EVELYN WHITAKER

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Содержание

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CHAPTER I

The Christening—An Outlandish Name—The Organist's Mistake—Farm-work—Tom and Bill—The Baby—Baby and All

Hath this child been already baptised, or no?'

'No, she ain't; leastwise we don't know as how she 've been or no, so we thought as we 'd best have her done.'

The clergyman who was taking Mr Clifford's duty at Downside for that Sunday, thought that this might be the usual undecided way of answering among the natives, and proceeded with the service. There were two other babies also brought that afternoon, one of which was crying lustily, so that it was not easy to hear what the sponsors answered; and, moreover, the officiating clergyman was a young man, and the prospect of holding that screaming, red-faced, little object made him too nervous and anxious to get done with it to stop and make further inquiries.

The woman who returned this undecided answer was an elderly woman, with a kind, sunburnt, honest face, very much heated just now, and embarrassed too; for the baby in her

arms prevented her getting at her pocket handkerchief to wipe the perspiration from her brow and pulling her bonnet on to its proper position on her head. The man beside her was also greatly embarrassed, and kept shuffling his large hob-nailed shoes together, and turning his hat round and round in his fingers.

I think that really that hat was the chief cause of his discomfort, for he was so accustomed to have it on his head that he could not feel quite himself without it; and, indeed, his wife could hardly recognise him, as she had been accustomed to see him wearing it indoors and out during the twenty years of their married life; pushed back for meals or smoking, but always on his head, except in bed, and even there, report says, on cold winter nights, he had recourse to it to keep off the draught from that cracked pane in the window. His face, like his wife's, was weatherbeaten, and of the same broad, flat type as hers, with small, surprised, dazzled-looking, pale blue eyes, and a tangle of grizzled light hair under his chin. He was noticeable for the green smock-frock he wore, a garment which is so rapidly disappearing before the march of civilisation, and giving place to the ill-cut, ill-made coat of shoddy cloth, which is fondly thought to resemble the squire's.

The christening party was completed by a hobbledehoy lad of about sixteen, who tried to cover his invincible shyness by a grin, and to keep his foolish eyes from the row of farm boys in the aisle, whose critical glances he felt in every pore. He was so like both father and mother, that there was no mistaking his parentage;

but when Mrs Gray took off the shepherd's-plaid shawl in which the baby was wrapped, such a little dark head and swarthy face were exposed to view as might have made intelligent spectators (if there were any in Downside church that afternoon, which I doubt) reflect on the laws of heredity and reversion to original types.

'Name this child!'

The clergyman had got successfully through his business with the roaring George Augustus and the whimpering Alberta Florence, and had now the little, quiet, brown-faced baby in his arms. Even a young and unmarried man was fain to confess that it was an unusually pretty little face that lay against his surplice, with a pointed chin, and more eyebrows and lashes than most young babies possess, and with dark eyes that looked up at him with a certain intelligence, recognisable even to an unprejudiced observer.

'Name this child!'

Mrs Gray had taken advantage of this opportunity to mop her forehead with her blue and white pocket handkerchief, and wrestle with her bonnet's unconquerable tendency to slip off behind, and the clergyman passed the question on to her husband, who fixed his eye on a bluebottle buzzing in one of the windows, and jerked out what sounded like 'Joe.'

'I thought it was a girl,' whispered the clergyman. 'Joe, did you say?'

'No, it ain't that 'zactly. Here, 'Liza, can't you tell the

gentleman? You knows best what it be.'

The next attempt sounded like 'Sue,' and the clergyman suggested Susan as the name, but that would not do.

'Zola' seemed to him, though not a reader of French novels, unsuitable, and 'Zero,' too, he could not quite appreciate.

'I can't make it out, an outlandish sorter name!' said Gray, with a terrible inclination to put on his hat in the excitement of the moment, only checked by a timely nudge from his wife's elbow; 'here, ain't you got it wrote down somewheres? Can't you show it up?'

And after a lengthened rummage in a voluminous pocket, and the production of several articles irrelevant to the occasion—a thimble, a bit of ginger, and part of a tract—Mrs Gray brought to light a piece of paper, on which was written the name 'Zoe.'

'Zoe, I baptise thee'–

A sudden crash on the organ-pedals followed these words. Mr Robins, the organist, had, perhaps, been asleep and let his foot slip on to the pedals, or, perhaps, he had thought there was no wind in the instrument and that he could put his foot down with impunity. He was plainly very much ashamed of himself for what had happened, and it was only right that he should be, for, of course, it made all the school children giggle, and a good many of their elders too, who should have known better.

The boy who blew the organ declared that he turned quite red and bent his head over the keys as if he were examining something on them, and he was evidently nervous and upset,

for he made ever so many mistakes in the concluding parts of the service, and, to the great surprise and to the satisfaction of the blower, cut the voluntary at the end unusually short, ending it in an abrupt and discordant way, which, I am sorry to say, the blower described as 'a 'owl,' though any shock that the boy's musical taste sustained was compensated for by the feeling that he would be at home at least ten minutes earlier than usual to tea.

Now it so happened that Mr Robins was in the vestry when the christening party came in to give the particulars about the babies to be entered in the register. He had come to fetch a music-book, which, however, it appeared after all had been left at home; but the clergyman was glad of his help in making out the story of the little Zoe who had just been baptised.

I have spoken before of intelligent observers noticing and drawing arguments from the entire want of likeness between Zoe and her parents; but all the observers on this occasion whether intelligent or not, with the exception of the officiating clergyman, were quite aware that Zoe was not the Grays' baby, but was a foundling child picked up one night by Gray in his garden.

Of her antecedents nothing was known, and, of course, any sensible people would have sent her to the workhouse—every one agreed on this point and told the Grays so; and yet, I think, half the women who were so positive and severe on Mrs Gray's folly would have done just the same.

We do not half of us know how kind-hearted we are till we are tried, or perhaps it is our foolishness that we do not realise.

Gray was only a labourer with twelve shillings a week and a couple of pounds more at harvest; and, of course, in bad weather there was no work and no wages, which is the rule among the agricultural labourers about Downside, as in many other parts, so did not present itself as a grievance to Gray's mind, though, to be sure, in winter or wet seasons it was a hard matter to get along. But it was neighbours' fare, and none of them felt hardly used, for Farmer Benson, what with bad seasons and cattle plague, was not much better off than they were, and the men knew it.

But out of these wages it was hardly to be expected of the most provident of people that anything could be laid by for old age or a rainy day; indeed, there seemed so many rainy days in the present that it was not easy to give much thought to those in the future. Of course too the local provident club had come to utter and hopeless grief. Is there any country place where this has not been the case? Gray had paid into it regularly for years and had gone every Whitmonday to its dinner, his one voluntary holiday during the year, on which occasion he took too much beer as a sort of solemn duty connected with his membership. When it collapsed he was too old to join another club, and so was left stranded. He bore it very philosophically; indeed, I think it was only on Whitmonday that he felt it at all, as it seemed strange and unnatural to go to bed quite sober on that day, as he did on all other days of the year.

On all other occasions he was a thoroughly sober man, perhaps, however, more from necessity than choice, as the beer

supplied by Farmer Benson in the hayfield was of a quality on which, as the men said, you got 'no forrarder' if you drank a hogshead, and Gray had no money to spare from the necessaries of life to spend on luxury, even the luxury of getting drunk.

He was in one way better off than his neighbours from a worldly point of view, in that he had not a large family as most of them were blessed with; for children are a blessing, a gift and heritage that cometh of the Lord, even when they cluster round a cold hearth and a scanty board. But Gray had only two sons, the elder of whom, Tom, we have seen at Zoe's christening, and who had been at work four years, having managed at twelve to scramble into the fifth standard, and at once left school triumphantly, and now can neither read nor write, having clean forgotten everything drummed into his head, but earns three shillings and sixpence a week going along with Farmer Benson's horses, from five o'clock in the morning till six in the evening, the long wet furrows and heavy ploughed land having made havoc of his legs, as such work does with most plough-boys.

The younger boy, Bill, is six years younger and still at school, and having been a delicate child, or as his mother puts it, 'enjoying bad health,' is not promising for farm-work, and, being fond of his book and a favourite at school, his mother cherishes hopes of his becoming a school-teacher in days to come.

But such is the perversity of human nature, that though many a Downside mother with a family of little steps envied Mrs Gray her compact family and the small amount of washing attached to

it, that ungrateful woman yearned after an occupant for the old wooden cradle, and treasured up the bits of baby things that had belonged to Tom and Bill, and nursed up any young thing that came to hand and wanted care, bringing up a motherless blind kitten with assiduous care and patience, as if the supply of that commodity was not always largely in excess of the demand, and lavishing more care on a sick lamb or a superfluous young pig than most of the neighbours' babies received.

So when one evening in May, Gray came in holding a bundle in his arms and poked it into her lap as she sat darning the holes in Tom's stockings (she was not good at needlework, but she managed, as she said, to 'goblify' the holes), he knew pretty well that it was into no unwilling arms that he gave the baby.

'And a mercy it was as the darning-needle didn't run right into the little angel,' Mrs Gray always said in recounting the story.

He had been down to the village to fetch some tobacco, for the Grays' cottage was right away from the village, up a lane leading on to the hillside, and there were no other cottages near. Tom was in bed, though it was not eight yet—but he was generally ready for bed when he had had his tea; and Bill was up on the hill, a favourite resort of his, and especially when it was growing dark and the great indigo sky spread over him, with the glory of the stars coming out.

'He never were like other lads,' his mother used to say with a mixture of pride and irritation; 'always mooning about by himself on them old hills.'

The cottage door stood open as it always did, and Mrs Gray sat there, plainly to be seen from the lane, with Tom's gray stocking and her eyes and the tallow candle as near together as possible. She did not hear a sound, though she was listening for Bill's return, and, even though Tom's snores penetrated the numerous crevices in the floor above, they were hardly enough to drown other sounds.

So there was no knowing when the bundle was laid just inside the cottage gate, not quite in the middle of the brick path, but on one side against the box edging, where a clump of daffodils nodded their graceful heads over the dark velvet polyanthus in the border. Gray nearly stepped upon the bundle, having large feet, and the way of walking which covers a good deal of ground to right and left, a way which plough-driving teaches.

Mrs Gray heard an exclamation.

And then Gray came in, and, as I have said, did his best to impale the bundle, baby and all, on the top of his wife's darning-needle.

CHAPTER II

Mr Robins—Village Choirs—Edith—An Elopement —A Father's Sorrow—An Unhappy Pair—The Wanderer's Return—Father!—A Daughter's Entreater—No Favourable Answer—A Sleepless Pillow

The organist of Downside, Mr Robins, lived in a little house close to the church.

Mr Clifford the vicar was accounted very lucky by the neighbouring clergy for having such a man, and not being exposed to all the vagaries of a young schoolmaster, or, perhaps, still worse, schoolmistress, with all the latest musical fancies of the training colleges. Neither had he to grapple with the tyranny of the leading bass nor the conceit and touchiness that seems inseparable from the tenor voice, since Mr Robins kept a firm and sensible hand on the reins, and drove that generally unmanageable team, a village choir, with the greatest discretion.

But when Mr Clifford was complimented by his friends on the possession of such a treasure, he accepted their remarks a little doubtfully, being sometimes inclined to think that he would almost rather have had a less excellent choir and have had some slight voice in the matter himself.

Mr Robins imported a certain solemnity into the musical matters of Downside, which of course was very desirable as

far as the church services were concerned; but when it came to penny-readings and village concerts, Mr Clifford and some of the parishioners were disposed to envy the pleasant ease of such festivities in other parishes, where, though the music was very inferior, the enjoyment of both performers and audience was far greater.

Mr Robins, for one thing, set his face steadily against comic songs; and Mr Clifford in his inmost heart had an ungratified ambition to sing a certain song, called 'The Three Little Pigs,' with which Mr Wilson in the next parish simply brought down the house on several occasions; though Mr Clifford felt he by no means did full justice to it, especially in the part where the old mother 'waddled about, saying "Umph! umph! umph!" while the little ones said "Wee! wee!"' To be sure Mr Wilson suffered for months after these performances from outbursts of grunting among his youthful parishioners at sight of him, and even at the Sunday-school one audacious boy had given vent on one occasion to an 'umph!' very true indeed to nature, but not conducive to good behaviour in his class. But Mr Clifford did not know the after effects of Mr Wilson's vocal success.

Likewise Mr Robins selected very simple music, and yet exacted an amount of practising unheard of at Bilton or Stokeley, where, after one or two attempts, they felt competent to face a crowded schoolroom, and yell or growl out such choruses as 'The Heavens are telling' or 'The Hallelujah Chorus,' with a lofty indifference to tune or time, and with their respective

schoolmasters banging away at the accompaniment, within a bar or two of the singers, all feeling quite satisfied if they finished up altogether on the concluding chord or thereabouts, flushed and triumphant, with perspiration standing on their foreheads, and an expression of honest pride on their faces, as much as to say, 'There's for you. What do you think of that?'

If success is to be measured by applause, there is no doubt these performances were most successful, far more so than the accurately rendered 'Hardy Norseman' or 'Men of Harlech' at Downside, in which lights and shades, *pianos* and *fortes* were carefully observed, and any attempt on anyone's part, even the tenors, to distinguish themselves above the others was instantly suppressed. The result, from a musical point of view, was no doubt satisfactory; but the applause was of a very moderate character, and never accompanied by those vociferous 'angcores,' which are so truly gratifying to the soul of musical artistes.

Mr Robins was a middle-aged man, looking older than he really was, as his hair was quite white. He had some small independent means of his own, which he supplemented by his small salary as organist, and by giving a few music lessons in the neighbourhood. He had been in his earlier years a vicar-choral at one of the cathedrals, and had come to Downside twenty years ago, after the death of his wife, bringing with him his little girl, in whom he was entirely wrapt up.

He spoilt her so persistently, and his housekeeper, Mrs Sands, was so gentle and meek-spirited, that the effect on a naturally

self-willed child can easily be imagined; and, as she grew up, she became more and more uncontrollable. She was a pretty, gypsy-looking girl, inheriting her sweet looks from her mother, and her voice and musical taste from her father. There was more than one young farmer in the neighbourhood who cast admiring glances towards the corner of the church near the organ, where the organist's pretty daughter sat, and slackened the pace of his horse as he passed the clipped yew-hedge by the church, to catch a glimpse of her in the bright little patch of garden, or to hear her clear sweet voice singing over her work.

But people said Mr Robins thought no one good enough for her, and though he himself had come of humble parentage, and in no way regarded himself, nor expected to be regarded as a gentleman, it was generally understood that no suitor except a gentleman would be acceptable for Edith.

And so it took every one by surprise, and no one more so than her father, when the girl took up with Martin Blake, the son of the blacksmith in the next village, who might be seen most days with a smutty face and leathern apron hammering away at the glowing red metal on the anvil. It would have been well for him if he had only been seen thus, with the marks of honest toil about him; but Martin Blake was too often to be seen at the 'Crown,' and often in a state that anyone who loved him would have grieved to see; and he was always to be found at any race meetings and steeplechases and fairs in the neighbourhood, and, report said, was by no means choice in his company.

To be sure he was good-looking and pleasant-mannered, and had a sort of rollicking, light-hearted way with him, which was very attractive; but still it seemed little short of infatuation on the part of Edith Robins to take up with a man whose character was so well known, and who was in every way her inferior in position and education.

No doubt Mr Robins was very injudicious in his treatment of her when he found out what was going on, and as this was the first time in her life that Edith's wishes had been crossed, it was not likely that she would yield without a struggle. The mere fact of opposition seemed to deepen what was at first merely an ordinary liking into an absorbing passion. It was perfectly useless to reason with her; she disbelieved all the stories to his discredit, which were abundant, and treated those who repeated them as prejudiced and ill-natured.

It was in vain that Mr Robins by turns entreated and commanded her to give him up, her father's distress or anger alike seemed indifferent to her; and when he forbade Martin to come near the place, and kept her as much as possible under his eye to prevent meetings between them, it only roused in her a more obstinate determination to have her own way in spite of him. She was missing one morning from the little bedroom which Mrs Sands loved to keep as dainty and pretty as a lady's, and from the garden where the roses and geraniums did such credit to her care, and from her place in the little church where her prayer-book still lay on the desk as she had left it the day before.

She had gone off with Martin Blake to London, without a word of sorrow or farewell to the father who had been so foolishly fond of her, or to the home where her happy petted childhood had passed. It nearly broke her father's heart; it made an old man of him and turned his hair white, and it seemed to freeze or petrify all his kindliness and human sympathy.

He was a proud, reserved man, and could not bear the pity that every one felt for him, or endure the well-meant but injudicious condolences, mixed with 'I told you so,' and 'I 've thought for a long time,' which the neighbours were so liberal with. Even Mr Clifford's attempts at consolation he could hardly bring himself to listen to courteously, and Jane Sands' tearful eyes and quivering voice irritated him beyond all endurance. If there had been anyone to whom he could have talked unrestrainedly and let out all the pent-up disappointment and wounded love and tortured pride that surged and boiled within him, he might have got through it better, or rather it might have raised him, as rightly borne troubles do, above his poor, little, pitiful self, and nearer to God; but this was just what he could not do.

He came nearest it sometimes in those long evenings of organ playing, of the length of which poor little Jack Davis, the blower, so bitterly complained, when the long sad notes wailed and sobbed through the little church like the voice of a weary, sick soul making its complaint. But even so he could not tell it all to God, though he had been given that power of expression in music, which must make it easier to those so gifted to cry unto

the Lord.

But the music wailed itself into silence, and Jack in his corner by the bellows waited terror-struck at the 'unked' sounds and the darkening church, till he ventured at last to ask: 'Be I to blow, mister? I 'm kinder skeered like.'

So the organist's trouble turned him bitter and hard, and changed his love for his daughter into cold resentment; he would not have her name mentioned in his presence, and he refused to open a letter she sent him a few weeks after her marriage, and bid Jane Sands send it back if she knew the address of the person who sent it.

On her side, Edith was quite as obstinate and resentful. She had no idea of humbling herself and asking pardon. She thought she had quite a right to do as she liked, and she believed her father would be too unhappy without her to bear the separation long. She very soon found out the mistake she had made—indeed, even in the midst of her infatuation about Martin Blake, I think there lurked a certain distrust of him, and they had not been married many weeks—I might almost say days—before this distrust was more than realised.

His feelings towards her, too, had been mere flattered vanity at being preferred by such a superior sort of girl than any deeper feeling, and vanity is not a sufficiently lasting foundation for married happiness, especially when the cold winds of poverty blow on the edifice, and when the superior sort of girl has not been brought up to anything useful, and cannot cook the dinner,

or iron a shirt, or keep the house tidy.

When his father, the old blacksmith at Bilton, died six months after they were married, Martin wished to come back and take up the work there, more especially as work was hard to get in London and living dear; but Edith would not hear of it, and opposed it so violently that she got her way, though Martin afterwards maintained that this decision was the ruin of him, occasionally dating his ruin six months earlier, from his wedding. Perhaps he was right, and he might have settled down steadily in the old home and among the old neighbours in spite of his fine-lady wife; but when he said so, Edith was quick to remember and cast up at him the stories which she had disbelieved and ignored before, to prove in their constant wranglings that place and neighbourhood had nothing to do with his idleness and unsteadiness. No one ever heard much of these five years in London, for Edith wrote no more after that letter was returned.

Those five years made little difference at Downside, except in Mr Robins' white hair and set lined face; the little house behind the yew-hedge looked just the same, and Jane Sands' kind, placid face was still as kind and placid. Some of the girls had left school and gone to service; some of the lads had developed into hobbledehoys and came to church with walking-sticks and well-oiled hair; one or two of the old folks had died; one or two more white-headed babies crawled about the cottage floors; but otherwise Downside was just the same as it had been five years before, when, one June morning, a self-willed girl had softly

opened the door under the honeysuckle porch and stepped out into the dewy garden, where the birds were calling such a glad good-morning as she passed to join her lover in the lane.

But the flame of life burns quicker and fiercer in London than at Downside, for that same girl, coming back after only five years in London, was so changed and aged and altered that—though, to be sure, she came in the dusk and was muffled up in a big shawl—no one recognised her, or thought for a moment of pretty, coquettish, well-dressed Edith Robins, when the weary, shabby-looking woman passed them by. She had lingered a minute or two by the churchyard gate, though tramps, for such her worn-out boots and muddy skirts proclaimed her, do not, as a rule, care for such music as sounded out from the church door, where Mr Robins was consoling himself for the irritation of choir-practice by ten minutes' playing. It was soon over, and Jack Davis, still blower, and not much taller than he was five years before, charged out in the rebound from the tension of long blowing, and nearly knocked over the woman standing by the churchyard gate in the shadow of the yew-tree, and made the baby she held in her arms give a feeble cry.

Конец ознакомительного фрагмента.