the port and sherry with the sweet biscuits stood always on the sideboard; and the fire had often to be low in the grate that my father's tall hat might shine resplendent and my mother's black silk rustle on Sundays.

But I would not have you sneer at them, thinking all pretence must spring from snobbishness and never from mistaken self-respect. Some fine gentleman writers there be – men whose world is bounded on the east by Bond Street – who see in the struggles of poverty to hide its darns only matter for jest. But myself, I cannot laugh at them. I know the long hopes and fears that centre round the hired waiter; the long cost of the cream and the ice jelly ordered the week before from the confectioner's. But to me it is pathetic, not ridiculous. Heroism is not all of one pattern. Dr. Washburn, had the Prince of Wales come to see him, would have put his bread and cheese and jug of beer upon the table, and helped His Royal Highness to half. But my father and mother's tea was very weak that Mr. Jones or Mr. Smith might have a glass of wine should they come to dinner. I remember the one egg for breakfast, my mother arguing that my father should have it because he had his business to attend to; my father insisting that my mother should eat it, she having to go out shopping, a compromise being effected by their dividing it between them, each clamouring for the white as the most nourishing. And I know however little the meal looked upon the table when we started I always rose well satisfied. These are small things to speak of, but then you must bear in mind this is a story moving in narrow ways.

To me this life came as a good time. That I was encouraged to eat treacle in preference to butter seemed to me admirable. Personally, I preferred sausages for dinner; and a supper of fried fish and potatoes, brought in stealthily in a carpet bag, was infinitely more enjoyable than the set meal where nothing was of interest till one came to the dessert. What fun there was about it all! The cleaning of the doorstep by night, when from the ill-lit street a gentleman with a piece of sacking round his legs might very well pass for a somewhat tall charwoman. I would keep watch at the gate to give warning should any one looking like a possible late caller turn the corner of the street, coming back now and then in answer to a low whistle to help my father grope about in the dark for the hearthstone; he was always mislaying the hearthstone. How much better, helping to clean the knives or running errands than wasting all one's morning dwelling upon the shocking irregularity of certain classes of French verbs; or making useless calculations as to how long X, walking four and a quarter miles an hour, would be overtaking Y, whose powers were limited to three and a half, but who had started two and three quarter hours sooner; the whole argument being reduced to sheer pedantry by reason of no information being afforded to the student concerning the respective thirstiness of X and Y.

Even my father and mother were able to take it lightly with plenty of laughter and no groaning that I ever heard. For over all lay the morning light of hope, and what prisoner, escaping from his dungeon, ever stayed to think of his torn hands and knees when beyond the distant opening he could see the sunlight glinting through the brambles?

"I had no idea," said my mother, "there was so much to do in a house. In future I shall arrange for the servants to have regular hours, and a little time to themselves, for rest. Don't you think it right, Luke?"

"Quite right," replied my father; "and I'll tell you another thing we'll do. I shall insist on the landlord's putting a marble doorstep to the next house we take; you pass a sponge over marble and it is always clean."

"Or tesselated," suggested my mother.

"Or tesselated," agreed my father; "but marble is more uncommon."

Only once, can I recall a cloud. That was one Sunday when my mother, speaking across the table in the middle of dinner, said to my father, "We might save the rest of that stew, Luke; there's an omelette coming."

My father laid down the spoon. "An omelette!"

"Yes," said my mother. "I thought I would like to try again."

My father stepped into the back kitchen – we dined in the kitchen, as a rule, it saved much carriage – returning with the wood chopper.

"What ever are you going to do, Luke, with the chopper?" said my mother.

"Divide the omelette," replied my father.

My mother began to cry.

"Why, Maggie – !" said my father.

"I know the other one was leathery," said my mother, "but it was the fault of the oven, you know it was, Luke."

"My dear," said my father, "I only meant it as a joke."

"I don't like that sort of joke," said my mother; "it isn't nice of you, Luke."

I don't think, to be candid, my mother liked much any joke that was against herself. Indeed, when I come to think of it, I have never met a woman who did, nor man, either.

There had soon grown up a comradeship between my father and myself for he was the youngest thing I had met with as yet. Sometimes my mother seemed very young, and later I met boys and girls nearer to my own age in years; but they grew, while my father remained always the same. The hair about his temples was turning grey, and when you looked close you saw many crow's feet and lines, especially about the mouth. But his eyes were the eyes of a boy, his laugh the laugh of a boy, and his heart the heart of a boy. So we were very close to each other.

In a narrow strip of ground we called our garden we would play a cricket of our own, encompassed about by many novel rules, rendered necessary by the locality. For instance, all hitting to leg was forbidden, as tending to endanger neighbouring windows, while hitting to off was likewise not to be encouraged, as causing a temporary adjournment of the game, while batter and bowler went through the house and out into the street to recover the ball from some predatory crowd of urchins to whom it had evidently appeared as a gift direct from Heaven. Sometimes rising very early we would walk across the marshes to bathe in a small creek that led down to the river, but this was muddy work, necessitating much washing of legs on the return home. And on rare days we would, taking the train to Hackney and walking to the bridge, row up the river Lea, perhaps as far as Ponder's End.

But these sports being hedged around with difficulties, more commonly for recreation we would take long walks. There were pleasant nooks even in the neighbourhood of Plaistow marshes in those days. Here and there a graceful elm still clung to the troubled soil. Surrounded on all sides by hideousness, picturesque inns still remained hidden within green walls where, if you were careful not to pry too curiously, you might sit and sip your glass of beer beneath the oak and dream yourself where reeking chimneys and mean streets were not. During such walks my father would talk to me as he would talk to my mother, telling me all his wild, hopeful plans, discussing with me how I was to lodge at Oxford, to what particular branches of study and of sport I was to give my preference, speaking always with such catching confidence that I came to regard my sojourn in this brick and mortar prison as only a question of months.

One day, talking of this future, and laughing as we walked briskly, through the shrill streets, I told him the words my mother had said – long ago, as it seemed to me, for life is as a stone rolling

down-hill, and moves but slowly at first; she and I sitting on the moss at the foot of old “Jacob’s Folly” – that he was our Prince fighting to deliver us from the grim castle called “Hard Times,” guarded by the dragon Poverty.

My father laughed and his boyish face flushed with pleasure.

“And she was right, Paul,” he whispered, pressing my small hand in his – it was necessary to whisper, for the street where we were was very crowded, but I knew that he wanted to shout. “I will fight him and I will slay him.” My father made passes in the air with his walking-stick, and it was evident from the way they drew aside that the people round about fancied he was mad. “I will batter down the iron gates and she shall be free. I will, God help me, I will.”

The gallant gentleman! How long and how bravely he fought! But in the end it was the Dragon triumphed, the Knight that lay upon the ground, his great heart still. I have read how, with the sword of Honest Industry, one may always conquer this grim Dragon. But such was in foolish books. In truth, only with the sword of Chicanery and the stout buckler of Unscrupulousness shall you be certain of victory over him. If you care not to use these, pray to your Gods, and take what comes with a stout heart.

CHAPTER III.
HOW GOOD LUCK KNOCKED AT THE DOOR OF THE MAN IN GREY

"Louisa!" roared my father down the kitchen stairs, "are you all asleep? Here have I had to answer the front door myself." Then my father strode into his office, and the door slammed. My father could be very angry when nobody was by.

Quarter of an hour later his bell rang with a quick, authoritative jangle. My mother, who was peeling potatoes with difficulty in wash-leather gloves, looked at my aunt who was shelling peas. The bell rang again louder still this time.

"Once for Louisa, twice for James, isn't it?" enquired my aunt.

"You go, Paul," said my mother; "say that Louisa – " but with the words a sudden flush overspread my mother's face, and before I could lay down my slate she had drawn off her gloves and had passed me. "No, don't stop your lessons, I'll go myself," she said, and ran out.

A few minutes later the kitchen door opened softly, and my mother's hand, appearing through the jar, beckoned to me mysteriously.

"Walk on your toes," whispered my mother, setting the example as she led the way up the stairs; which after the manner of stairs showed their disapproval of deception by creaking louder and more often than under any other circumstances; and in this manner we reached my parents' bedroom, where, in the old-fashioned wardrobe, relic of better days, reposed my best suit of clothes, or, to be strictly grammatical, my better.

Never before had I worn these on a week-day morning, but all conversation not germane to the question of getting into them quickly my mother swept aside; and when I was complete, down even to the new shoes – Bluchers, we called them in those days – took me by the hand, and together we crept down as we had crept up, silent, stealthy and alert. My mother led me to the street door and opened it.

"Shan't I want my cap?" I whispered. But my mother only shook her head and closed the door with a bang; and then the explanation of the pantomime came to me, for with such "business" – comic, shall I call it, or tragic? – I was becoming familiar; and, my mother's hand upon my shoulder, we entered my father's office.

Whether from the fact that so often of an evening – our drawing-room being reserved always as a show-room in case of chance visitors; Cowper's poems, open face-downwards on the wobbly loo table; the half-finished crochet work, suggestive of elegant leisure, thrown carelessly over the arm of the smaller easy-chair – this office would become our sitting-room, its books and papers, as things of no account, being huddled out of sight; or whether from the readiness with which my father would come out of it at all times to play at something else – at cricket in the back garden on dry days or ninepins in the passage on wet, charging back into it again whenever a knock sounded at the front door, I cannot say. But I know that as a child it never occurred to me to regard my father's profession as a serious affair. To me he was merely playing there, surrounded by big books and bundles of documents, labelled profusely but consisting only of blank papers; by japanned tin boxes, lettered imposingly, but for the most part empty. "Sutton Hampden, Esq.," I remember was practically my mother's work-box. The "Drayton Estates" yielded apparently nothing but apples, a fruit of which my father was fond; while "Mortgages" it was not until later in life I discovered had no connection with poems in manuscript, some in course of correction, others completed.

Now, as the door opened, he rose and came towards us. His hair stood up from his head, for it was a habit of his to rumple it as he talked; and this added to his evident efforts to compose his face into an expression of businesslike gravity, added emphasis, if such were needed, to the suggestion of the over long schoolboy making believe.

"This is the youngster," said my father, taking me from my mother, and passing me on. "Tall for his age, isn't he?"

With a twist of his thick lips, he rolled the evil-smelling cigar he was smoking from the left corner of his mouth to the right; and held out a fat and not too clean hand, which, as it closed round mine, brought to my mind the picture of the walrus in my natural history book; with the other he flapped me kindly on the head.

"Like 'is mother, wonderfully like 'is mother, ain't 'e?" he observed, still holding my hand. "And that," he added with a wink of one of his small eyes towards my father, "is about the 'ighest compliment I can pay 'im, eh?"

His eyes were remarkably small, but marvellously bright and piercing; so much so that when he turned them again upon me I tried to think quickly of something nice about him, feeling sure that he could see right into me.

"And where are you thinkin' of sendin' 'im?" he continued; "Eton or 'Arrow?"

"We haven't quite made up our minds as yet," replied my father; "at present we are educating him at home."

"You take my tip," said the fat man, "and learn all you can. Look at me! If I'd 'ad the opportunity of being a schollard I wouldn't be here offering your father an extravagant price for doin' my work; I'd be able to do it myself."

"You seem to have got on very well without it," laughed my father; and in truth his air of prosperity might have justified greater self-complacency. Rings sparkled on his blunt fingers, and upon the swelling billows of his waistcoat rose and sank a massive gold cable.

"I'd 'ave done better with it," he grunted.

"But you look very clever," I said; and though divining with a child's cuteness that it was desired I should make a favourable impression upon him, I hoped this would please him, the words were yet spontaneous.

He laughed heartily, his whole body shaking like some huge jelly.

"Well, old Noel Hasluck's not exactly a fool," he assented, "but I'd like myself better if I could talk about something else than business, and didn't drop my aitches. And so would my little gell."

"You have a daughter?" asked my mother, with whom a child, as a bond of sympathy with the stranger took the place assigned by most women to disrespectful cooks and incompetent housemaids.

"I won't tell you about 'er. But I'll just bring 'er to see you now and then, ma'am, if you don't mind," answered Mr. Hasluck. "She don't often meet gentle-folks, an' it'll do 'er good."

My mother glanced across at my father, but the man, intercepting her question, replied to it himself.

"You needn't be afraid, ma'am, that she's anything like me," he assured her quite good-temperedly; "nobody ever believes she's my daughter, except me and the old woman. She's a little lady, she is. Freak o' nature, I call it."

"We shall be delighted," explained my mother.

"Well, you will when you see 'er," replied Mr. Hasluck, quite contentedly.

He pushed half-a-crown into my hand, overriding my parents' susceptibilities with the easy good-temper of a man accustomed to have his way in all things.

"No squanderin' it on the 'eathen," was his parting injunction as I left the room; "you spend that on a Christian tradesman."

It was the first money I ever remember having to spend, that half-crown of old Hasluck's; suggestions of the delights to be derived from a new pair of gloves for Sunday, from a Latin grammar, which would then be all my own, and so on, having hitherto displaced all less exalted visions concerning the disposal of chance coins coming into my small hands. But on this occasion I was left free to decide for myself.

The anxiety it gave me! the long tossing hours in bed! the tramping of the bewildering streets! Even advice when asked for was denied me.

"You must learn to think for yourself," said my father, who spoke eloquently on the necessity of early acquiring sound judgment and what he called "commercial aptitude."

"No, dear," said my mother, "Mr. Hasluck wanted you to spend it as you like. If I told you, that would be spending it as I liked. Your father and I want to see what you will do with it."

The good little boys in the books bought presents or gave away to people in distress. For this I hated them with the malignity the lower nature ever feels towards the higher. I consulted my aunt Fan.

"If somebody gave you half-a-crown," I put it to her, "what would you buy with it?"

"Side-combs," said my aunt; she was always losing or breaking her side-combs.

"But I mean if you were me," I explained.

"Drat the child!" said my aunt; "how do I know what he wants if he don't know himself? Idiot!"

The shop windows into which I stared, my nose glued to the pane! The things I asked the price of! The things I made up my mind to buy and then decided that I wouldn't buy! Even my patient mother began to show signs of irritation. It was rapidly assuming the dimensions of a family curse, was old Hasluck's half-crown.

Then one day I made up my mind, and so ended the trouble. In the window of a small plumber's shop in a back street near, stood on view among brass taps, rolls of lead piping and cistern requisites, various squares of coloured glass, the sort of thing chiefly used, I believe, for lavatory doors and staircase windows. Some had stars in the centre, and others, more elaborate, were enriched with designs, severe but inoffensive. I purchased a dozen of these, the plumber, an affable man who appeared glad to see me, throwing in two extra out of sheer generosity.

Why I bought them I did not know at the time, and I do not know now. My mother cried when she saw them. My father could get no further than: "But what are you going to do with them?" to which I was unable to reply. My aunt, alone, attempted comfort.

"If a person fancies coloured glass," said my aunt, "then he's a fool not to buy coloured glass when he gets the chance. We haven't all the same tastes."

In the end, I cut myself badly with them and consented to their being thrown into the dust-bin. But looking back, I have come to regard myself rather as the victim of Fate than of Folly. Many folks have I met since, recipients of Hasluck's half-crowns – many a man who has slapped his pocket and blessed the day he first met that "Napoleon of Finance," as later he came to be known among his friends – but it ever ended so; coloured glass and cut fingers. Is it fairy gold that he and his kind fling round? It would seem to be.

Next time old Hasluck knocked at our front door a maid in cap and apron opened it to him, and this was but the beginning of change. New oilcloth glistened in the passage. Lace curtains, such as in that neighbourhood were the hall-mark of the plutocrat, advertised our rising fortunes to the street, and greatest marvel of all, at least to my awed eyes, my father's Sunday clothes came into weekday wear, new ones taking their place in the great wardrobe that hitherto had been the stronghold of our gentility; to which we had ever turned for comfort when rendered despondent by contemplation of the weakness of our outer walls. "Seeing that everything was all right" is how my mother would explain it. She would lay the lilac silk upon the bed, fondly soothing down its rustling undulations, lingering lovingly over its deep frosted flounces of rich Honiton. Maybe she had entered the room weary looking and depressed, but soon there would proceed from her a gentle humming as from some small winged thing when the sun first touches it and warms it, and sometimes by the time the Indian shawl, which could go through a wedding ring, but never would when it was wanted to, had been refolded and fastened again with the great cameo brooch, and the poke bonnet, like some fractious child, shaken and petted into good condition, she would be singing softly to herself, nodding her head to the words: which were generally to the effect that somebody was too old and somebody else too

bold and another too cold, “so he wouldn’t do for me;” and stepping lightly as though the burden of the years had fallen from her.

One evening – it was before the advent of this Hasluck – I remember climbing out of bed, for trouble was within me. Creatures, indescribable but heavy, had sat upon my chest, after which I had fallen downstairs, slowly and reasonably for the first few hundred flights, then with haste for the next million miles or so, until I found myself in the street with nothing on but my nightshirt. Personally, I was shocked, but nobody else seemed to mind, and I hailed a two-penny ‘bus and climbed in. But when I tried to pay I found I hadn’t any pockets, so I jumped out and ran away and the conductor came after me. My feet were like lead, and with every step he gained on me, till with a scream I made one mighty effort and awoke.

Feeling the need of comfort after these unpleasant but by no means unfamiliar experiences, I wrapped some clothes round me and crept downstairs. The “office” was dark, but to my surprise a light shone from under the drawing-room door, and I opened it.

The candles in the silver candlesticks were lighted, and in state, one in each easy-chair, sat my father and mother, both in their best clothes; my father in the buckled shoes and the frilled shirt that I had never seen him wear before, my mother with the Indian shawl about her shoulders, and upon her head the cap of ceremony that reposed three hundred and sixty days out of the year in its round wicker-work nest lined with silk. They started guiltily as I pushed open the door, but I congratulate myself that I had sense enough – or was it instinct – to ask no questions.

The last time I had seen them, three hours ago, they had been engaged, the lights carefully extinguished, cleaning the ground floor windows, my father the outside, my mother within, and it astonished me the change not only in their appearance, but in their manner and bearing, and even in their very voices. My father brought over from the sideboard the sherry and sweet biscuits and poured out and handed a glass to my mother, and he and my mother drank to each other, while I between them ate the biscuits, and the conversation was of Byron’s poems and the great glass palace in Hyde Park.

I wonder am I disloyal setting this down? Maybe to others it shows but a foolish man and woman, and that is far from my intention. I dwell upon such trifles because to me the memory of them is very tender. The virtues of our loved ones we admire, yet after all ‘tis but what we expected of them: how could they do otherwise? Their failings we would forget; no one of us is perfect. But over their follies we love to linger, smiling.

To me personally, old Hasluck’s coming and all that followed thereupon made perhaps more difference than to any one else. My father now was busy all the day; if not in his office, then away in the grim city of the giants, as I still thought of it; while to my mother came every day more social and domestic duties; so that for a time I was left much to my own resources.

Rambling – “bummelling,” as the Germans term it – was my bent. This my mother would have checked, but my father said:

“Don’t molly-coddle him. Let him learn to be smart.”

“I don’t think the smart people are always the nicest,” demurred my mother. “I don’t call you at all ‘smart,’ Luke.”

My father appeared surprised, but reflected.

“I should call myself smart – in a sense,” he explained, after consideration.

“Perhaps you are right, dear,” replied my mother; “and of course boys are different from girls.”

Sometimes I would wander Victoria Park way, which was then surrounded by many small cottages in leafy gardens; or even reach as far as Clapton, where old red brick Georgian houses still stood behind high palings, and tall elms gave to the wide road on sunny afternoons an old-world air of peace. But such excursions were the exception, for strange though it may read, the narrow, squalid streets had greater hold on me. Not the few main thoroughfares, filled ever with a dull, deep throbbing as of some tireless iron machine; where the endless human files, streaming ever up and

down, crossing and recrossing, seemed mere rushing chains of flesh and blood, working upon unseen wheels; but the dim, weary, lifeless streets – the dark, tortuous roots, as I fancied them, of that grim forest of entangled brick. Mystery lurked in their gloom. Fear whispered from behind their silence. Dumb figures flitted swiftly to and fro, never pausing, never glancing right nor left. Far-off footsteps, rising swiftly into sound, as swiftly fading, echoed round their lonely comers. Dreading, yet drawn on, I would creep along their pavements as through some city of the dead, thinking of the eyes I saw not watching from the thousand windows; starting at each muffled sound penetrating the long, dreary walls, behind which that close-packed, writhing life lay hid.

One day there came a cry from behind a curtained window. I stood still for a moment and then ran; but before I could get far enough away I heard it again, a long, piercing cry, growing fiercer before it ceased; so that I ran faster still, not heeding where I went, till I found myself in a raw, unfinished street, ending in black waste land, bordering the river. I stopped, panting, wondering how I should find my way again. To recover myself and think I sat upon the doorstep of an empty house, and there came dancing down the road with a curious, half-running, half-hopping step – something like a water wagtail's – a child, a boy about my own age, who, after eyeing me strangely sat down beside me.

We watched each other for a few minutes; and I noticed that his mouth kept opening and shutting, though he said nothing. Suddenly, edging closer to me, he spoke in a thick whisper. It sounded as though his mouth were full of wool.

"Wot 'appens to yer when yer dead?"

"If you're good you go to Heaven. If you're bad you go to Hell."

"Long way off, both of 'em, ain't they?"

"Yes. Millions of miles."

"They can't come after yer? Can't fetch yer back again?"

"No, never."

The doorstep that we occupied was the last. A yard beyond began the black waste of mud. From the other end of the street, now growing dark, he never took his staring eyes for an instant.

"Ever seen a stiff 'un – a dead 'un?"

"No."

"I 'ave – stuck a pin into 'im. 'E never felt it. Don't feel anything when yer dead, do yer?"

All the while he kept swaying his body to and fro, twisting his arms and legs, and making faces. Comical figures made of ginger-bread, with quaintly curved limbs and grinning features, were to be bought then in bakers' shops: he made me hungry, reminding me of such.

"Of course not. When you are dead you're not there, you know. Our bodies are but senseless clay." I was glad I remembered that line. I tried to think of the next one, which was about food for worms; but it evaded me.

"I like you," he said; and making a fist, he gave me a punch in the chest. It was the token of palship among the youth of that neighbourhood, and gravely I returned it, meaning it, for friendship with children is an affair of the instant, or not at all, and I knew him for my first chum.

He wormed himself up.

"Yer won't tell?" he said.

I had no notion what I was not to tell, but our compact demanded that I should agree.

"Say 'I swear.'"

"I swear."

The heroes of my favourite fiction bound themselves by such like secret oaths. Here evidently was a comrade after my own heart.

"Good-bye, cockey."

But he turned again, and taking from his pocket an old knife, thrust it into my hand. Then with that extraordinary hopping movement of his ran off across the mud.

I stood watching him, wondering where he could be going. He stumbled a little further, where the mud began to get softer and deeper, but struggling up again, went hopping on towards the river.

I shouted to him, but he never looked back. At every few yards he would sink down almost to his knees in the black mud, but wrenching himself free would flounder forward. Then, still some distance from the river, he fell upon his face, and did not rise again. I saw his arms beating feebler and feebler as he sank till at last the oily slime closed over him, and I could detect nothing but a faint heaving underneath the mud. And after a time even that ceased.

It was late before I reached home, and fortunately my father and mother were still out. I did not tell any one what I had seen, having sworn not to; and as time went on the incident haunted me less and less until it became subservient to my will. But of my fancy for those silent, lifeless streets it cured me for the time. From behind their still walls I would hear that long cry; down their narrow vistas see that writhing figure, like some animated ginger-bread, hopping, springing, falling.

Yet in the more crowded streets another trouble awaited me, one more tangible.

Have you ever noticed a pack of sparrows round some crumbs perchance that you have thrown out from your window? Suddenly the rest of the flock will set upon one. There is a tremendous Lilliputian hubbub, a tossing of tiny wings and heads, a babel of shrill chirps. It is comical.

“Spiteful little imps they are,” you say to yourself, much amused.

So I have heard good-tempered men and women calling out to one another with a laugh.

“There go those young devils chivvying that poor little beggar again; ought to be ashamed of theirselves.”

But, oh! the anguish of the poor little beggar! Can any one who has not been through it imagine it! Reduced to its actualities, what was it? Gibes and jeers that, after all, break no bones. A few pinches, kicks and slaps; at worst a few hard knocks. But the dreading of it beforehand! Terror lived in every street, hid, waiting for me, round each corner. The half-dozen wrangling over their marbles – had they seen me? The boy whistling as he stood staring into the print shop, would I get past him without his noticing me; or would he, swinging round upon his heel, raise the shrill whoop that brought them from every doorway to hunt me?

The shame, when caught at last and cornered: the grinning face that would stop to watch; the careless jokes of passers-by, regarding the whole thing but as a sparrows’ squabble: worst of all, perhaps, the rare pity! The after humiliation when, finally released, I would dart away, followed by shouted taunts and laughter; every eye turned to watch me, shrinking by; my whole small carcass shaking with dry sobs of bitterness and rage!

If only I could have turned and faced them! So far as the mere bearing of pain was concerned, I knew myself brave. The physical suffering resulting from any number of stand-up fights would have been trivial compared with the mental agony I endured. That I, the comrade of a hundred heroes – I, who nightly rode with Richard Coeur de Lion, who against Sir Lancelot himself had couched a lance, and that not altogether unsuccessful, I to whom all damsels in distress were wont to look for succour – that I should run from varlets such as these!

My friend, my bosom friend, good Robin Hood! how would he have behaved under similar circumstances? how Ivanhoe, my chosen companion in all quests of knightly enterprise? how – to come to modern times – Jack Harkaway, mere schoolboy though he might be? Would not one and all have welcomed such incident with a joyous shout, and in a trice have scattered to the winds the worthless herd?

But, alas! upon my pale lips the joyous shout sank into an unheard whisper, and the thing that became scattered to the wind was myself, the first opening that occurred.

Sometimes, the blood boiling in my veins, I would turn, thinking to go back and at all risk defying my tormentors, prove to myself I was no coward. But before I had retraced my steps a dozen paces, I would see in imagination the whole scene again before me: the laughing crowd, the halting

passers-by, the spiteful, mocking little faces every way I turned; and so instead would creep on home, and climbing stealthily up into my own room, cry my heart out in the dark upon my bed.

Until one blessed day, when a blessed Fairy, in the form of a small kitten, lifted the spell that bound me, and set free my limbs.

I have always had a passionate affection for the dumb world, if it be dumb. My first playmate, I remember, was a water rat. A stream ran at the bottom of our garden; and sometimes, escaping the vigilant eye of Mrs. Fursey, I would steal out with my supper and join him on the banks. There, hidden behind the osiers, we would play at banquets, he, it is true, doing most of the banqueting, and I the make-believe. But it was a good game; added to which it was the only game I could ever get him to play, though I tried. He was a one-ideaed rat.

Later I came into the possession of a white specimen all my own. He lived chiefly in the outside breast pocket of my jacket, in company with my handkerchief, so that glancing down I could generally see his little pink eyes gleaming up at me, except on very cold days, when it would be only his tail that I could see; and when I felt miserable, somehow he would know it, and, swarming up, push his little cold snout against my ear. He died just so, clinging round my neck; and from many of my fellow-men and women have I parted with less pain. It sounds callous to say so; but, after all, our feelings are not under our own control; and I have never been able to understand the use of pretending to emotions one has not. All this, however, comes later. Let me return now to my fairy kitten.

I heard its cry of pain from afar, and instinctively hastened my steps. Three or four times I heard it again, and at each call I ran faster, till, breathless, I arrived upon the scene, the opening of a narrow court, leading out of a by-street. At first I saw nothing but the backs of a small mob of urchins. Then from the centre of them came another wailing appeal for help, and without waiting for any invitation, I pushed my way into the group.

What I saw was Hecuba to me – gave me the motive and the cue for passion, transformed me from the dull and muddy-mettled little John-a-dreams I had been into a small, blind Fury. Pale Thought, that mental emetic, banished from my system, I became the healthy, unreasoning animal, and acted as such.

From my methods, I frankly admit, science was absent. In simple, primitive fashion that would have charmed a Darwinian disciple to observe, I "went for" the whole crowd. To employ the expressive idiom of the neighbourhood, I was "all over it and inside." Something clung about my feet. By kicking myself free and then standing on it I gained the advantage of quite an extra foot in height; I don't know what it was and didn't care. I fought with my arms and I fought with my legs; where I could get in with my head I did. I fought whatever came to hand in a spirit of simple thankfulness, grateful for what I could reach and indifferent to what was beyond me.

That the "show" – if again I may be permitted the local idiom – was not entirely mine I was well aware. That not alone my person but my property also was being damaged in the rear became dimly conveyed to me through the sensation of draught. Already the world to the left of me was mere picturesque perspective, while the growing importance of my nose was threatening the absorption of all my other features. These things did not trouble me. I merely noted them as phenomena and continued to punch steadily.

Until I found that I was punching something soft and yet unyielding. I looked up to see what this foreign matter that thus mysteriously had entered into the mixture might be, and discovered it to be a policeman. Still I did not care. The felon's dock! the prison cell! a fig for such mere bogies. An impudent word, an insulting look, and I would have gone for the Law itself. Pale Thought – it must have been a livid green by this time – still trembled at respectful distance from me.

Fortunately for all of us, he was not impertinent, and though he spoke the language of his order, his tone disarmed offence.

"Now, then. Now, then. What is all this about?"

There was no need for me to answer. A dozen voluble tongues were ready to explain to him; and to explain wholly in my favour. This time the crowd was with me. Let a man school himself to bear dispraise, for thereby alone shall he call his soul his own. But let no man lie, saying he is indifferent to popular opinion. That was my first taste of public applause. The public was not select, and the applause might, by the sticklers for English pure and undefiled, have been deemed ill-worded, but to me it was the sweetest music I had ever heard, or have heard since. I was called a "plucky little devil," a "fair 'ot 'un," not only a "good 'un," but a "good 'un" preceded by the adjective that in the East bestows upon its principal every admirable quality that can possibly apply. Under the circumstances it likewise fitted me literally; but I knew it was intended rather in its complimentary sense.

Kind, if dirty, hands wiped my face. A neighbouring butcher presented me with a choice morsel of steak, not to eat but to wear; and I found it, if I may so express myself without infringing copyright, "grateful and comforting." My enemies had long since scooted, some of them, I had rejoiced to notice, with lame and halting steps. The mutilated kitten had been restored to its owner, a lady of ample bosom, who, carried beyond judgment by emotion, publicly offered to adopt me on the spot. The Law suggested, not for the first time, that everybody should now move on; and slowly, followed by feminine commendation mingled with masculine advice as to improved methods for the future, I was allowed to drift away.

My bones ached, my flesh stung me, yet I walked as upon air. Gradually I became conscious that I was not alone. A light, pattering step was trying to keep pace with me. Graciously I slacked my speed, and the pattering step settled down beside me. Every now and again she would run ahead and then turn round to look up into my face, much as your small dog does when he happens not to be misbehaving himself and desires you to note the fact. Evidently she approved of me. I was not at my best, as far as appearance was concerned, but women are kittle cattle, and I think she preferred me so. Thus we walked for quite a long distance without speaking, I drinking in the tribute of her worship and enjoying it. Then gaining confidence, she shyly put her hand into mine, and finding I did not repel her, promptly assumed possession of me, according to woman's way.

For her age and station she must have been a person of means, for having tried in vain various methods to make me more acceptable to followers and such as having passed would turn their heads, she said:

"I know, gelatines;" and disappearing into a sweetstuff shop, returned with quite a quantity. With these, first sucked till glutinous, we joined my many tatters. I still attracted attention, but felt warmer.

She informed me that her name was Cissy, and that her father's shop was in Three Colt Street. I informed her that my name was Paul, and that my father was a lawyer. I also pointed out to her that a lawyer is much superior in social position to a shopkeeper, which she acknowledged cheerfully. We parted at the corner of the Stainsby Road, and I let her kiss me once. It was understood that in the Stainsby Road we might meet again.

I left Eliza gaping after me, the front door in her hand, and ran straight up into my own room. Robinson Crusoe, King Arthur, The Last of the Barons, Rob Roy! I looked them all in the face and was not ashamed. I also was a gentleman.

My mother was much troubled when she saw me, but my father, hearing the story, approved.

"But he looks so awful," said my mother. "In this world," said my father, "one must occasionally be aggressive – if necessary, brutal."

My father would at times be quite savage in his sentiments.

CHAPTER IV.
PAUL, FALLING IN WITH A GOODLY COMPANY OF PILGRIMS, LEARNS OF THEM THE ROAD THAT HE MUST TRAVEL. AND MEETS THE PRINCESS OF THE GOLDEN LOCKS

The East India Dock Road is nowadays a busy, crowded thoroughfare. The jingle of the tram-bell and the rattle of the omnibus and cart mingle continuously with the rain of many feet, beating ceaselessly upon its pavements. But at the time of which I write it was an empty, voiceless way, bounded on the one side by the long, echoing wall of the docks and on the other by occasional small houses isolated amid market gardens, drying grounds and rubbish heaps. Only one thing remains – or did remain last time I passed along it, connecting it with its former self – and that is the one-storeyed brick cottage at the commencement of the bridge, and which was formerly the toll-house. I remember this toll-house so well because it was there that my childhood fell from me, and sad and frightened I saw the world beyond.

I cannot explain it better. I had been that afternoon to Plaistow on a visit to the family dentist. It was an out-of-the-way place in which to keep him, but there existed advantages of a counterbalancing nature.

"Have the half-crown in your hand," my mother would direct me, while making herself sure that the purse containing it was safe at the bottom of my knickerbocker pocket; "but of course if he won't take it, why, you must bring it home again."

I am not sure, but I think he was some distant connection of ours; at all events, I know he was a kind friend. I, seated in the velvet chair of state, he would unroll his case of instruments before me, and ask me to choose, recommending with affectionate eulogisms the most murderous looking.

But on my opening my mouth to discuss the fearful topic, lo! a pair would shoot from under his coat-sleeve, and almost before I knew what had happened, the trouble would be over. After that we would have tea together. He was an old bachelor, and his house stood in a great garden – for Plaistow in those days was a picturesque village – and out of the plentiful fruit thereof his housekeeper made the most wonderful of jams and jellies. Oh, they were good, those teas! Generally our conversation was of my mother who, it appeared, was once a little girl: not at all the sort of little girl I should have imagined her; on the contrary, a prankish, wilful little girl, though good company, I should say, if all the tales he told of her were true. And I am inclined to think they were, in spite of the fact that my mother, when I repeated them to her, would laugh, saying she was sure she had no recollection of anything of the kind, adding severely that it was a pity he and I could not find something better to gossip about. Yet her next question would be:

"And what else did he say, if you please?" explaining impatiently when my answer was not of the kind expected: "No, no, I mean about me."

The tea things cleared away, he would bring out his great microscope. To me it was a peep-hole into a fairy world where dwelt strange dragons, mighty monsters, so that I came to regard him as a sort of harmless magician. It was his pet study, and looking back, I cannot help associating his enthusiasm for all things microscopical with the fact that he was an exceptionally little man himself, but one of the biggest hearted that ever breathed.

On leaving I would formally hand him my half-crown, "with mamma's compliments," and he would formally accept it. But on putting my hand into my jacket pocket when outside the gate I would invariably find it there. The first time I took it back to him, but unblushingly he repudiated all knowledge.

"Must be another half-crown," he suggested; "such things do happen. One puts change into a pocket and overlooks it. Slippery things, half-crowns."

Returning home on this particular day of days, I paused upon the bridge, and watched for awhile the lazy barges manoeuvring their way between the piers. It was one of those hushed summer evenings when the air even of grim cities is full of whispering voices; and as, turning away from the river, I passed through the white toll-gate, I had a sense of leaving myself behind me on the bridge. So vivid was the impression, that I looked back, half expecting to see myself still leaning over the iron parapet, looking down into the sunlit water.

It sounds foolish, but I leave it standing, wondering if to others a like experience has ever come. The little chap never came back to me. He passed away from me as a man's body may possibly pass away from him, leaving him only remembrance and regret. For a time I tried to play his games, to dream his dreams, but the substance was wanting. I was only a thin ghost, making believe.

It troubled me for quite a spell of time, even to the point of tears, this feeling that my childhood lay behind me, this sudden realisation that I was travelling swiftly the strange road called growing up. I did not want to grow up; could nothing be done to stop it? Rather would I be always as I had been, playing, dreaming. The dark way frightened me. Must I go forward?

Then gradually, but very slowly, with the long months and years, came to me the consciousness of a new being, new pulsations, sensories, throbbings, rooted in but differing widely from the old; and little Paul, the Paul of whom I have hitherto spoken, faded from my life.

So likewise must I let him fade with sorrow from this book. But before I part with him entirely, let me recall what else I can remember of him. Thus we shall be quit of him, and he will interfere with us no more.

Chief among the pictures that I see is that of my aunt Fan, crouching over the kitchen fire; her skirt and crinoline rolled up round her waist, leaving as sacrifice to custom only her petticoat. Up and down her body sways in rhythmic motion, her hands stroking affectionately her own knees; the while I, with paper knife for sword, or horse of broomstick, stand opposite her, flourishing and declaiming. Sometimes I am a knight and she a wicked ogre. She is slain, growling and swearing, and at once becomes the beautiful princess that I secure and bear away with me upon the prancing broomstick. So long as the princess is merely holding sweet converse with me from her high-barred window, the scene is realistic, at least, to sufficiency; but the bearing away has to be make-believe; for my aunt cannot be persuaded to leave her chair before the fire, and the everlasting rubbing of her knees.

At other times, with the assistance of the meat chopper, I am an Indian brave, and then she is Laughing Water or Singing Sunshine, and we go out scalping together; or in less bloodthirsty moods I am the Fairy Prince and she the Sleeping Beauty. But in such parts she is not at her best. Better, when seated in the centre of the up-turned table, I am Captain Cook, and she the Cannibal Chief.

"I shall skin him and hang him in the larder till Sunday week," says my aunt, smacking her lips, "then he'll be just in right condition; not too tough and not too high." She was always strong in detail, was my aunt Fan.

I do not wish to deprive my aunt of any credit due to her, but the more I exercise my memory for evidence, the more I am convinced that her compliance on these occasions was not conceived entirely in the spirit of self-sacrifice. Often would she suggest the game and even the theme; in such case, casting herself invariably for what, in old theatrical parlance, would have been termed the heavy lead, the dragons and the wicked uncles, the fussy necromancers and the uninvited fairies. As authoress of a new cookery book for use in giant-land, my aunt, I am sure, would have been successful. Most recipes that one reads are so monotonously meagre: "Boil him," "Put her on the spit and roast her for supper," "Cook 'em in a pie – with plenty of gravy;" but my aunt into the domestic economy of Ogredom introduced variety and daintiness.

"I think, my dear," my aunt would direct, "we'll have him stuffed with chestnuts and served on toast. And don't forget the giblets. They make such excellent sauce."

With regard to the diet of imprisoned maidens she would advise:

"Not too much fish – it spoils the flesh for roasting."

The things that she would turn people into – king's sons, rightful princesses, such sort of people – people who after a time, one would think, must have quite forgotten what they started as. To let her have her way was a lesson to me in natural history both present and pre-historic. The most beautiful damsel that ever lived she would without a moment's hesitation turn into a Glyptodon or a Hippocrepian. Afterwards, when I could guess at the spelling, I would look these creatures up in the illustrated dictionary, and feel that under no circumstances could I have loved the lady ever again. Warriors and kings she would delight in transforming into plaice or prawns, and haughty queens into Brussels sprouts.

With gusto would she plan a complicated slaughter, paying heed to every detail: the sharpening of the knives, the having ready of mops and pails of water for purposes of after cleaning up. As a writer she would have followed the realistic school.

Her death, with which we invariably wound up the afternoon, was another conscientious effort. Indeed, her groans and writhings would sometimes frighten me. I always welcomed the last gurgle. That finished, but not a moment before, my aunt would let down her skirt – in this way suggesting the fall of the curtain upon our play – and set to work to get the tea.

Another frequently recurring picture that I see is of myself in glazed-peaked cap explaining many things the while we walk through dingy streets to yet a smaller figure curly haired and open eyed. Still every now and then she runs ahead to turn and look admiringly into my face as on the day she first became captive to the praise and fame of me.

I was glad of her company for more reasons than she knew of. For one, she protected me against my baser self. With her beside me I should not have dared to flee from sudden foes. Indeed, together we courted adventure; for once you get used to it this standing hazard of attack adds a charm to outdoor exercise that older folk in districts better policed enjoy not. So possibly my dog feels when together we take the air. To me it is a simple walk, maybe a little tiresome, suggested rather by contemplation of my waistband than by desire for walking for mere walking's sake; to him an expedition full of danger and surprises: "The gentleman asleep with one eye open on The Chequer's doorstep! will he greet me with a friendly sniff or try to bite my head off? This cross-eyed, lop-eared loafer, lurching against the lamp-post! shall we pass with a careless wag and a 'how-do,' or become locked in a life and death struggle? Impossible to say. This coming corner, now, 'Ware! Is anybody waiting round there to kill me, or not?"

But the trusting face beside me nerved me. As reward in lonely places I would let her hold my hand.

A second advantage I derived from her company was that of being less trampled on, less walked over, less swept aside into doorway or gutter than when alone. A pretty, winsome face had this little maid, if Memory plays me not kindly false; but also she had a vocabulary; and when the blind idiot, male or female, instead of passing us by walking round us, would, after the custom of the blind idiot, seek to gain the other side of us by walking through us, she would use it.

"Now, then, where yer coming to, old glass-eye? We ain't sperrits. Can't yer see us?"

And if they attempted reply, her child's treble, so strangely at variance with her dainty appearance, would only rise more shrill.

"Garn! They'd run out of 'eads when they was making you. That's only a turnip wot you've got stuck on top of yer!" I offer but specimens.

Nor was it of the slightest use attempting personal chastisement, as sometimes an irate lady or gentleman would be foolish enough to do. As well might an hippopotamus attempt to reprove a terrier. The only result was to provide comedy for the entire street.

On these occasions our positions were reversed, I being the admiring spectator of her prowess. Yet to me she was ever meek, almost irritatingly submissive. She found out where I lived and would

often come and wait for me for hours, her little face pressed tight against the iron railings, until either I came out or shook my head at her from my bedroom window, when she would run off, the dying away into silence of her pattering feet leaving me a little sad.

I think I cared for her in a way, yet she never entered into my day-dreams, which means that she existed for me only in the outer world of shadows that lay round about me and was not of my real life.

Also, I think she was unwise, introducing me to the shop, for children and dogs – one seems unconsciously to bracket them in one's thoughts – are snobbish little wretches. If only her father had been a dealer in firewood I could have soothed myself by imagining mistakes. It was a common occurrence, as I well knew, for children of quite the best families to be brought up by wood choppers. Fairies, the best intentioned in the world, but born muddlers, were generally responsible for these mishaps, which, however, always became righted in time for the wedding. Or even had he been a pork butcher, and there were many in the neighbourhood, I could have thought of him as a swineherd, and so found precedent for hope.

But a fishmonger – from six in the evening a fried fishmonger! I searched history in vain. Fried fishmongers were without the pale.

So gradually our meetings became less frequent, though I knew that every afternoon she waited in the quiet Stainsby Road, where dwelt in semi-detached, six-roomed villas the aristocracy of Poplar, and that after awhile, for arriving late at times I have been witness to the sad fact, tears would trace pathetic patterns upon her dust-besprinkled cheeks; and with the advent of the world-illuminating Barbara, to which event I am drawing near, they ceased altogether.

So began and ended my first romance. One of these days – some quiet summer's afternoon, when even the air of Pigott Street vibrates with tenderness beneath the whispered sighs of Memory, I shall walk into the little grocer's shop and boldly ask to see her. So far have I already gone as to trace her, and often have I tried to catch sight of her through the glass door, but hitherto in vain. I know she is the more or less troubled mother of a numerous progeny. I am told she has grown stout, and probable enough it is that her tongue has gained rather than lost in sharpness. Yet under all the unrealities the clumsy-handed world has built about her, I shall see, I know, the lithesome little maid with fond, admiring eyes. What help they were to me I never knew till I had lost them. How hard to gain such eyes I have learned since. Were we to write the truth in our confession books, should we not admit the quality we most admire in others is admiration of ourselves? And is it not a wise selection? If you would have me admirable, my friend, admire me, and speak your commendation without stint that in the sunshine of your praises I may wax. For indifference maketh an indifferent man, and contempt a contemptible man. Come, is it not true? Does not all that is worthy in us grow best by honour?

Chief among the remaining figures on my childhood's stage were the many servants of our house, the "generals," as they were termed. So rapid, as a rule, was their transit through our kitchen that only one or two, conspicuous by reason of their lingering, remain upon my view. It was a neighbourhood in which domestic servants were not much required. Those intending to take up the calling seriously went westward. The local ranks were recruited mainly from the discontented or the disappointed, from those who, unappreciated at home, hoped from the stranger more discernment; or from the love-lorn, the jilted and the jealous, who took the cap and apron as in an earlier age their like would have taken the veil. Maybe, to the comparative seclusion of our basement, as contrasted with the alternative frivolity of shop or factory, they felt in such mood more attuned. With the advent of the new or the recovery of the old young man they would plunge again into the vain world, leaving my poor mother to search afresh amid the legions of the cursed.

With these I made such comradeship as I could, for I had no child friends. Kind creatures were most of them, at least so I found them. They were poor at "making believe," but would always squeeze ten minutes from their work to romp with me, and that, perhaps, was healthier for me. What, perhaps, was not so good for me was that, staggered at the amount of "book-learning" implied by

my conversation (for the journalistic instinct, I am inclined to think, was early displayed in me), they would listen open-mouthed to all my information, regarding me as a precocious oracle. Sometimes they would obtain permission to take me home with them to tea, generously eager that their friends should also profit by me. Then, encouraged by admiring, grinning faces, I would "hold forth," keenly enjoying the sound of my own proud piping.

"As good as a book, ain't he?" was the tribute most often paid to me.

"As good as a play," one enthusiastic listener, an old greengrocer, went so far as to say.

Already I regarded myself as among the Immortals.

One girl, a dear, wholesome creature named Janet, stayed with us for months and might have stayed years, but for her addiction to strong language. The only and well-beloved child of the captain of the barge "Nancy Jane," trading between Purfleet and Ponder's End, her conversation was at once my terror and delight.

"Janet," my mother would exclaim in agony, her hands going up instinctively to guard her ears, "how can you use such words?"

"What words, mum?"

"The things you have just called the gas man."

"Him! Well, did you see what he did, mum? Walked straight into my clean kitchen, without even wiping his boots, the – " And before my mother could stop her, Janet had relieved her feelings by calling him it – or rather them – again, without any idea that she had done aught else than express in fitting phraseology a natural human emotion.

We were good friends, Janet and I, and therefore it was that I personally undertook her reformation. It was not an occasion for mincing one's words. The stake at issue was, I felt, too important. I told her bluntly that if she persisted in using such language she would inevitably go to hell.

"Then where's my father going?" demanded Janet.

"Does he use language?"

I gathered from Janet that no one who had enjoyed the privilege of hearing her father could ever again take interest in the feeble efforts of herself.

"I am afraid, Janet," I explained, "that if he doesn't give it up – "

"But it's the only way he can talk," interrupted Janet. "He don't mean anything by it."

I sighed, yet set my face against weakness. "You see, Janet, people who swear do go there."

But Janet would not believe.

"God send my dear, kind father to hell just because he can't talk like the gentlefolks! Don't you believe it of Him, Master Paul. He's got more sense."

I hope I pain no one by quoting Janet's common sense. For that I should be sorry. I remember her words because so often, when sinking in sloughs of childish despond, they afforded me firm foothold. More often than I can tell, when compelled to listen to the sententious voice of immeasurable Folly glibly explaining the eternal mysteries, has it comforted me to whisper to myself: "I don't believe it of Him. He's got more sense."

And about that period I had need of all the comfort I could get. As we descend the road of life, the journey, demanding so much of our attention, becomes of more importance than the journey's end; but to the child, standing at the valley's gate, the terminating hills are clearly visible. What lies beyond them is his constant wonder. I never questioned my parents directly on the subject, shrinking as so strangely we all do, both young and old, from discussion of the very matters of most moment to us; and they, on their part, not guessing my need, contented themselves with the vague generalities with which we seek to hide even from ourselves the poverty of our beliefs. But there were foolish voices about me less reticent; while the literature, illustrated and otherwise, provided in those days for serious-minded youth, answered all questionings with blunt brutality. If you did wrong you burnt in a fiery furnace for ever and ever. Were your imagination weak you could turn to the accompanying illustration, and see at a glance how you yourself would writhe and shrink and scream, while cheerful

devils, well organised, were busy stoking. I had been burnt once, rather badly, in consequence of live coals, in course of transit on a shovel, being let fall upon me. I imagined these burning coals, not confined to a mere part of my body, but pressing upon me everywhere, not snatched swiftly off by loving hands, the pain assuaged by applications of soft soap and the blue bag, but left there, eating into my flesh and veins. And this continued for eternity. You suffered for an hour, a day, a thousand years, and were no nearer to the end; ten thousand, a million years, and yet, as at the very first, it was for ever, and for ever still it would always be for ever! I suffered also from insomnia about this period.

"Then be good," replied the foolish voices round me; "never do wrong, and so avoid this endless agony."

But it was so easy to do wrong. There were so many wrong things to do, and the doing of them was so natural.

"Then repent," said the voices, always ready.

But how did one repent? What was repentance? Did I "hate my sin," as I was instructed I must, or merely hate the idea of going to hell for it? Because the latter, even my child's sense told me, was no true repentance. Yet how could one know the difference?

Above all else there haunted me the fear of the "Unforgivable Sin." What this was I was never able to discover. I dreaded to enquire too closely, lest I should find I had committed it. Day and night the terror of it clung to me.

"Believe," said the voices; "so only shall you be saved." How believe? How know you did believe? Hours would I kneel in the dark, repeating in a whispered scream:

"I believe, I believe. Oh, I do believe!" and then rise with white knuckles, wondering if I really did believe.

Another question rose to trouble me. In the course of my meanderings I had made the acquaintance of an old sailor, one of the most disreputable specimens possible to find; and had learned to love him. Our first meeting had been outside a confectioner's window, in the Commercial Road, where he had discovered me standing, my nose against the glass, a mere palpitating Appetite on legs. He had seized me by the collar, and hauled me into the shop. There, dropping me upon a stool, he bade me eat. Pride of race prompted me politely to decline, but his language became so awful that in fear and trembling I obeyed. So soon as I was finished – it cost him two and fourpence, I remember – we walked down to the docks together, and he told me stories of the sea and land that made my blood run cold. Altogether, in the course of three weeks or a month, we met about half a dozen times, when much the same programme was gone through. I think I was a fairly frank child, but I said nothing about him at home, feeling instinctively that if I did there would be an end of our comradeship, which was dear to me: not merely by reason of the pastry, though I admit that was a consideration, but also for his wondrous tales. I believed them all implicitly, and so came to regard him as one of the most interesting criminals as yet unhanged: and what was sad about the case, as I felt myself, was that his recital of his many iniquities, instead of repelling, attracted me to him. If ever there existed a sinner, here was one. He chewed tobacco – one of the hundred or so deadly sins, according to my theological library – and was generally more or less drunk. Not that a stranger would have noticed this; the only difference being that when sober he appeared constrained – was less his natural, genial self. In a burst of confidence he once admitted to me that he was the biggest blackguard in the merchant service. Unacquainted with the merchant service, as at the time I was, I saw no reason to doubt him.

One night in a state of intoxication he walked over a gangway and was drowned. Our mutual friend, the confectioner, seeing me pass the window, came out to tell me so; and having heard, I walked on, heavy of heart, and pondering.

About his eternal destination there could be no question. The known facts precluded the least ray of hope. How could I be happy in heaven, supposing I eventually did succeed in slipping in, knowing that he, the lovable old scamp, was burning for ever in hell?

How could Janet, taking it that she reformed and thus escaped damnation, be contented, knowing the father she loved doomed to torment? The heavenly hosts, so I argued, could be composed only of the callous and indifferent.

I wondered how people could go about their business, eat, drink and be merry, with tremendous fate hanging thus ever suspended over their heads. When for a little space I myself forgot it, always it fell back upon me with increased weight.

Nor was the contemplation of heaven itself particularly attractive to me, for it was a foolish paradise these foolish voices had fashioned out of their folly. You stood about and sang hymns – for ever! I was assured that my fear of finding the programme monotonous was due only to my state of original sin, that when I got there I should discover I liked it. But I would have given much for the hope of avoiding both their heaven and their hell.

Fortunately for my sanity I was not left long to brood unoccupied upon such themes. Our worldly affairs, under the sunshine of old Hasluck's round red face, prospered – for awhile; and one afternoon my father, who had been away from home since breakfast time, calling me into his office where also sat my mother, informed me that the long-talked-of school was become at last a concrete thing.

"The term commences next week," explained my father. "It is not exactly what I had intended, but it will do – for the present. Later, of course, you will go to one of the big public schools; your mother and I have not yet quite decided which."

"You will meet other boys there, good and bad," said my mother, who sat clasping and unclasping her hands. "Be very careful, dear, how you choose your companions."

"You will learn to take your own part," said my father. "School is an epitome of the world. One must assert oneself, or one is sat upon."

I knew not what to reply, the vista thus opened out to me was so unexpected. My blood rejoiced, but my heart sank.

"Take one of your long walks," said my father, smiling, "and think it over."

"And if you are in any doubt, you know where to go for guidance, don't you?" whispered my mother, who was very grave.

Yet I went to bed, dreaming of quite other things that night: of Queens of Beauty bending down to crown my brows with laurel: of wronged Princesses for whose cause I rode to death or victory. For on my return home, being called into the drawing-room by my father, I stood transfixed, my cap in hand, staring with all my eyes at the vision that I saw.

No such wonder had I ever seen before, at all events, not to my remembrance. The maidens that one meets in Poplar streets may be fair enough in their way, but their millinery displays them not to advantage; and the few lady visitors that came to us were of a staid and matronly appearance. Only out of pictures hitherto had such witchery looked upon me; and from these the spell faded as one gazed.

I heard old Hasluck's smoky voice saying, "My little gell, Barbara," and I went nearer to her, moving unconsciously.

"You can kiss 'er," said the smoky voice again; "she won't bite." But I did not kiss her. Nor ever felt I wanted to, upon the mouth.

I suppose she must have been about fourteen, and I a little over ten, though tall for my age. Later I came to know she had that rare gold hair that holds the light, so that upon her face, which seemed of dainty porcelain, there ever fell a softened radiance as from some shining aureole; those blue eyes where dwell mysteries, shadow veiled. At the time I knew nothing, but that it seemed to me as though the fairy-tales had all come true.

She smiled, understanding and well pleased with my confusion. Child though I was – little more than child though she was, it flattered her vanity.

Fair and sweet, you had but that one fault. Would it had been another, less cruel to you yourself.

CHAPTER V.
IN WHICH THERE COMES BY ONE BENT UPON PURSUING HIS OWN WAY

"Correct" is, I think, the adjective by which I can best describe Doctor Florret and all his attributes. He was a large man, but not too large – just the size one would select for the head-master of an important middle-class school; stout, not fat, suggesting comfort, not grossness. His hands were white and well shaped. On the left he wore a fine diamond ring, but it shone rather than sparkled. He spoke of commonplace things in a voice that lent dignity even to the weather. His face, which was clean-shaven, radiated benignity tempered by discretion.

So likewise all about him: his wife, the feminine counterpart of himself. Seeing them side by side one felt tempted to believe that for his special benefit original methods had been reverted to, and she fashioned, as his particular helpmeet, out of one of his own ribs. His furniture was solid, meant for use, not decoration. His pictures, following the rule laid down for dress, graced without drawing attention to his walls. He ever said the correct thing at the correct time in the correct manner. Doubtful of the correct thing to do, one could always learn it by waiting till he did it; when one at once felt that nothing else could possibly have been correct. He held on all matters the correct views. To differ from him was to discover oneself a revolutionary.

In practice, as I learned at the cost of four more or less wasted years, he of course followed the methods considered correct by English schoolmen from the days of Edward VI. onwards.

Heaven knows I worked hard. I wanted to learn. Ambition – the all containing ambition of a boy that "has its centre everywhere nor cares to fix itself to form" stirred within me. Did I pass a speaker at some corner, hatless, perspiring, pointing Utopias in the air to restless hungry eyes, at once I saw myself, a Demosthenes swaying multitudes, a statesman holding the House of Commons spellbound, the Prime Minister of England, worshipped by the entire country. Even the Opposition papers, had I known of them, I should have imagined forced to reluctant admiration. Did the echo of a distant drum fall upon my ear, then before me rose picturesque fields of carnage, one figure ever conspicuous: Myself, well to the front, isolated. Promotion in the British army of my dream being a matter purely of merit, I returned Commander-in-Chief. Vast crowds thronged every flag-decked street. I saw white waving hands from every roof and window. I heard the dull, deep roar of welcome, as with superb seat upon my snow-white charger – or should it be coal-black? The point cost me much consideration, so anxious was I that the day should be without a flaw – I slowly paced at the head of my victorious troops, between wild waves of upturned faces: walked into a lamp-post or on to the toes of some irascible old gentleman, and awoke. A drunken sailor stormed from between swing doors and tacked tumultuously down the street: the factory chimney belching smoke became a swaying mast. The costers round about me shouted "Ay, ay, sir. 'Ready, ay, ready." I was Christopher Columbus, Drake, Nelson, rolled into one. Spurning the presumption of modern geographers, I discovered new continents. I defeated the French – those useful French! I died in the moment of victory. A nation mourned me and I was buried in Westminster Abbey. Also I lived and was created a Duke. Either alternative had its charm: personally I was indifferent. Boys who on November the ninth, as explained by letters from their mothers, read by Doctor Florret with a snort, were suffering from a severe toothache, told me on November the tenth of the glories of Lord Mayor's Shows. I heard their chatter fainter and fainter as from an ever-increasing distance. The bells of Bow were ringing in my ears. I saw myself a merchant prince, though still young. Nobles crowded my counting house. I lent them millions and married their daughters. I listened, unobserved in a corner, to discussion on some new book. Immediately I was a famous author. All men praised me: for of reviewers and their density I, in those days, knew nothing. Poetry, fiction, history, I wrote them all; and all men read, and wondered.

Only here was a crumpled rose leaf in the pillow on which I laid my swelling head: penmanship was vexation to me, and spelling puzzled me, so that I wrote with sorrow and many blots and scratchings out. Almost I put aside the idea of becoming an author.

But along whichever road I might fight my way to the Elysian Fields of fame, education, I dimly but most certainly comprehended, was a necessary weapon to my hand. And so, with aching heart and aching head, I pored over my many books. I see myself now in my small bedroom, my elbows planted on the shaky, one-legged table, startled every now and again by the frizzling of my hair coming in contact with the solitary candle. On cold nights I wear my overcoat, turned up about the neck, a blanket round my legs, and often I must sit with my fingers in my ears, the better to shut out the sounds of life, rising importunately from below. "A song, Of a song, To a song, A song, O! song!" "I love, Thou lovest, He she or it loves. I should or would love" over and over again, till my own voice seems some strange buzzing thing about me, while my head grows smaller and smaller till I put my hands up frightened, wondering if it still be entire upon my shoulders.

Was I more stupid than the average, or is a boy's brain physically incapable of the work our educational system demands of it?

"Latin and Greek" I hear repeating the suave tones of Doctor Florret, echoing as ever the solemn croak of Correctness, "are useful as mental gymnastics." My dear Doctor Florret and Co., cannot you, out of the vast storehouse of really necessary knowledge, select apparatus better fitted to strengthen and not overstrain the mental muscles of ten-to-fourteen? You, gentle reader, with brain fully grown, trained by years of practice to its subtlest uses, take me from your bookshelf, say, your Browning or even your Shakespeare. Come, you know this language well. You have not merely learned: it is your mother tongue. Construe for me this short passage, these few verses: parse, analyse, resolve into component parts! And now, will you maintain that it is good for Tommy, tear-stained, ink-bespattered little brat, to be given AEsop's Fables, Ovid's Metamorphoses to treat in like manner? Would it not be just as sensible to insist upon his practising his skinny little arms with hundred pounds dumb-bells?

We were the sons of City men, of not well-to-do professional men, of minor officials, clerks, shopkeepers, our roads leading through the workaday world. Yet quite half our time was taken up in studies utterly useless to us. How I hated them, these youth-tormenting Shades. Homer! how I wished the fishermen had asked him that absurd riddle earlier. Horace! why could not that shipwreck have succeeded: it would have in the case of any one but a classic.

Until one blessed day there fell into my hands a wondrous talisman.

Hearken unto me, ye heavy burdened little brethren of mine. Waste not your substance upon tops and marbles, nor yet upon tuck (Do ye still call it "tuck"?), but scrape and save. For in the neighbourhood of Paternoster Row there dwells a good magician who for silver will provide you with a "Key" that shall open wide for you the gates of Hades.

By its aid, the Frogs of Aristophanes became my merry friends. With Ulysses I wandered eagerly through Wonderland. Doctor Florret was charmed with my progress, which was real, for now, at last, I was studying according to the laws of common sense, understanding first, explaining afterwards. Let Youth, that the folly of Age would imprison in ignorance, provide itself with "Keys."

But let me not seem to claim credit due to another. Dan it was – Dan of the strong arm and the soft smile, Dan the wise hater of all useless labour, sharp-witted, easy-going Dan, who made this grand discovery.

Dan followed me a term later into the Lower Fourth, but before he had been there a week was handling Latin verse with an ease and dexterity suggestive of unholy dealings with the Devil. In a lonely corner of Regent's Park, first making sure no one was within earshot, he revealed to me his magic.

"Don't tell the others," he commanded; "or it will get out, and then nobody will be any the better."

"But is it right?" I asked.

"Look here, young 'un," said Dan; "what are you here for – what's your father paying school fees for (it was the appeal to our conscientiousness most often employed by Dr. Florret himself), for you to play a silly game, or to learn something?

"Because if it's only a game – we boys against the masters," continued Dan, "then let's play according to rule. If we're here to learn – well, you've been in the class four months and I've just come, and I bet I know more Ovid than you do already." Which was true.

So I thanked Dan and shared with him his key; and all the Latin I remember, for whatever good it may be to me, I take it I owe to him.

And knowledge of yet greater value do I owe to the good fortune that his sound mother wit was ever at my disposal to correct my dreamy unfeasibility; for from first to last he was my friend; and to have been the chosen friend of Dan, shrewd judge of man and boy, I deem no unimportant feather in my cap. He "took to" me, he said, because I was so "jolly green" – "such a rummy little mug." No other reason would he ever give me, save only a sweet smile and a tumbling of my hair with his great hand; but I think I understood. And I loved him because he was big and strong and handsome and kind; no one but a little boy knows how brutal or how kind a big boy can be. I was still somewhat of an effeminate little chap, nervous and shy, with a pink and white face, and hair that no amount of wetting would make straight. I was growing too fast, which took what strength I had, and my journey every day, added to school work and home work, maybe was too much for my years. Every morning I had to be up at six, leaving the house before seven to catch the seven fifteen from Poplar station; and from Chalk Farm I had to walk yet another couple of miles. But that I did not mind, for at Chalk Farm station Dan was always waiting for me. In the afternoon we walked back together also; and when I was tired and my back ached – just as if some one had cut a piece out of it, I felt – he would put his arm round me, for he always knew, and oh, how strong and restful it was to lean against, so that one walked as in an easy-chair.

It seems to me, remembering how I would walk thus by his side, looking up shyly into his face, thinking how strong and good he was, feeling so glad he liked me, I can understand a little how a woman loves. He was so solid. With his arm round me, it was good to feel weak.

At first we were in the same class, the Lower Third. He had no business there. He was head and shoulders taller than any of us and years older. It was a disgrace to him that he was not in the Upper Fourth. The Doctor would tell him so before us all twenty times a week. Old Waterhouse (I call him "Old Waterhouse" because "Mister Waterhouse, M.A.," would convey no meaning to me, and I should not know about whom I was speaking) who cordially liked him, was honestly grieved. We, his friends, though it was pleasant to have him among us, suffered in our pride of him. The only person quite contented was Dan himself. It was his way in all things. Others had their opinion of what was good for him. He had his own, and his own was the only opinion that ever influenced him. The Lower Third suited him. For him personally the Upper Fourth had no attraction.

And even in the Lower Third he was always at the bottom. He preferred it. He selected the seat and kept it, in spite of all allurements, in spite of all reproaches. It was nearest to the door. It enabled him to be first out and last in. Also it afforded a certain sense of retirement. Its occupant, to an extent screened from observation, became in the course of time almost forgotten. To Dan's philosophical temperament its practical advantages outweighed all sentimental objection.

Only on one occasion do I remember his losing it. As a rule, tiresome questions, concerning past participles, square roots, or meridians never reached him, being snapped up in transit by arm-waving lovers of such trifles. The few that by chance trickled so far he took no notice of. They possessed no interest for him, and he never pretended that they did. But one day, taken off his guard, he gave voice quite unconsciously to a correct reply, with the immediate result of finding himself in an exposed position on the front bench. I had never seen Dan out of temper before, but that moment had any of us ventured upon a whispered congratulation we would have had our head punched, I feel confident.

Old Waterhouse thought that here at last was reformation. “Come, Brian,” he cried, rubbing his long thin hands together with delight, “after all, you’re not such a fool as you pretend.”

“Never said I was,” muttered Dan to himself, with a backward glance of regret towards his lost seclusion; and before the day was out he had worked his way back to it again.

As we were going out together, old Waterhouse passed us on the stairs: “Haven’t you any sense of shame, my boy?” he asked sorrowfully, laying his hand kindly on Dan’s shoulder.

“Yes, sir,” answered Dan, with his frank smile; “plenty. It isn’t yours, that’s all.”

He was an excellent fighter. In the whole school of over two hundred boys, not half a dozen, and those only Upper Sixth boys – fellows who came in top hats with umbrellas, and who wouldn’t out of regard to their own dignity – could have challenged him with any chance of success. Yet he fought very seldom, and then always in a bored, lazy fashion, as though he were doing it purely to oblige the other fellow.

One afternoon, just as we were about to enter Regent’s Park by the wicket opposite Hanover Gate, a biggish boy, an errand boy carrying an empty basket, and supported by two smaller boys, barred our way.

“Can’t come in here,” said the boy with the basket.

“Why not?” inquired Dan.

“‘Cos if you do I shall kick you,” was the simple explanation.

Without a word Dan turned away, prepared to walk on to the next opening. The boy with the basket, evidently encouraged, followed us: “Now, I’m going to give you your coward’s blow,” he said, stepping in front of us; “will you take it quietly?” It is a lonely way, the Outer Circle, on a winter’s afternoon.

“I’ll tell you afterwards,” said Dan, stopping short.

The boy gave him a slight slap on the cheek. It could not have hurt, but the indignity, of course, was great. No boy of honour, according to our code, could have accepted it without retaliating.

“Is that all?” asked Dan.

“That’s all – for the present,” replied the boy with the basket.

“Good-bye,” said Dan, and walked on.

“Glad he didn’t insist on fighting,” remarked Dan, cheerfully, as we proceeded; “I’m going to a party tonight.”

Yet on another occasion, in a street off Lisson Grove, he insisted on fighting a young rough half again his own weight, who, brushing up against him, had knocked his hat off into the mud.

“I wouldn’t have said anything about his knocking it off,” explained Dan afterwards, tenderly brushing the poor bruised thing with his coat sleeve, “if he hadn’t kicked it.”

On another occasion I remember, three or four of us, Dan among the number, were on our way one broiling summer’s afternoon to Hadley Woods. As we turned off from the highroad just beyond Barnet and struck into the fields, Dan drew from his pocket an enormous juicy-looking pear.

“Where did you get that from?” inquired one, Dudley.

“From that big greengrocer’s opposite Barnet Church,” answered Dan. “Have a bit?”

“You told me you hadn’t any more money,” retorted Dudley, in reproachful tones.

“No more I had,” replied Dan, holding out a tempting slice at the end of his pocket-knife.

“You must have had some, or you couldn’t have bought that pear,” argued Dudley, accepting.

“Didn’t buy it.”

“Do you mean to say you stole it?”

“Yes.”

“You’re a thief,” denounced Dudley, wiping his mouth and throwing away a pip.

“I know it. So are you.”

“No, I’m not.”

"What's the good of talking nonsense. You robbed an orchard only last Wednesday at Mill Hill, and gave yourself the stomach-ache."

"That isn't stealing."

"What is it?"

"It isn't the same thing."

"What's the difference?"

And nothing could make Dan comprehend the difference. "Stealing is stealing," he would have it, "whether you take it off a tree or out of a basket. You're a thief, Dudley; so am I. Anybody else say a piece?"

The thermometer was at that point where morals become slack. We all had a piece; but we were all of us shocked at Dan, and told him so. It did not agitate him in the least.

To Dan I could speak my inmost thoughts, knowing he would understand me, and sometimes from him I received assistance and sometimes confusion. The yearly examination was approaching. My father and mother said nothing, but I knew how anxiously each of them awaited the result; my father, to see how much I had accomplished; my mother, how much I had endeavoured. I had worked hard, but was doubtful, knowing that prizes depend less upon what you know than upon what you can make others believe you know; which applies to prizes beyond those of school.

"Are you going in for anything, Dan?" I asked him. We were discussing the subject, crossing Primrose Hill, one bright June morning.

I knew the question absurd. I asked it of him because I wanted him to ask it of me.

"They're not giving away anything I particularly want," murmured Dan, in his lazy drawl: looked at from that point of view, school prizes are, it must be confessed, not worth their cost.

"You're sweating yourself, young 'un, of course?" he asked next, as I expected.

"I mean to have a shot at the History," I admitted. "Wish I was better at dates."

"It's always two-thirds dates," Dan assured me, to my discouragement. "Old Florret thinks you can't eat a potato until you know the date that chap Raleigh was born."

"I've prayed so hard that I may win the History prize," I explained to him. I never felt shy with Dan. He never laughed at me.

"You oughtn't to have done that," he said. I stared. "It isn't fair to the other fellows. That won't be your winning the prize; that will be your getting it through favouritism."

"But they can pray, too," I reminded him.

"If you all pray for it," answered Dan, "then it will go, not to the fellow that knows most history, but to the fellow that's prayed the hardest. That isn't old Florret's idea, I'm sure."

"But we are told to pray for things we want," I insisted.

"Beastly mean way of getting 'em," retorted Dan. And no argument that came to me, neither then nor at any future time, brought him to right thinking on this point.

He would judge all matters for himself. In his opinion Achilles was a coward, not a hero.

"He ought to have told the Trojans that they couldn't hurt any part of him except his heel, and let them have a shot at that," he argued; "King Arthur and all the rest of them with their magic swords, it wasn't playing the game. There's no pluck in fighting if you know you're bound to win. Beastly cads, I call them all."

I won no prize that year. Oddly enough, Dan did, for arithmetic; the only subject studied in the Lower Fourth that interested him. He liked to see things coming right, he explained.

My father shut himself up with me for half an hour and examined me himself.

"It's very curious, Paul," he said, "you seem to know a good deal."

"They asked me all the things I didn't know. They seemed to do it on purpose," I blurted out, and laid my head upon my arm. My father crossed the room and sat down beside me.

"Spud!" he said – it was a long time since he had called me by that childish nickname – "perhaps you are going to be with me, one of the unlucky ones."

"Are you unlucky?" I asked.

"Invariably," answered my father, rumpling his hair. "I don't know why. I try hard – I do the right thing, but it turns out wrong. It always does."

"But I thought Mr. Hasluck was bringing us such good fortune," I said, looking up in surprise. "We're getting on, aren't we?"

"I have thought so before, so often," said my father, "and it has always ended in a – in a collapse."

I put my arms round his neck, for I always felt to my father as to another boy; bigger than myself and older, but not so very much.

"You see, when I married your mother," he went on, "I was a rich man. She had everything she wanted."

"But you will get it all back," I cried.

"I try to think so," he answered. "I do think so – generally speaking. But there are times – you would not understand – they come to you."

"But she is happy," I persisted; "we are all happy."

He shook his head.

"I watch her," he said. "Women suffer more than we do. They live more in the present. I see my hopes, but she – she sees only me, and I have always been a failure. She has lost faith in me."

I could say nothing. I understood but dimly.

"That is why I want you to be an educated man, Paul," he continued after a silence. "You can't think what a help education is to a man. I don't mean it helps you to get on in the world; I think for that it rather hampers you. But it helps you to bear adversity. To a man with a well-stored mind, life is interesting on a piece of bread and a cup of tea. I know. If it were not for you and your mother I should not trouble."

And yet at that time our fortunes were at their brightest, so far as I remember them; and when they were dark again he was full of fresh hope, planning, scheming, dreaming again. It was never acting. A worse actor never trod this stage on which we fret. His occasional attempts at a cheerfulness he did not feel inevitably resulted in our all three crying in one another's arms. No; it was only when things were going well that experience came to his injury. Child of misfortune, he ever rose, Antaeus-like, renewed in strength from contact with his mother.

Nor must it be understood that his despondent moods, even in time of prosperity, were oft recurring. Generally speaking, as he himself said, he was full of confidence. Already had he fixed upon our new house in Guilford Street, then still a good residential quarter; while at the same time, as he would explain to my mother, sufficiently central for office purposes, close as it was to Lincoln and Grey's Inn and Bedford Row, pavements long worn with the weary footsteps of the Law's sad courtiers.

"Poplar," said my father, "has disappointed me. It seemed a good idea – a rapidly rising district, singularly destitute of solicitors. It ought to have turned out well, and yet somehow it hasn't."

"There have been a few come," my mother reminded him.

"Of a sort," admitted my father; "a criminal lawyer might gather something of a practice here, I have no doubt. But for general work, of course, you must be in a central position. Now, in Guilford Street people will come to me."

"It should certainly be a pleasanter neighbourhood to live in," agreed my mother.

"Later on," said my father, "in case I want the whole house for offices, we could live ourselves in Regent's Park. It is quite near to the Park."

"Of course you have consulted Mr. Hasluck?" asked my mother, who of the two was by far the more practical.

"For Hasluck," replied my father, "it will be much more convenient. He grumbles every time at the distance."

"I have never been quite able to understand," said my mother, "why Mr. Hasluck should have come so far out of his way. There must surely be plenty of solicitors in the City."

"He had heard of me," explained my father. "A curious old fellow – likes his own way of doing things. It's not everyone who would care for him as a client. But I seem able to manage him."

Often we would go together, my father and I, to Guilford Street. It was a large corner house that had taken his fancy, half creeper covered, with a balcony, and pleasantly situated, overlooking the gardens of the Foundling Hospital. The wizened old caretaker knew us well, and having opened the door, would leave us to wander through the empty, echoing rooms at our own will. We furnished them handsomely in later Queen Anne style, of which my father was a connoisseur, sparing no necessary expense; for, as my father observed, good furniture is always worth its price, while to buy cheap is pure waste of money.

"This," said my father, on the second floor, stepping from the bedroom into the smaller room adjoining, "I shall make your mother's boudoir. We will have the walls in lavender and maple green – she is fond of soft tones – and the window looks out upon the gardens. There we will put her writing-table."

My own bedroom was on the third floor, a sunny little room.

"You will be quiet here," said my father, "and we can shut out the bed and the washstand with a screen."

Later, I came to occupy it; though its rent – eight and sixpence a week, including attendance – was somewhat more than at the time I ought to have afforded. Nevertheless, I adventured it, taking the opportunity of being an inmate of the house to refurnish it, unknown to my stout landlady, in later Queen Anne style, putting a neat brass plate with my father's name upon the door. "Luke Kelver, Solicitor. Office hours, 10 till 4." A medical student thought he occupied my mother's boudoir. He was a dull dog, full of tiresome talk. But I made acquaintanceship with him; and often of an evening would smoke my pipe there in silence while pretending to be listening to his monotonous brag.

The poor thing! he had no idea that he was only a foolish ghost; that his walls, seemingly covered with coarse-coloured prints of wooden-looking horses, simpering ballet girls and petrified prize-fighters, were in reality a delicate tone of lavender and maple green; that at her writing-table in the sunlit window sat my mother, her soft curls curtaining her quiet face.

CHAPTER VI.
OF THE SHADOW THAT CAME BETWEEN THE MAN IN GREY AND THE LADY OF THE LOVE-LIT EYES

"There's nothing missing," said my mother, "so far as I can find out. Depend upon it, that's the explanation: she has got frightened and has run away.

"But what was there to frighten her?" said my father, pausing with a decanter in one hand and the bottle in the other.

"It was the idea of the thing," replied my mother. "She has never been used to waiting at table. She was actually crying about it only last night."

"But what's to be done?" said my father. "They will be here in less than an hour."

"There will be no dinner for them," said my mother, "unless I put on an apron and bring it up myself."

"Where does she live?" asked my father.

"At Ilford," answered my mother.

"We must make a joke of it," said my father.

My mother, sitting down, began to cry. It had been a trying week for my mother. A party to dinner – to a real dinner, beginning with anchovies and ending with ices from the confectioner's; if only they would remain ices and not, giving way to unaccustomed influences, present themselves as cold custard – was an extraordinary departure from the even tenor of our narrow domestic way; indeed, I recollect none previous. First there had been the house to clean and rearrange almost from top to bottom; endless small purchases to be made of articles that Need never misses, but which Ostentation, if ever you let her sneering nose inside the door, at once demands. Then the kitchen range – it goes without saying: one might imagine them all members of a stove union, controlled by some agitating old boiler out of work – had taken the opportunity to strike, refusing to bake another dish except under permanently improved conditions, necessitating weary days with plumbers. Fat cookery books, long neglected on their shelf, had been consulted, argued with and abused; experiments made, failures sighed over, successes noted; cost calculated anxiously; means and ways adjusted, hope finally achieved, shadowed by fear.

And now with victory practically won, to have the reward thus dashed from her hand at the last moment! Downstairs in the kitchen would be the dinner, waiting for the guests; upstairs round the glittering table would be the assembled guests, waiting for their dinner. But between the two yawned an impassable gulf. The bridge, without a word of warning, had bolted – was probably by this time well on its way to Ilford. There was excuse for my mother's tears.

"Isn't it possible to get somebody else?" asked my father.

"Impossible, in the time," said my mother. "I had been training her for the whole week. We had rehearsed it perfectly."

"Have it in the kitchen," suggested my aunt, who was folding napkins to look like ships, which they didn't in the least, "and call it a picnic." Really it seemed the only practical solution.

There came a light knock at the front door.

"It can't be anybody yet, surely," exclaimed my father in alarm, making for his coat.

"It's Barbara, I expect," explained my mother. "She promised to come round and help me dress. But now, of course, I shan't want her." My mother's nature was pessimistic.

But with the words Barbara ran into the room, for I had taken it upon myself to admit her, knowing that shadows slipped out through the window when Barbara came in at the door – in those days, I mean.

She kissed them all three, though it seemed but one movement, she was so quick. And at once they saw the humour of the thing.

"There's going to be no dinner," laughed my father. "We are going to look surprised and pretend that it was yesterday. It will be fun to see their faces."

"There will be a very nice dinner," smiled my mother, "but it will be in the kitchen, and there's no way of getting it upstairs." And they explained to her the situation.

She stood for an instant, her sweet face the gravest in the group. Then a light broke upon it.

"I'll get you someone," she said.

"My dear, you don't even know the neighbourhood," began my mother. But Barbara had snatched the latchkey from its nail and was gone.

With her disappearance, shadow fell again upon us. "If there were only an hotel in this beastly neighbourhood," said my father.

"You must entertain them by yourself, Luke," said my mother; "and I must wait – that's all."

"Don't be absurd, Maggie," cried my father, getting angry. "Can't cook bring it in?"

"No one can cook a dinner and serve it, too," answered my mother, impatiently. "Besides, she's not presentable."

"What about Fan?" whispered my father.

My mother merely looked. It was sufficient.

"Paul?" suggested my father.

"Thank you," retorted my mother. "I don't choose to have my son turned into a footman, if you do."

"Well, hadn't you better go and dress?" was my father's next remark.

"It won't take me long to put on an apron," was my mother's reply.

"I was looking forward to seeing you in that new frock," said my father. In the case of another, one might have attributed such a speech to tact; in the case of my father, one felt it was a happy accident.

My mother confessed – speaking with a certain indulgence, as one does of one's own follies when past – that she herself also had looked forward to seeing herself therein. Threatening discord melted into mutual sympathy.

"I so wanted everything to be all right, for your sake, Luke," said my mother; "I know you were hoping it would help on the business."

"I was only thinking of you, Maggie, dear," answered my father. "You are my business."

"I know, dear," said my mother. "It is hard."

The key turned in the lock, and we all stood quiet to listen.

"She's come back alone," said my mother. "I knew it was hopeless."

The door opened.

"Please, ma'am," said the new parlour-maid, "will I do?"

She stood there, framed by the lintel, in the daintiest of aprons, the daintiest of caps upon her golden hair; and every objection she swept aside with the wind of her merry wilfulness. No one ever had their way with her, nor wanted it.

"You shall be footman," she ordered, turning to me – but this time my mother only laughed. "Wait here till I come down again." Then to my mother: "Now, ma'am, are you ready?"

It was the first time I had seen my mother, or, indeed, any other flesh and blood woman, in evening dress, and to tell the truth I was a little shocked. Nay, more than a little, and showed it, I suppose; for my mother flushed and drew her shawl over the gleaming whiteness of her shoulders, pleading coldness. But Barbara cried out against this, saying it was a sin such beauty should be hid; and my father, filching a shawl with a quick hand, so dextrously indeed as to suggest some previous practice in the feat, dropped on one knee – as though the world were some sweet picture book – and raised my mother's hand with grave reverence to his lips; and Barbara, standing behind my mother's

chair, insisted on my following suit, saying the Queen was receiving. So I knelt also, glancing up shyly as towards the gracious face of some fair lady hitherto unknown, thus Catching my first glimpse of the philosophy of clothes.

My memory lingers upon this scene by contrast with the sad, changed days that swiftly followed, when my mother's eyes would flash towards my father angry gleams, and her voice ring cruel and hard; though the moment he was gone her lips would tremble and her eyes grow soft again and fill with tears; when my father would sit with averted face and sullen lips tight pressed, or worse, would open them only to pour forth a rapid flood of savage speech; and fling out of the room, slamming the door behind him, and I would find him hours afterwards, sitting alone in the dark, with bowed head between his hands.

Wretched, I would lie awake, hearing through the flimsy walls their passionate tones, now rising high, now fiercely forced into cold whispers; and then their words to each other sounded even crueller.

In their estrangement from each other, so new to them, both clung closer to me, though they would tell me nothing, nor should I have understood if they had. When my mother was sobbing softly, her arms clasping me tighter and tighter with each quivering throb, then I hated my father, who I felt had inflicted this sorrow upon her. Yet when my father drew me down upon his knee, and I looked into his kind eyes so full of pain, then I felt angry with my mother, remembering her bitter tongue.

It seemed to me as though some cruel, unseen thing had crept into the house to stand ever between them, so that they might never look into each other's loving eyes but only into the eyes of this evil shadow. The idea grew upon me until at times I could almost detect its outline in the air, feel a chillness as it passed me. It trod silently through the pokey rooms, always alert to thrust its grinning face before them. Now beside my mother it would whisper in her ear; and the next moment, stealing across to my father, answer for him with his voice, but strangely different. I used to think I could hear it laughing to itself as it stepped back into enfolding space.

To this day I seem to see it, ever following with noiseless footsteps man and woman, waiting patiently its opportunity to thrust its face between them. So that I can read no love tale, but, glancing round, I see its mocking eyes behind my shoulder, reading also, with a silent laugh. So that never can I meet with boy and girl, whispering in the twilight, but I see it lurking amid the half lights, just behind them, creeping after them with stealthy tread, as hand in hand they pass me in quiet ways.

Shall any of us escape, or lies the road of all through this dark valley of the shadow of dead love? Is it Love's ordeal? testing the feeble-hearted from the strong in faith, who shall find each other yet again, the darkness passed?

Of the dinner itself, until time of dessert, I can give no consecutive account, for as footman, under the orders of this enthusiastic parlour-maid, my place was no sinecure, and but few opportunities of observation through the crack of the door were afforded me. All that was clear to me was that the chief guest was a Mr. Teidelmann – or Tiedelmann, I cannot now remember which – a snuffy, mumbling old frump, with whose name then, however, I was familiar by reason of seeing it so often in huge letters, though with a Co. added, on dreary long blank walls, bordering the Limehouse reach. He sat at my mother's right hand; and I wondered, noticing him so ugly and so foolish seeming, how she could be so interested in him, shouting much and often to him; for added to his other disattractions he was very deaf, which necessitated his putting his hand up to his ear at every other observation made to him, crying querulously: "Eh, what? What are you talking about? Say it again," – smiling upon him and paying close attention to his every want. Even old Hasluck, opposite to him, and who, though pleasant enough in his careless way, was far from being a slave to politeness, roared himself purple, praising some new disinfectant of which this same Teidelmann appeared to be the proprietor.

"My wife swears by it," bellowed Hasluck, leaning across the table.

"Our drains!" chimed in Mrs. Hasluck, who was a homely soul; "well, you'd hardly know there was any in the house since I've took to using it."

"What are they talking about?" asked Teidelmann, appealing to my mother. "What's he say his wife does?"

"Your disinfectant," explained my mother; "Mrs. Hasluck swears by it."

"Who?"

"Mrs. Hasluck."

"Does she? Delighted to hear it," grunted the old gentleman, evidently bored.

"Nothing like it for a sick-room," persisted Hasluck; "might almost call it a scent."

"Makes one quite anxious to be ill," remarked my aunt, addressing no one in particular.

"Reminds me of cocoanuts," continued Hasluck.

Its proprietor appeared not to hear, but Hasluck was determined his flattery should not be lost.

"I say it reminds me of cocoanuts." He screamed it this time.

"Oh, does it?" was the reply.

"Doesn't it you?"

"Can't say it does," answered Teidelmann. "As a matter of fact, don't know much about it myself. Never use it."

Old Teidelmann went on with his dinner, but Hasluck was still full of the subject.

"Take my advice," he shouted, "and buy a bottle."

"Buy a what?"

"A bottle," roared the other, with an effort palpably beyond his strength.

"What's he say? What's he talking about now?" asked Teidelmann, again appealing to my mother.

"He says you ought to buy a bottle," again explained my mother.

"What of?"

"Of your own disinfectant."

"Silly fool!"

Whether he intended the remark to be heard and thus to close the topic (which it did), or whether, as deaf people are apt to, merely misjudged the audibility of an intended sotto vocalism, I cannot say. I only know that outside in the passage I heard the words distinctly, and therefore assume they reached round the table also.

A lull in the conversation followed, but Hasluck was not thin-skinned, and the next thing I distinguished was his cheery laugh.

"He's quite right," was Hasluck's comment; "that's what I am undoubtedly. Because I can't talk about anything but shop myself, I think everybody else is the same sort of fool."

But he was doing himself an injustice, for on my next arrival in the passage he was again shouting across the table, and this time Teidelmann was evidently interested.

"Well, if you could spare the time, I'd be more obliged than I can tell you," Hasluck was saying. "I know absolutely nothing about pictures myself, and Pearsall says you are one of the best judges in Europe."

"He ought to know," chuckled old Teidelmann. "He's tried often enough to palm off rubbish onto me."

"That last purchase of yours must have been a good thing for young – " Hasluck mentioned the name of a painter since world famous; "been the making of him, I should say."

"I gave him two thousand for the six," replied Teidelmann, "and they'll sell for twenty thousand."

"But you'll never sell them?" exclaimed my father.

"No," grunted old Teidelmann, "but my widow will." There came a soft, low laugh from a corner of the table I could not see.

"It's Anderson's great disappointment," followed a languid, caressing voice (the musical laugh translated into prose, it seemed), "that he has never been able to educate me to a proper appreciation

of art. He'll pay thousands of pounds for a child in rags or a badly dressed Madonna. Such a waste of money, it appears to me."

"But you would pay thousands for a diamond to hang upon your neck," argued my father's voice.

"It would enhance the beauty of my neck," replied the musical voice.

"An even more absolute waste of money," was my father's answer, spoken low. And I heard again the musical, soft laugh.

"Who is she?" I asked Barbara.

"The second Mrs. Teidelmann," whispered Barbara. "She is quite a swell. Married him for his money – I don't like her myself, but she's very beautiful."

"As beautiful as you?" I asked incredulously. We were sitting on the stairs, sharing a jelly.

"Oh, me!" answered Barbara. "I'm only a child. Nobody takes any notice of me – except other kids, like you." For some reason she appeared out of conceit with herself, which was not her usual state of mind.

"But everybody thinks you beautiful," I maintained.

"Who?" she asked quickly.

"Dr. Hal," I answered.

We were with our backs to the light, so that I could not see her face.

"What did he say?" she asked, and her voice had more of contentment in it.

I could not remember his exact words, but about the sense of them I was positive.

"Ask him what he thinks of me, as if you wanted to know yourself," Barbara instructed me, "and don't forget what he says this time. I'm curious." And though it seemed to me a foolish command – for what could he say of her more than I myself could tell her – I never questioned Barbara's wishes.

Yet if I am right in thinking that jealousy of Mrs. Teidelmann may have clouded for a moment Barbara's sunny nature, surely there was no reason for this, seeing that no one attracted greater attention throughout the dinner than the parlour-maid.

"Where ever did you get her from?" asked Mrs. Florret, Barbara having just descended the kitchen stairs.

"A neat-handed Phillis," commented Dr. Florret with approval.

"I'll take good care she never waits at my table," laughed the wife of our minister, the Rev. Cottle, a broad-built, breezy-voiced woman, mother of eleven, eight of them boys.

"To tell the truth," said my mother, "she's only here temporarily."

"As a matter of fact," said my father, "we have to thank Mrs. Hasluck for her."

"Don't leave me out of it," laughed Hasluck; "can't let the old girl take all the credit."

Later my father absent-mindedly addressed her as "My dear," at which Mrs. Cottle shot a swift glance towards my mother; and before that incident could have been forgotten, Hasluck, when no one was looking, pinched her elbow, which would not have mattered had not the unexpectedness of it drawn from her an involuntary "augh," upon which, for the reputation of the house, and the dinner being then towards its end; my mother deemed it better to take the whole company into her confidence. Naturally the story gained for Barbara still greater admiration, so that when with the dessert, discarding the apron but still wearing the dainty cap, which showed wisdom, she and the footman took their places among the guests, she was even more than before the centre of attention and remark.

"It was very nice of you," said Mrs. Cottle, thus completing the circle of compliments, "and, as I always tell my girls, that is better than being beautiful."

"Kind hearts," added Dr. Florret, summing up the case, "are more than coronets." Dr. Florret had ever ready for the occasion the correct quotation, but from him, somehow, it never irritated; rather it fell upon the ear as a necessary rounding and completing of the theme; like the Amen in church.

Only to my aunt would further observations have occurred.

"When I was a girl," said my aunt, breaking suddenly upon the passing silence, "I used to look into the glass and say to myself: 'Fanny, you've got to be amiable,' and I was amiable," added my aunt, challenging contradiction with a look; "nobody can say that I wasn't, for years."

"It didn't pay?" suggested Hasluck.

"It attracted," replied my aunt, "no attention whatever."

Hasluck had changed places with my mother, and having after many experiments learned the correct pitch for conversation with old Teidelmann, talked with him as much aside as the circumstances of the case would permit. Hasluck never wasted time on anything else than business. It was in his opera box on the first night of Verdi's Aida (I am speaking of course of days then to come) that he arranged the details of his celebrated deal in guano; and even his very religion, so I have been told and can believe, he varied to suit the enterprise of the moment, once during the protracted preliminaries of a cocoa scheme becoming converted to Quakerism.

But for the most of us interest lay in a discussion between Washburn and Florret concerning the superior advantages attaching to residence in the East End.

As a rule, incorrect opinion found itself unable to exist in Dr. Florret's presence. As no bird, it is said, can continue its song once looked at by an owl, so all originality grew silent under the cold stare of his disapproving eye. But Dr. "Fighting Hal" was no gentle warbler of thought. Vehement, direct, indifferent, he swept through all polite argument as a strong wind through a murmuring wood, carrying his partisans with him further than they meant to go, and quite unable to turn back; leaving his opponents clinging desperately – upside down, anyhow – to their perches, angry, their feathers much ruffled.

"Life!" flung out Washburn – Dr. Florret had just laid down unimpeachable rules for the conduct of all mankind on all occasions – "what do you respectable folk know of life? You are not men and women, you are marionettes. You don't move to your natural emotions implanted by God; you dance according to the latest book of etiquette. You live and love, laugh and weep and sin by rule. Only one moment do you come face to face with life; that is in the moment when you die, leaving the other puppets to be dressed in black and make believe to cry."

It was a favourite subject of denunciation with him, the artificiality of us all.

"Little doll," he had once called me, and I had resented the term.

"That's all you are, little Paul," he had persisted, "a good little hard-working doll, that does what it's made to do, and thinks what it's made to think. We are all dolls. Your father is a gallant-hearted, soft-headed little doll; your mother the sweetest and primmest of dolls. And I'm a silly, dissatisfied doll that longs to be a man, but hasn't the pluck. We are only dolls, little Paul."

"He's a trifle – a trifle whimsical on some subjects," explained my father, on my repeating this conversation.

"There are a certain class of men," explained my mother – "you will meet with them more as you grow up – who talk for talking's sake. They don't know what they mean. And nobody else does either."

"But what would you have?" argued Dr. Florret, "that every man should do that which is right in his own eyes?"

"Far better than, like the old man in the fable, he should do what every other fool thinks right," retorted Washburn. "The other day I called to see whether a patient of mine was still alive or not. His wife was washing clothes in the front room. 'How's your husband?' I asked. 'I think he's dead,' replied the woman. Then, without leaving off her work, 'Jim,' she shouted, 'are you there?' No answer came from the inner room. 'He's a goner,' she said, wringing out a stocking."

Конец ознакомительного фрагмента.