

GILSON ROY
ROLFE

MISS PRIMROSE: A NOVEL

Roy Gilson
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Miss Primrose: A Novel:

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PART I

A Devonshire Lad

I

LETITIA

All little, white-haired, smiling ladies remind me of Letitia – Letitia Primrose, whom you saw just now in a corner of our garden among the petunias. You thought her odd, no doubt, not knowing her as I or as the children do who find her doughnuts sweet after school is done, or their English cousins, those little brown-feathered beggars waiting on winter mornings in the snow-drifts at her sill. As for myself, I must own to a certain kinship, as it were, not of blood but of propinquity, a long next-doorhood in our youth, a tenderer, nameless tie in after years, and always a fond partiality which began one day by our old green fence. There, on its Primrose side, it seems, she had parted the grape-vines, looking for fruit, and found instead —

"Why! whose little boy is this?"

Now, it happened to be Bertram, Jonathan Weatherby's little boy – it being a holiday, and two pickets off, and the Concords purple in a witchery of September sheen – though at first he could make no sign to her of his parentage, so surprised he was, and his mouth so crammed.

"Will I die?" he asked, when he had gulped down all but his tongue.

"Die!" she replied, laughing at his grave, round eyes and pinching his nearer cheek. "Do I look like an ogress?"

"No," he said; "but I've gone and swallowed 'em."

"The grapes?"

"No – yes – but I mean the pits," whereat she laughed so that his brow darkened.

"Well, a man *did* once."

"Did what?"

"Died – from swallowin' 'em."

"Who told you that?"

"Maggie did."

"And who is Maggie?"

"Why, you know Maggie. She's our hired girl."

"How many did you swallow?"

"Five."

"Five!"

"Or six, I guess. I'm not quite sure."

"What made you do it?"

"I didn't. *You* did."

"I made you swallow them?"

"Why, yes, 'cause, now, I had 'em in my mouth – "

"Six all at once!"

"Yes, and you went and scared me. I forgot to think."

"Mercy! I'm sorry, darling."

"My name isn't darling. It's Bertram."

"I'm sorry, Bertram."

"Oh, that's all right," he forgave her, cheerfully, "as long as I don't die like the man did; you'll know pretty soon, I guess."

"How shall I know?"

"Well, the man, he hollered. You could hear him 'cross lots, Maggie says. So, if you listen, why, pretty soon you'll know."

And it is due partly to the fact that Letitia Primrose, listening, heard no hollering across lots, that I am able here to record the very day and hour when I first met her; partly that, and partly because Letitia has a better memory than Jonathan Weatherby's little boy, for I do not remember the thing at all and must take her word for it.

She was not gray then, of course. It must have been a pink, sweet, merry face that peered at me through the grape-vines, and a ringing laugh in those days, and two plump fingers that pinched my cheek. Her hair was brown and hung in braids, she tells me. She may have been fourteen.

I do not remember her so young. I do remember hugging some one and being hugged, next door – once in the bay-window by the red geraniums, whose scent still bears to me some faint, sweet

airs of summers gone. It was not a relative who hugged me; I know by the feeling – the remembered feeling – for I was dutiful but not o'er keen in the matter of kissing our kith and kin. No, it was some one who took me by surprise and rumbled me, some one who seemed, somehow, to have the right to me, though not by blood – some one too who was nearer my age than most of our relatives, who were not so young and round and luring as I recall them. It was some one kneeling, so that our heads were even. The carpet was red, I remember. I had run in from play, I suppose, and she was there, and I – I may have been irresistible in those days. At least I know it was not I, but Eve who —

That must have been Letitia. I have never asked, but it was not Cousin Julia, or the Potter girl, or Sammy's sister. Excluding the rest of the world, I infer Letitia. And why not kiss me? She kissed Sammy, that fat, little, pudding-head Sammy McSomething, who played the mouth-organ. Since of all the tunes in the world he knew but one (you know which one), it may seem foolish that I cared; but, remember, I played none! And she kissed him *for* playing – kissed him, pudgy and vulgar as he was with the fatty-bag tied to his neck by a dirty string to ward off contagions! Ugh! I swore a green, green oath to learn the accordion.

That night in bed – night of the day she kissed him – with only the moon-lamp burning outside my window, I felt that my cheeks were wet. I had been thinking. It had come to me awfully as I tossed, that I had been born too late – for Letitia. Always I should be too young for her. Dear Letitia, white and kneeling even then,

perhaps, at your whiter prayers, or reading after them, before you slept, in the *Jane Eyre* which lay for years beneath your pillow, you did not dream that you also were a heroine of romance. You did not dream of the plot then hatching in the night: plot with a villain in it – oh, beware, Letitia, of a pudgy, vulgar, superstitious villain wearing a charmed necklace of assafœtida to ward off evils, but powerless, even quite odorless against that green-eyed one! For, lo! Letitia: thy Hero standing beneath thy chamber-window in the moonbeams, is singing soprano to the gentle bellowsings of early love!

No, I do not play the accordion, nor did I ever. I never even owned one, so I never practised secretly in the barn-loft, nor did I ever, after all my plotting, lure young Sammy to play "Sweet Home" to our dear lady in the moonshine, only to be eclipsed, to his dire confusion and everlasting shame, by me. It may have been that I had no pocket-money, or that Santa Claus was short that year in his stock of wind-instruments, or that Jonathan Weatherby had no ear for melody about the house, but it is far more likely that Letitia Primrose never again offended, to my knowledge, in the matter of pudgy little vulgar boys.

Now, as I muse the longer of that fair young lady who lived next door to us, as I see myself crawling through the place with the pickets off, and recall beyond it the smell and taste of the warm Concords in my petty larcenies of a dozen autumns, then other things come back to me, of Letitia's youth, of its cares and sacrifice and its motherlessness. The Rev. David Primrose,

superannuate divine, bard and scholar, lived mostly in a chair, as I recall him, and it was Letitia who wheeled him on sunny days when other girls were larking, who sat beside it in the bay-window, half-screened by her geraniums, reading to him when his eyes were weary, writing for him, when his hand trembled, those fine fancies that helped him to forget his sad and premature decay. She was his only child, his only housemaid, gardener, errand-boy, and "angel," as mother said, and the mater went sometimes to sit evenings with him lest Letitia should never know joys of straw-rides and taffy-pulls and church-sociable ice-cream and cake.

He had a fine, white, haggard face, too stern for a little child to care for, but less forbidding to a growing school-boy who had found by chance that it softened wonderfully with memories of that Rugby where Tom Brown went to school; for Dr. Primrose had conned his Xenophon within those very ivied-walls, and, what was more to Bertram Weatherby, under those very skies had fled like Tom, a hunted hare, working fleet wonders in the fields of Warwickshire.

"A mad March hare I was, Bertram," he would tell me, the light of his eyes blazing in that little wind of a happy memory, only to sink and go out again. Smoothing then with his fine, white hands the plaid shawl which had been his wife's and was now a coverlet for his wasted knees, he would say, sadly:

"Broomsticks, Bertram – but in their day there were no fleeter limbs in Rugby."

There on my upper shelf is an old, worn, dusty copy of the *Odes of Horace*, which I cannot read, but it bears on its title-page, in a school-boy's scrawl, the name and date for which I prize it:

"David Buckleton Primrose, Rugby, a. d. 18 – ."

He laughed as he gave it to me.

"Mark, Bertram," said he, "the 'a. d.'"

"Thank you, sir," I replied, tremulously. "You bet I'll always keep it, Mr. Primrose."

"*Dr.* Primrose," he reproved me, gently.

"Doctor, I mean. Maybe Tom had one like it."

"Likely," he replied. "You must learn to read it."

"Oh, I will, sir – and Greek."

"That's right, my boy. Remember always what *Dr.* Primrose said when he gave you Horace: that no gentleman could have pretensions to sound culture who was not well-grounded in the classics. Can you remember that?"

Twice he made me repeat it.

"Oh yes, sir, I can remember it," I told him. "Do you suppose Tom put in his name like that?"

"Doubtless," said *Dr.* Primrose, "minus the a. d."

"I didn't know you had a middle name," I said.

"Buckleton was my mother's maiden name," he explained. "She was of the Wiltshire Buckletons, and a very good family, too."

"David Buckleton Primrose," I read aloud.

"Lineal descendant of *Dr.* Charles Primrose, Vicar of

Wakefield," added the minister, so solemnly that I fairly caught my breath. I had no notion then of whom he spoke, but there was that in the chant of his deep voice and the pleasant, pompous sound he gave the title, which awed me so I could only stare at him, and then at Horace, and then at him again, as he lay back solemnly in his chair, regarding me with half-shut eyes. Slowly a smile overspread his features.

"I was only jesting. Did you never hear of the *Vicar of Wakefield*?"

"No," I said.

"There: that little yellow book on the third shelf, between the green ones. He was its hero, a famous character of Oliver Goldsmith's. He also was a clergyman, and his name was Primrose."

"Oh," I said, "and did he go to Rugby, sir?"

Now, though the doctor laughed and shook his head, somehow I got that notion in my noddle, and to this very day must stop to remember that the vicar was not a Rugby boy. I have even caught myself imagining that I had read somewhere, or perhaps been told, that his middle name was Buckleton. One thing, of course, was true of both Primroses: they lived a. d.

II

LITTLE RUGBY

Hunting fox-grapes on a Saturday in fall, or rambling truantly on a fair spring morning, and chuckling to hear the school-bells calling in vain to us across the meadows, it was fine to say:

"Gee! If there was only a game-keeper to get into a row with!"

And then hear Peter's answer:

"Gee, yes! Remember how Velveteens caught Tom up a tree?"

It was fine, I say, because it proved that Peter, too, knew *Tom Brown's School Days*, and all about Slogger Williams and Tom's fight with him, all about East and Arthur and Dr. Arnold, and Tom in the last chapter standing alone in the Rugby chapel by the doctor's grave.

One night in winter I remember keeping watch – hard-pressed was Cæsar by the hordes of Gaul – a merest stripling from among the legions, stealthily deserted post, braving the morrow's reckoning to linger in delicious idleness by his father's shelves. There, in a tattered copy of an old *Harper's*, whose cover fluttered to the hearth-rug, his eyes fell upon a set of drawings of a gate, a quadrangle, a tower door with ivy over it, a cricket-field with boys playing and scattering a flock of sheep, a shop (at this his eyes grew wider) – a mere little Englishy village-shop, to be sure, but not like others, for this, indeed, was Sallie Harrowell's, where Tom bought baked potatoes and a pennyworth of tea! And

out of one full, dark page looked Dr. Arnold – a face as fine and wise and tender as Bertram Weatherby had fancied it, so that he turned from it but to turn back again, thinking how Tom had looked upon its living presence in more wondrous days. Cæsar's deserter read and looked, and looked and read again, beside the hearth, forgetting the legions in the Gallic wilds, forgetting the Roman sentry calls for the cries of cricketers, and seeing naught but the guarded wickets on an English green and how the sheep browsed peacefully under the windows in the vines.

Schoolward next morning Rugby and Cæsar nestled together beneath his arm. He found his Little Rugby on a hill – a red brick school-house standing awkwardly and solemn-eyed in its threadbare playground, for all the world like a poor school-master, impoverished without, well stocked within. It was an ugly, mathematical-looking Rugby, austere and angular, and without a shred of vine or arching bough for birds or dreams to nest in, yet Bertram Weatherby hailed it joyfully, ran lightly up its painted steps, and flung wide open its great hall-door. A flood of sound gushed forth – laughter, boisterous voices, chatter of girls, and the movement of restless feet. Across the threshold familiar faces turned, smiling, familiar voices rose from the tumult, his shoulders tingled with the buffets of familiar hands.

"Hello, Bildad!"

"Hello, old saw-horse!"

"Hello, yourself! Take *that!*"

But suddenly, in the midst of these savage greetings, that

gentle pressure of an arm about him, and Peter's voice:

"Hello, old man!"

Bertram would whirl at that, his face beaming; they had met but yesterday – it was as years ago – "Hello, old man! Look, Peter!"

But a gong clanged. Then all about them was the hurry and tramp of feet upon the stairs. Lost in the precious pages, they climbed together, arm in arm, drifting upward with the noisy current and through the doors of the assembly-hall.

"See, Bertram – the cricket-bats on the wall!"

"Yes; and the High Street – and Sallie Harrowell's!"

"And the doctor's door!"

Through another door just then their own masters were slowly filing, their own doctor last and weightiest of all, his smooth, strong face busy with some chapel reverie.

"The Professor's like Arnold," Bertram told Peter as they slipped together into their double seat.

The last gong clanged. There was a last bang of seats turned down, a last clatter of books upon the desks, the last belated, breathless ones fluttered down aisles with reddened cheeks, while the Professor waited with the Bible open in his hand.

"Let us read this morning the one-hundred-and-seventh Psalm – Psalm one hundred seven."

Peter was in Rugby, hidden by the girl in front. The boy named Bertram fixed his gaze upon the desk before him. Fair and smooth it was – too smooth with newness to please a Rugbeian

eye. During the Psalm, with his pocket-knife he cut his initials in the yellow wood, and smiled at them. In days to come other boys would sit where he was sitting, and gaze and puzzle over that rude legacy, and, if dreams came true, might be proud enough to sprawl their elbows where a famous man had lolled. They might even hang the old seat-top upon the wall, that all who ran might read the glory of an *alma mater* in the disobedience of a mighty son. Bertram Weatherby gazed fondly upon his handiwork and closed his knife. Time and Destiny must do the rest.

"Let us pray."

For a moment the Professor stood there silently with lowered eyes. Bertram and Peter, their shoulders touching, bowed their heads.

"Our Father in heaven..."

There was no altar – only a flat-topped desk; no stained-glass windows – only the sunshine on the panes; and there a man's voice, deep and trembling, and here a school-boy's beating heart.

"... Help us, O Father, to be kinder..."

How you loved Peter, the Professor, and your ugly Rugby on its hill!

"... Lead us, O Father, to a nobler youth..."

Ay, they should know you for the man you were, deep down in your hidden soul.

"... Give us, O Father, courage for the battle..."

Wait till the next time Murphy bumped you on the stairs!

"... to put behind us all indolence of flesh and soul..."

You would study hard that term.

"... *all heedlessness and disobedience...*"

You would keep the rules.

"... *for Jesus' sake – Amen.*"

"Peter, did you see the sheep..."

"If the two young gentlemen *whispering* on the back seat –"

You flushed angrily. Other fellows whispered on back seats.

Why, always, did the whole school turn so knowingly to you?

Sitting, one study-hour, in the assembly-hall, Bertram's eyes wandered to the top of the *Commentaries*, strayed over the book to the braids of the Potter girl beyond, and on to the long, brown benches. The hum of recitations there, whispering behind him, giggling half suppressed, and the sharp rat-tat of the teacher's warning pencil came to him vaguely as in a dream. Through the tall windows he saw the spotless blue of the sky, the bright-green, swaying tips of the maples, and the flight of wings. Out there it was spring. Two more months of Cæsar – eight more dreary weeks of legions marching and barbarians bending beneath the yoke – then summer and the long vacation, knights jousting in the orchard, Indians scalping on the hill. Eight weeks – forty days of school.

Behind a sheltering grammar Peter was reading Hughes. Over his shoulder Bertram could make out Tom, just come to Rugby, watching the football, and that cool Crab Jones, fresh from a scrimmage, with the famous straw still hanging from his teeth. He read to the line of Peter's shoulder, then his eyes wandered

again to the school-room window. It was spring in Grassy Ford – it was spring in Warwickshire...

"If the young *gentleman* gazing out of the window – "

"*Tertia vigilia eruptionem fecerunt*" – third watch – eruption – they made. *Eruptionem*– eruption – pimples – break out – sally. They made a sally at the third watch. *Tertia vigilia*, ablative case. Ablative of what? Ablative of time. Why ablative of time? Because a noun denoting – oh, hang their *eruptionem*! They were dead and buried long ago. Why does a fellow learn such stuff? Help his English – huh! English helps his Latin – that's what. *How* does a fellow know *eruptionem*? Because he's seen pimples – that's how. No sense learning Latin. Dead language – dead as a door-nail...

Bertram Weatherby drew a picture on the margin of his book – a head, shoulders, two arms, a trunk – and trousered legs. Carefully, then, he dotted in the eyes – the nose – the mouth – the ears beneath the tousled hair. He rolled the shirt-sleeves to the elbows – drew the trousers-belt – the shoes. Then delicately, smiling to himself the while, his head tilted, his eyes squinted like a connoisseur, he drew a straw pendent from the figure's lips.

"Peter, who's that?"

"Sh! not so loud. She'll hear you."

"Who's that, Peter?"

"Hm – Crab Jones."

"Now, if the idle young gentleman drawing *pictures*– "

"*Tertia vigilia eruptionem fecerunt*" – oh, they did, did they?"

What of that?..

"Rugby," said the Professor, who had a way of enlivening his classes with matters of the outer world – "Rugby, as I have heard my friend Dr. Primrose say, who was a Rugby boy himself, is very different from our public schools. Only the other day he was telling me of a school-mate, a professor now, who had returned to England, and who had spent a day there rambling about the ivied buildings, and searching, I suppose, for the ancient form where he had carved his name. Dr. Primrose told me how, as this old friend lingered on the greensward where the boys played cricket, as he himself had done on that very spot – fine, manly fellows in their white flannels – he heard not a single oath or vulgar word in all that hour he loitered there. One young player called to another who ran too languidly after the ball. '*Aren't* you playing, Brown?' he cried, with a touch of irony in his voice."

The Professor paused.

"I have heard stronger language on our playground here."

He paused again, adding, impressively:

"We might do well to *imitate* our English cousins."

"Just what *I* say," whispered young Bertram Weatherby.

"The Prof.'s all right," Peter whispered back.

And so, down-town, after school that day, behold! – sitting on stools at Billy's Palace Lunch Counter, in the Odd Fellow's Block – two fine, manly chaps, not in white cricket flannels, to be sure, but —

"It's *some* like Sallie Harrowell's," one mumbled, joyously,

crunching his buttered toast, and the other nodded, taking his swig of tea.

So it came to pass that they looked reverently upon the Professor with Rugbeian eyes, and more admiringly as they noted new likenesses between him and the great head-master. There was a certain resemblance of glowing countenance, they told themselves, a certain ardor of voice, as they imagined, and over all a sympathy for boys.

"Well," he would say, stopping them as they walked together arm in arm, "if you seek Peter, look for Bertram – eh?" giving their shoulders a bantering shake which pleased them greatly as they sauntered on.

Listening to his prayers in chapel, hearing at least the murmur of them as they bowed their heads, their minds swayed by the earnestness of the great man's voice rather than by the words he uttered, they felt that glow which comes sometimes to boys who read and dream. Then Bertram loved the touch of Peter's shoulder, and, with the memory of another doctor and another school-boy, he loved his Rugby, little and meagre and vineless though it was upon its threadbare hill. When he had left it he would return some day, he thought; he would stand like Tom in the last chapter; he would sit again at his old brown desk, alone, musing – missing his mate, and finding silence where happy whisperings and secret play had been – but still in the pine before him he would trace the letters he had cut, and, seeing them, he would be again the boy who cut them there.

One morning, such was the fervor of the Professor's voice, there was some such dream, and when it ended, prayer and dream together —

"After these exercises — "

It was the Professor's voice.

" — I wish to see in my office Bertram Weatherby and Peter Wynne."

They heard aghast. The whole school turned to them. The Past rose dreadfully before their startled vision, yet for once, it seems, they could find no blemish there.

Down-stairs, quaking, they slipped together through the office door. The Professor had not arrived. They took their stations farthest from his chair, and leaned, wondering, for support against the wall. There was a murmur of assembling classes overhead, a hurry of belated feet, and then — that well-known, awful tread. Peter gulped; Bertram shifted his feet, his heart thumping against his ribs, but they squared their shoulders as the door flew open and the Professor, his face grave, his eyes flashing, swooped down upon them in the little room.

"Bertram!"

"Yes, sir."

"Peter!"

"Yes, sir."

"I have sent for you to answer a most serious charge — most serious, indeed. I am surprised. I am astonished. Two of my best pupils, two whom I have praised, not once but many times, here

in this very room – two, I may say, of my favorite boys found violating, wilfully violating, the rules of this school. I could not believe the charge till I saw the evidence with my own eyes. I could not believe that boys like you – boys of good families, boys with minds far above the average of their age, would despoil, openly despoil – yes, I may say, ruthlessly despoil – the property of this school, descending – "

"Why, sir, what prop – "

"Descending," cried the Professor, "to vandalism – to a vandalism which I have again and again proscribed. Over and over I have said, and within your hearing, that I *would not countenance the defacing of desks!*"

Bertram Weatherby glanced furtively at Peter Wynne. Peter had sighed.

"Over and over," said the Professor, "I have told you that they were not your property or mine, but the property of the people whose representative I am. Yet here I find you marring their tops with jack-knives, carving great, sprawling letters – "

"But, sir, at Rug – "

"Great, ugly letters, I say, sprawling and slashed so deeply that the polished surface can never be restored."

"At Rug – "

"What will visitors say? What will your parents say if they come, as parents should, to see the property for which they pay a tribute to the state?"

"But, sir, at Rug – "

"Bertram, I am grieved. I am grieved, Peter, that boys reared to care for the neatness of their persons should prove so slovenly in the matter of the property a great republic intrusts to their use and care."

"But, sir, at Rug – "

"I am astonished."

"At Rug – "

"I am astounded."

"At Rug – "

"Astounded, I repeat."

"At Rugby, sir – "

"*Rugby!*" thundered the Professor. "*Rugby!* And what of Rugby?"

"Why, at Rugby, sir – "

"And what, pray, has Rugby, or a thousand Rugbys, to do with your wilful disobedience?"

"They cut, sir – "

"*Cut*, sir!" repeated the Professor. "*Cut*, sir!"

"Yes, sir – their desks, sir."

"And if they do – what then?"

"Well, sir, you said, you know – "

"Said? What did I say? I asked you to imitate the manliness of Rugby cricketers. I did not ask you to carve your desks like the totem-poles of savage tribes!"

His face was pale, his eyes dark, his words ground fine.

"Young gentlemen, I will have you know that rules must be

obeyed. I will have you know that I am here not only as a teacher, but as a guardian of the public property intrusted to my care. Under the rules which I am placed here to enforce, I can suspend you both – dismiss you from the privileges of the school. This once I will act with lenience. This once, young gentlemen, you may think yourselves lucky to escape with demerit marks, but if I hear again of conduct so unbecoming, so disgraceful, of vandalism so ruthless and absurd, I shall punish you as you deserve. Now go."

Softly they shut the office door behind them. Arm in arm they went together, tiptoe, down the empty hall.

"Well?"

The gloom of a great disappointment was in their voices.

"He's not an Arnold, after all," they said.

III

A POET OF GRASSY FORD

The lesser Primrose was a poet. It was believed in Grassy Ford, though the grounds seem vague enough now that I come to think of them, that he published widely in the literary journals of the day. Letitia was seen to post large envelopes, and anon to draw large envelopes from the post-office and hasten home with them. The former were supposed to contain poems; the latter, checks. Be that as it may, I never saw the Primrose name in print save in our *Grassy Ford Weekly Gazette*. There, when gossip lagged, you would find it frequently in a quiet upper corner, set "solid," under the caption "Gems" – a terse distinction from the other bright matters with which our journal shone, and further emphasized by the Gothic capitals set in a scroll of stars. Thus modestly, I believe, were published for the first time – and I fear the last – David Buckleton Primrose's "Agamemnon," "Ode to Jupiter," "Ulysses's Farewell," "Lines on Rereading Dante," "November: an Elegy Written in the Autumn of Life," as well as those stirring bugle-calls, "To Arms!" "John Brown," and "The Guns of Sumter," and those souvenirs of more playful tender moods, "To a Lady," "When I was a Rugby Lad," "Thanksgiving Pies," and "Lines Written in a Young Lady's Album on her Fifteenth Birthday." Now that young lady was Letitia, I chance to know, for I have seen the verses in her school-girl album, a

little leathern Christmas thing stamped with forget-me-nots now faded, and there they stand just opposite some school-mate's doggerel of "roses red and violets blue" signed Johnny Gray. The lines begin, I remember:

"Virtue is in thy modest glance, sweet child,"

and they are written in a flourished, old-fashioned hand. These and every other line her father dreamed there in his chair Letitia treasures in a yellow scrap-book made of an odd volume of Rhode Island statutes for 18 – . There, one by one, as he wrote them, or cut them with trembling fingers from the fresh, ink-scented *Gazette*— "Gems," scroll and all, and with date attached — she set them neatly in with home-made paste, pressing flat each precious flower of his muse with her loving fingers.

Editor Butters used to tell me of the soft-eyed girl, "with virtue in her modest glance," slipping suddenly into his print-shop, preferably after dusk had fallen, and of the well-known envelope rising from some sacred folds, he never quite knew where, to be laid tremblingly upon his desk.

"Something from father, sir."

It was a faint voice, often a little husky, and then a smile, a bow, and she had fled.

Editor Nathaniel Butters had a weakness of the heart for all tender things — a weakness "under oath," however, as he once replied when I charged him with it, and as I knew, for I myself

heard him one summer afternoon, as he sat, shirt-sleeved and pipe in mouth, perched on a stool, and setting type hard by a window where I stood beneath fishing with a dogwood wand.

"The-oc-ri-tus! Humpf! Now, who in thunder cares a tinker's damn for Theocritus, in Grassy Ford? Some old Greek god, I suppose, who died and went to the devil; and here's a parson – a Christian parson who ought to know better – writing an ode to him, for Hank Myers to read, and Jim Gowdy, and Old Man Flynn. And I don't get a cent for it, not a blank cent, Sam – well, he doesn't either, for that matter – but it's all tommy-rot, and here I've got to sweat, putting in capitals where they don't belong and hopping down to the darned old dictionary every five minutes to see if he's right – Sam [turning to his printer] there's some folks think it's just heaven to be a country editor, but I'll be – "

He was a rough, white-bearded, little, round, fat man, who showed me type-lice, I remember (the first and only time I ever saw the vermin), and roared when I wiped my eyes, though I've forgiven him. He was good to Letitia in an hour of need.

Dr. Primrose, it seems, had written his masterpiece, a solemn, Dr. Johnsonian thing which he named "Jerusalem," and reaching, so old man Butters told me once, chuckling, "from Friday evening to Saturday night." The muse had granted him a longer candle than it was her wont to lend, and Letitia trembled for that sacred fire.

"Print it, child? Of course he'll print it. It's the finest thing I ever did!"

"True, father, but its length – "

"Not longer than Milton's 'Lycidas,' my dear."

"I know, but – he's so – he looks so fierce, father." She laughed nervously.

"Who? Butters?"

"Yes."

"Tut! Butters has brains enough – "

"It isn't his brains," replied Letitia. "It's his whiskers, father."

"Whiskers?"

"Yes; they bristle so."

"Don't be foolish, child. Butters has brains enough to know it is worth the printing. Worth the printing!" he cried, with irony.

"Yes, even though it isn't dialect."

Dialect was then in vogue; no Grassy Ford, however small, in those days, but had its Rhyming Robin who fondly imagined that he might be another Burns.

"Dialect!" the doctor repeated, scornfully, his eyes roving to the shabby ancients on his shelves. "Bring me Horace – that's a good girl. No – yes." His hand lingered over hers that offered him the book. "Child," he said, looking her keenly in the eyes, "do you find it so hard to brave that lion?"

"Oh no, father. I didn't mean I was afraid, only he's so – woolly. You can hardly make out his eyes, and fire sputters through his old spectacles. I think he never combs his hair."

"Does he ever grumble at you?"

"Oh no" – and here she laughed – "that is, I never give him

time; I run away."

The old poet made no reply to her, but went on holding that soft little hand with the Horace in it, and gazing thoughtfully at his daughter's face.

"We can send it by mail," he said at last.

That roused Letitia.

"Oh, not at all!" she cried. "Why, I'm proud to take it, father. Mr. Butters isn't so dreadful – if he *is* fuzzy. I'm sure he'll print it. There was that letter from Mr. Banks last week, a column long, on carrots."

He smiled dryly at her over his opened book.

"If only my 'Jerusalem' were artichokes instead of Saracens!" he said.

The fuzzy one was in his lair, proof-reading at his unkempt desk. The floor was littered at his feet. He was smoking a black tobacco in a blacker pipe. He wore no coat, no cuffs, and his sleeves were – um; it does not matter. He glared ("carnivorously," Letitia tells me) at the opening door.

"Evening," he said, and waited; but the envelope did not arise. So he rose himself, offering a seat in the midst of his clutter, a plain, pine, rope-mended chair, from which he pawed soiled sheets of copy and tattered exchanges that she might sit.

"Looks some like snow," he said.

"Yes," she assented. "I called, Mr. Butters –"

She paused uncertainly. It was her own voice that had disconcerted her, it was so tremulous.

"Another poem, I suppose," he said, fondly imagining that he had softened his voice to a tone of gallantry, but succeeding no better than might be expected of speech so hedged, so beset and baffled, so veritably bearded in its earward flight.

"You – you mentioned snow, I think," stammered Letitia. He had frightened her away, or she may have drawn back, half-divining, even in embarrassment, that the other, the more round-about, the snowy path, was the better way to approach her theme.

"Snow and east winds are the predictions, I believe, Miss Primrose."

"I dread the winter – don't you?" she ventured.

"No," he replied. "I like it."

"That's because you are – "

"Because I'm so fat, you mean."

"Oh no, Mr. Butters, I didn't even think of that; I meant so – "

And then – heavens! – it flashed across her that she had meant "woolly"! To save her soul she could think of no synonyme. Her cheeks turned red.

"I meant – why, of course, I meant – you're so well prepared."

"Well prepared," he grumbled.

"Why, yes, you – men can wear beards, you know."

"Egad! you're right," he roared. "You're right, Miss Primrose. I *am* well muffled, that's a fact."

"But, really, it must be a great assistance, Mr. Butters."

"Oh yes; it is – and it saves neckties."

And this, mark you, was the way to Poetry! Poor Letitia, with

the manuscript hidden beneath her cloak, was all astray. The image of the poet with Horace in his lap rose before her and rebuked her. She was tempted to disclose her mission, dutifully, there and then.

"How is Mrs. Butters?" she inquired instead.

"About as well as common, which is to say, poorly – very poorly, thank you."

"Oh, I'm sorry."

Editor Butters seemed downcast.

"She's tried everything," he said. "Even had a pocket made in her gown to hold a potato and a horse-chestnut – but this rheumatism does beat all, I tell you. How's the old gentleman?"

"The doctor says he will never walk."

"Yes, so I heard," muttered the editor. "It's a damned shame."

He was fumbling with his proofs and did not see her face – yet, after all, she could feel the sympathy even in his rudeness.

"Still hatching poems, I suppose?"

Her heart, which had warmed even as her cheeks had colored at his other words, grew cold at these. What manner of toil it was that brought forth things so pure and beautiful in her sight, what labor of love and travail of spirit it was to him, she alone would ever know who watched beside him, seeing his life thus ebbing, dream by dream. She sat silent, crumpling those precious pages in her hands.

"Well," Butters went on, gruffly, clearing his throat, "he's a good hand at it." He was not looking at Letitia, but kept his

eyes upon a ring of keys with which he played nervously; and now when he spoke it was more spasmodically, as if reluctant to broach some matter for which, however, he felt the time had come. "Yes, he's a good hand at it. Used to be even better than he is now – but that's natural. I wish, though – you'd just suggest when it comes handy – just in a quiet sort of way, you know – some day when you get the chance – that he's getting just a leetle bit – you can say it better than I can – but I mean long-winded for the *Gazette*. It's natural, of course, but you see – you see, Miss Primrose, if we print one long-winded piece, you know – you can see for yourself – why, every other poet in Grassy Ford starts firing epics at us, which is natural, of course, but – hard on me. And if I refuse 'em, why, then, they just naturally up and say, 'Well, you printed Primrose's; why not mine?' and there they have you – there they have you right by the – yes, sir, there they have you; and there's the devil to pay. Like as not they get mad then and stop their papers, which they don't pay for – and that's natural, too, only it causes feeling and doesn't do me any good, or your father either."

"But, Mr. Butters, you printed Mr. Banks's letter on carrots, and that was – "

The editor fairly leaped in his chair.

"There, you have it!" he cried. "Just what I said! There's that confounded letter of Jim Banks's, column-long on carrots, a-staring me in the face from now till kingdom come when any other idiot wants to print something a column long. Just what I

say, Miss Primrose; but you must remember that the readers of the *Gazette* do raise carrots, and they *don't* raise – well, now, for instance, and not to be mean or personal at all, Miss Primrose – not at all – they *don't* raise Agamemnons or Theocrituses. I suppose I should say Theocriti – singular, Theocritus; plural, Theocriti. No, sir, they don't raise Theocriti – which is natural, of course, and reminds me – while we are *on* the subject – reminds me, Miss Primrose, that I've been thinking – or wondering – in fact, I've been going to ask you for some time back, only I never just got the chance – ask you if you wouldn't – just kind of speak to your father, to kind of induce him, you know, to – to write on – about – well, about *livelier* things. You see, Miss Primrose, it's natural, of course, for scholars to write about things that are dead and gone. They wouldn't *be* scholars if they wrote what other people knew about. That's only natural. Still – still, Miss Primrose, if the old gentleman *could* just give us a poem or two on the – well, the issues of the day, you know – oh, he's a good writer, Miss Primrose! Mind, I'm not saying a word – not a word – against that. I'd be the last – Good God, what's the matter, girl! What have I done? Oh, I say now, that's too bad – that's too bad, girlie. Come, don't do that – don't – Why, if I'd a-known – "

Letitia, "Jerusalem" crushed in her right hand, had buried her face among the proof-sheets on his desk. Woolier than ever in his bewilderment, the editor rose – sat – rose again – patted gingerly (he had never had a daughter), patted Letitia's shaking shoulders and strove to soothe her with the only words at his command:

"Oh, now, I say – I – why, say, if I'd a-knownn" – till Letitia raised her dripping face.

"You m-mustn't mind, Mr. B-Butters," she said, smiling through her tears.

"Why, say, Miss Primrose, if I'd a-dreamed – "

"It's all my f-fault, Mr. B-Butters."

"Damn it, no! It's mine. It's mine, I tell you. I might a-knownn you'd think I was criticising your father."

"Oh, it's not that exactly, Mr. Butters, but you see – "

She put her hair out of her eyes and smoothed the manuscript.

"Egad! I see; you had one of the old gentleman's – "

Letitia nodded.

"Egad!" he cried again. "Let's see, Miss Primrose."

"Oh, there isn't the slightest use," she said. "It's too long, Mr. Butters."

"No, no. Let's have a look at it."

"No," she answered. "No, it's *altogether* too long, Mr. Butters."

"But let's have a look at it."

She hesitated. His hand was waiting; but she shook her head.

"No. It's the longest poem he ever wrote, Mr. Butters. It's his masterpiece."

"By George! let's see it, then. Let's see it."

"Why, it's as long, Mr. Butters – it's as long as 'Lycidas.'"

"Long as – hm!" he replied. "Still – still, Miss Primrose," he added, cheerfully, "that isn't so long when you come to think of

it."

"But that's not all," Letitia said. "It's about – it's called – oh, you'll *never* print it, Mr. Butters!"

She rose with the poem in her hand.

"Print it!" cried Butters. "Why, of course I'll print it. I'll print it if every cussed poet in Grassy – "

"Oh, *will* you, Mr. Butters?"

"Will I? Of course I will."

He took it from her unresisting fingers.

"Je-ru-sa-lem!" he cried, fluttering the twenty pages.

"Yes," she said, "that's – that's the name of it, Mr. Butters," and straightway set herself to rights again.

IV

THE SEVENTH SLICE

It was the editor himself who told me the story years afterwards – Butters of "The Pide Bull," as he ever afterwards called his shop, for in her gratitude Letitia had pointed out to him how natural it was that he of all men should be the patron of poets, since beyond a doubt, she averred, he was descended from that very Nathaniel Butter for whom was printed the first quarto edition of *King Lear*. Indeed, with the proofs of "Jerusalem" she brought him the doctor's Shakespeare, and showed him in the preface to the tragedy the record of an antique title-page bearing these very words:

"Printed for *Nathaniel Butter*, and are to be sold at his shop in *Paul's Churchyard* at the signe of the Pide Bull neere St. Austin's Gate, 1608."

"Egad!" said Butters, "I never heard that before. Well, well, well, well."

"I think there is no doubt, Mr. Butters," said Letitia, "that he was your ancestor."

"You don't say so," mumbled the delighted editor. "Shouldn't wonder. Shouldn't wonder now at all. I believe there was an 's' tacked on our name, some time or other, now that I come to think of it, and printer's ink always did run in the Butters blood, by George!"

He even meditated hanging up a sign with a pied bull upon it – or so he said – but rejected the plan as too Old English for Grassy Ford. He never ceased, however, to refer to "my old cousin – Shakespeare's publisher, you know," and in the occasional dramatic criticisms that embellished the columns of the *Gazette*, all plays presented at our Grand Opera-House in the Odd Fellow's Block were compared, somehow, willy-nilly, to *King Lear*.

Butters of "The Pide Bull," I say, first told me how that young Crusader with the tear-wet face had delivered "Jerusalem," saving it from the stern fate which had awaited it and setting it proudly among the immortal "Gems." Then I sought Letitia, whose briefer, more reluctant version filled in wide chinks in the Butters narrative, while my knowledge of them both, of their modesty and their tender-heartedness, filled in the others, making the tale complete.

I was too young when the poet wrote his masterpiece to know or care about it, or how it found its way to the wondering world of Grassy Ford – nay, to the whole round world as well, "two hemispheres," as old man Butters used to remind me with offended pride in his voice, which had grown gruffer with his years. Did he not send *Gazettes* weekly, he would ask, to Mrs. Ann Bowers's eldest son, a Methodist missionary in the Congo wilds, and to "that woman in Asia"? He referred to a Grassy Ford belle of other days who had married a tea-merchant and lived in Chong-Chong.

Who knows what befell the edition of that memorable *Gazette* which contained "Jerusalem," set solid, a mighty column of Alexandrine lines? One summer's afternoon, tramping in an Adirondack wilderness, I came by chance upon the blackened ashes of a fire, and sitting meditatively upon a near-by log, poking the leaf-strewn earth with my stick, I unearthed a yellow, half-burned corner of an old newspaper, and, idly lifting it to read, found it a fragment of some Australian *Times*. Still more recently, when my aunt Matilda, waxing wroth at the settling floors of her witch-colonial house in Bedfordtown, had them torn up to lay down new ones, the carpenters unearthed an old rat's nest built partially of a New York *Tribune* with despatches from the field of Gettysburg.

"Sneer not at the power of the press," old man Butters used to say, stuffing the bowl of his black pipe from my tobacco-jar and casting the match into my wife's card-tray. "Who knows, my boy? Davy Primrose's 'Jerusalem' may turn up yet."

It is something to ponder now how all those years that I played away, Letitia, of whom I thought then only as the young lady who lived next door and occasional confidante of my idle hours, was slaving with pretty hands and puzzling her fair young mind to bring both ends together in decent comfort for that poor dependent one. Yet she does not sigh, this gray Letitia among the petunias, when she talks of those by-gone days, but is always smiling back with me some happy memory.

"You were the funniest boy, Bertram," she tells me, "always

making believe that it was old England in Grassy Ford, and that you were Robin Hood or Lord Somebody or Earl Somebody Else. How father used to laugh at you! He said it was a pity you would never be knighted, and once he drew for you your escutcheon – you don't remember? Well, it had three books upon it —*Tom Brown's School-days*, *Tales of a Grandfather*, and the *Morte d'Arthur*."

Then I remind her that Robin Saxeholm was half to blame for my early failure as an American. He was a Devonshire lad; he had been a Harrow boy, and was a Cambridge man when he came, one summer of my boyhood, to Grassy Ford to visit the Primroses. His father had been the doctor's dearest friend when they were boys together in Devonshire, and when young Robin's five-feet-eleven filled up the poet's doorway, Letitia tells me, the tears ran down the doctor's cheeks and he held out both his arms to him:

"Robin Saxeholm! – you young Devon oak, you – tell me, does the Dart still run?"

"*He* does, sir!" cried the young Englishman, speaking, Letitia says, quite in the Devon manner, for those who dwell upon the banks of that famous river find, it seems, something too human in its temper and changeful moods to speak of it in the neuter way.

They sat an hour together, the poet and his old friend's son, before Letitia could show the guest to the room she had prepared for him.

That was a summer!

Robin taught me a kind of back-yard, two-old-cat cricket with a bat fashioned by his own big hands. Sometimes Letitia joined us, and the doctor watched us from his chair rolled out upon the garden walk, applauding each mighty play decorously, in the English fashion, with clapping hands. Robin Goodfellow, the doctor called our captain, "though a precious large one, I'll be bound," he said. Letitia called him Mr. Saxeholm, first – then Mr. Robin, and sometimes, laughingly, Mr. Bobbin – then Robin. I called him Mr. Bob.

I made up my mind to one thing then and there: I should be happier when I grew old enough to wear white cricket flannels and a white hat like Mr. Bob's, and I hoped, and prayed too on my knees, that *my* skin would be as clear and pinkish – yes, and my hair as red. Alas! I had begun all wrong: I was a little beast of a brunette.

I taught Mr. Bob baseball, showed him each hill and dale, each whimpering brook of Grassy Ford, and fished with him among the lilies in shady pools while he smoked his pipe and told me of Cambridge and Harrow-on-the-Hill and the vales of Devon. He had lived once, so he told me, next door to a castle, though it did not resemble Warwick or Kenilworth in the least.

"It was just a *cah-sle*," said Mr. Bob, in his funny way.

"With a moat, Mr. Bob?"

"Oh yes, a moat, I dare say – but dry, you know."

"And a drawbridge, Mr. Bob?"

"Well, no – not precisely; at any rate, you couldn't draw it up."

"But a portcullis, I'll bet, Mr. Bob?"

"Well – I *cahn't* say as to that, I'm sure, Bertram."

He had lived next door to a castle, mind you, and did not know if it had a portcullis! He had never even looked to see! He had never even asked! Still, Mr. Bob was a languid fellow, Bertram Weatherby was bound to admit, even in speech, and drawled out the oddest words sometimes, talking of "trams" and "guards" and "luggage-vans," which did seem queer in a college man, though Bertram remembered he was not a Senior and doubtless would improve his English in due time. Indeed, he helped him, according to his light, and the credit is the boy's that the young Britisher, after a single summer in Grassy Ford, could write from Cambridge to Letitia: "I guess I will never forget the folks in Grassy Ford! Remember me to the little kid, my quondam guide, philosopher, and friend."

Robin was always pleasant with Letitia, helping her with her housework, I remember, wiping her dishes for her, tending her fires, and weeding her kitchen-garden. There never had been so many holidays, she declared, gratefully, and she used to marvel that he had come so far, all that watery way from Devon, yet could be content with such poor fare and such humble work and quiet pleasures in an alien land so full of wonders. Yet it must have been cheerful loitering, for he stayed on, week after week. He had come intending, he confessed, to "stop" but one, but somehow had small hankering thereafter to see, he said, "what is

left of America, liking your Grassy Fordshire, Bertram, so very well." Perhaps secretly he was touched by the obvious penury and helplessness of his father's friend, as well as by the daughter's loving and heavy service, so that he stayed on but to aid them in the only unobtrusive way, overpaying them, Letitia says, for what he whimsically called "tuition in the quiet life," as he gently closed her fingers over the money which she blushed to take. Then he would quote for her those lines from Pope:

"... Quiet by day,

Sound sleep by night; study and ease
Together mixt, sweet recreation,
And innocence, which most doth please
With meditation."

He read Greek and Latin with Dr. Primrose, and many an argument of ancient loves and wars I listened to, knowing by the keen-edged feeling of my teeth when the fray was over that my mouth had been wide open all the while. Letitia, too, could hear from the kitchen where she made her pies, for it was a conversational little house, just big enough for a tête-à-tête, as Dr. Primrose used to say, and when debate waxed high, she would stand sometimes in the kitchen doorway, in her gingham apron, wiping the same cup twenty times.

"Young Devon oak," the doctor called him, sometimes half vexed to find how ribbed and knotty the young tree was.

"We'll look it up, then," he would cry, "but I know I'm right."

"You'll find you are mistaken, I think, doctor."

"Well, now, we'll see. We'll see. You're fresh from the schools and I'm a bit rusty, I'll confess, but I'm sure I'm – here, now – hm, let's see – why, can that be possible? – I didn't think so, but – by George! you're right. You're right, sir. You're right, my boy."

He said it so sadly sometimes and shut the book with an air so beaten, lying back feebly in his chair, that Robin, Letitia says, would lead the talk into other channels, merely to contend for ground he knew he could never hold, to let the doctor win. It was fine to see him then, the roused old gentleman, his eyes shining, sitting bolt upright in his chair waving away the young man's arguments with his feeble hand.

"I think you are right, doctor, after all. I see it now. You make it clear to me. Yes, sir, I'm groggy. I'm down, sir. Count me out."

And you should have seen the poet then in his triumph, if victory so gracious may be called by such a name. There was no passing under the yoke – no, no! He would gaze far out of the open window, literally overlooking his vanquished foe, and delicately conveying thus a hint that it was of no utter consequence which had conquered; and so smoothing the young man's rout, he would fall to expatiating, soothingly, remarking how natural it was to go astray on a point so difficult, so many-sided, so subtle and profound – in short, speaking so eloquently for his prone antagonist, expounding so many likely arguments in defence of that lost cause, one listening would wonder sometimes who had won.

Evenings, when Letitia's work was done, she would come and sit with us, Robin and me, upon the steps. There in the summer moonlight we would listen to his tales, lore of the Dartmoor and Exmoor wilds, until my heart beat strangely at the shadows darkening my homeward way when the clock struck ten. Grape-vines, I noted then, were the very place for an ambush by the Doones, of whom they talked so much, Robin and Letitia! Later, when the grapes were ripe, a Doone could regale himself, leisurely waiting to step out, giant-wise, upon his prey! There were innumerable suspicious rustlings as I passed, and in particular a certain strange – a dreadful *brushing* sound as of ghostly wings when I squeezed, helpless, through the worn pickets! – and then I would strike out manfully across the lawn.

One day in August – it was August, I know, for it was my birthday and Robin had given me a rod and line – we took Letitia with us to the top of Sun Dial, a bald-crowned hill from which you see all Grassy Fordshire green and golden at your feet. Leaving the village, we crossed a brook by a ford of stones and plunged at once into the wild wood, forest and ancient orchard that clothed the slope. I was leading – to show the way. Robin followed with Letitia – to help her over the rocks and brambles and steeper places of the long ascent, which was far more arduous than one might think, looking up at it from the town below.

I strode on proudly, threading the narrow hunter's trail I knew by heart, a remnant of an old wagon-lane long overgrown. I strode on swiftly, I remember, breaking the cob-webs, parting

the fragrant tangle that beset the way – vines below, branches above me – keeping in touch the while, vocally, when the thickets intervened, with the pair that followed. I could hear them laughing together over the green barriers which closed behind me, and I was pleased at their troubles among the briars. I had led them purposely by the roughest way. Robin, stalking across the ford, had made himself merry with my short legs, and I had vowed secretly that before the day was out he should feel how long those legs could be.

"I'll show you, Mr. Bob," I muttered, plunging through the brushwood, and setting so fast a pace it was no great while before I realized how faintly their voices came to me.

"Hello-o!" I cried.

"H'lo-o!" came back to me, but from so far behind me I deemed it wiser to stop awhile, awaiting their approach.

The day was glorious, but quiet for a boy. The world was nodding in its long, midsummer nap, and no birds sang, no squirrels chattered. I looked in vain for one; but there were berries and the mottled fruit of an antique apple-tree to while the time away – and so I waited.

I remember chuckling as I nibbled there, wondering what Mr. Bob would say of those short legs which had outstripped him. I fancied him coming up red and breathless to find me calmly eating and whistling between bites – and I did whistle when I thought them near enough. I whistled "Dixie" till I lost the pucker, thinking what fun it was, and tried again, but could not

keep the tune for chuckling. And so I waited – and then I listened – but all the wood was still.

"Hello-o!" I cried.

There was no answer.

"Hello-o!" I called again, but still heard nothing in reply save my own echo.

"*Hello-o!*" I shouted. "*Hello-o!*" till the wood rang, and then they answered:

"H'lo-o!" but as faint and distant as before.

They had lost their way!

"*Wait!*" I shouted, plunging pell-mell through the bushes.

"Wait where you are! I'm coming!"

And so, hallooing all the way, while Robin answered, I made my way to them – and found them resting on a wall.

"Hello," I said.

"Hello," said Robin. "We aren't mountain-goats, you know, Bertram."

I grinned gleefully.

"I thought my legs were so short?" I said.

"And so they are," he replied, calmly, "but you go a bit too fast, my lad – for Letty."

I had forgotten Letitia! Revenging myself on Robin, it was she alone who had suffered, and my heart smote me as I saw how pale she was, and weary, sitting beside him on the wall. Yet she did not chide me; she said nothing, but sat there resting, with her eyes upon the wild-flower which she plucked to pieces in her hand.

We climbed more slowly and together after that. I was chagrined and angry with myself, and a little jealous that Robin Saxeholm, friend of but a summer-time, should teach me thoughtfulness of dear Letitia. All that steep ascent I felt a strange resentment in my soul, not that Robin was so kind and mindful of her welfare, guiding her gently to where the slope was mildest, but that it was not I who helped her steps. I feigned indifference, but I knew each time he spoke to her and I saw how trustingly she gave her hand.

And I was envious – yes, I confess it – envious of Robin for himself, he was so stalwart; and besides, his coat and trousers set so rarely! They were of some rough, brownish, Scotchy stuff, and interwoven with a fine red stripe just faintly showing through – oh, wondrous fetching! Such ever since has been my ideal pattern, vaguely in mind when I enter tailor-shops, but I never find it. It was woven, I suppose, on some by-gone loom; perhaps at Thrums.

Reaching the summit and drinking in the sweet, clear, skyey airs, with Grassy Fordshire smiling from all its hills and vales for miles about us, I forgot my pique.

"What about water?" Letitia asked.

I knew a spring.

"I'll go," said Robin. "Where is it, Bertram?"

"Oh no, you won't!" I cried, fiercely. "That's my work, Mr. Bob. You're not the only one who can help Letitia."

He looked astonished for a moment, but laughed good-

naturedly and handed me his flask. Letitia smiled at me, and I whistled "Dixie" as I disappeared. I hurried desperately till I lost my breath; I skinned both knees; I wellnigh slipped from a rocky ledge, yet with all my haste I was a full half-hour gone, and got back red and panting.

They had waited patiently. Famished as they were, neither had touched a single mouthful. Letitia said, "Thank you, Bertram," and handed me a slice of the bread and jam. She seemed wondrous busy in our service. Robin was silent – and I guessed why.

"I didn't mean to be rough," I said.

"Rough?" he asked. "When were you rough, Bertie?"

"About the water."

"Oh," he said, putting his hand upon my shoulder. "I never thought of it, old fellow," and my heart smote me for the second time that day, seeing how much he loved me.

Letitia, weary with our hard climbing, ate so little that Robin chided her, very gently, and I tried banter.

"Wake up! This is a picnic." But they did not rally, so I sprang up restlessly, crying, "It's not like our other good times at all."

"What!" said Robin, striving to be playful. "Only six slices, Bertram? This is our last holiday. Eat another, lad."

Then I understood that gloom on Sun Dial: he was going to leave us. Boylike, I had taken it for granted, I suppose, that we would go on climbing and fishing and playing cricket in Grassy Ford indefinitely. He was to go, he said, on Monday.

"News from home, Mr. Bob?"

He was silent a moment.

"Well, no, Bertie."

"Then why not stay?" I urged. "Stay till September."

He shook his head.

"Eat one more slice for me," I can hear him drawling. "I'll cut it – and a jolly fat one it shall be, Bertram – and Letty here, she'll spread it for you." Here Mr. Bob began to cut – wellnigh a quarter of the loaf he made it. "Lots of the jam, Letty," he said to her. "And you'll eat it, Bertram – and we'll call it – we'll call it the Covenant of the Seventh Slice – never to forget each other. Eh? How's that?"

Now, I did not want the covenant at all, but he was so earnest; and besides, I was afraid Letitia might think that I refused the slice because of the tears she had dropped upon it, spreading the jam.

V

THE HANDMAIDEN

Robin gone, I saw but little of Letitia, I was so busy, I suppose, with youth, and she with age. The poet's lamp had burned up bravely all that summer-time, its flame renewed by Robin's coming – or, rather, it was the brief return of his own young English manhood which he lived again in that fine, clean Devon lad. Robin gone, he felt more keenly how far he was from youth and Devonshire, what a long journey he had come to age and helplessness, and his feeble life burned dimmer than before.

Two or three years slipped by. The charm was gone which had drawn me daily through the hole in our picket-fence. Even the doctor's Rugby tales no longer held me, I knew them so by heart. When he began some old beginning, my mind recited so much more glibly than his faltering tongue, I had leaped to the end before he reached the middle of his story. He was given now to wandering in his narratives, and while he droned there in his chair, my own mind wandered where it listed, or I played restlessly with my cap and tried hard not to yawn, longing to be out-of-doors again. Many a time has my conscience winced, remembering that eagerness to desert one who had been so kind to me, who had led my fancies into pure-aired ways and primrose paths – a little too English and hawthorn-scented, some may think, for a good American, but we meant no treason. He, before

Robin, had given my mind an Old-World bent never to be altered. Only last evening, with Master Shallow and a certain well-known portly one of Windsor fame, I drank right merrily and ate a last year's pippin with a dish of caraways in an orchard of ancient Gloucestershire. Before me as I write there hangs a drawing of pretty Sally of the alley and the song. Between the poet and that other younger Devonshire lad, they wellnigh made me an English boy.

We heard from Robin – rather, Letitia did. He never wrote to me, but sent me his love in Letitia's letters and a book from London, *Lorna Doone*, for the Christmas following his return. Letitia told me of him now and then. She knew when he left Cambridge and we sent him a present – or, rather, Letitia did – *Essays of Emerson*, which she bought with money that could be ill-spared, and she wrote an inscription in it, "From Grassy Fordshire, in memory of the Seventh Slice." She knew when he went back home to Devon, and then, soon afterwards, I believe, when he left England and went out to India. Now, she did not tell me that wonderful piece of news till it was old to her, which was strange, I thought. I remember my surprise. I had been wondering where Robin was and saying to her that he must be in London – perhaps in Parliament! – making his way upward in the world, for I never doubted that he would be an earl some day.

"Oh no," Letitia said, when I mentioned London. "He is in India."

"India! Mr. Bob in India?"

"Yes. He went – why, he went last autumn! Didn't you know?"

No, I did not know. Why, I asked, and as reproachfully as I could make the question – why had she never told me?

She must have forgotten, she replied, penitent – there were so many things to remember.

True, I argued, but she ought at least to have charged her mind with what was to me such important news. Mr. Bob and I were dear, dear friends, I reminded her. He had gone to India, and I had not known!

She knew it, she said, humbly. She would never forgive herself. I did not go near her for days, I remember, and long afterwards her offence still rankled in my mind. Had she not spread that slice on Sun Dial, never to forget? When next I saw her I made a rebuking point of it, asking her if she had heard from Robin. She shook her head. Months passed and no letter came.

"We don't see you often any more, Bertram," her father said to me one day.

"No," I stammered. "I'm – "

"Busy studying, I suppose," he said.

"Yes, sir; and ball-games," I replied.

"How do you get on with your Latin?" he inquired, feebly.

"We're still in Virgil, sir."

"Ah," he said, but without a trace of the old vigor the classics had been wont to rouse in him. "That's good – won'erful writer – up – "

He was pointing with his bony fore-finger.

"Yes?" I answered, wondering what he meant to say. He roused himself, and pointed again over my shoulder.

"Up there – on the – s'elf."

He was so ghastly white I thought him dying and called Letitia.

"S all right, Bertram," he reassured me, patting my hand. I suppose he had seen the terror in my face. He smiled faintly. "M all right, Bertram."

Outside the apple-trees were blooming, I remember, and he lived, somehow, to see them bloom again.

My conscience winces, as I say, to think how I twirled my cap by my old friend's bedside, longing to be gone; yet I comfort myself with the hope that he did not note my eagerness, or that if he did he remembered his own boyhood and the witchery of bat and ball. Not only was the poet's life-lamp waning, not only was Letitia burdened with increasing cares, fast aging her, the mater said, but I was a child no longer; a youth, now, mindful of all about me, and seeing that neighbor household with new and comprehending eyes.

The very house grew dismal to me. The boughs outside were creeping closer – not to shelter it, not to cool it and make a breathing nook for a lad flushed with his games in the summer sun. It was damp there; the air seemed mouldy under the lindens; there was no invitation in the unkempt grass; toads hopped from beneath your feet, bird-songs came to you, but always, or so it seemed to me, they came from distance, from the yards beyond.

There within, across that foot-worn threshold which had been

a goal for me in former years, there was now a – not a poet any longer, or Rugby boy, but only a sick old man. Upon a table at his side his goblets stood, covered with saucers, and a spoon in each. His drugs were watery; there was no warmth in them, no sparkle even when the sun came straggling in, no wine of life to be quaffed thirstily – only a tepid, hourly spoonful to be feebly sipped, a sop to death.

Even with windows open to the breeze the air seemed stifling to the lad I was. The sunlight falling on the faded carpet seemed always ebbing to a kind of shadow of a glow. The clock, that ugly box upon the shelf, ticked dreadfully as if it never would strike a smiling hour again. The china ornaments at its side stood ghastly mute, and hideous flowers —*ffff!* those waxen faces under glass! If not quite dead, why were they kept so long a-dying there? Would no kind, sunny soul in mercy free them from their pallid misery? I was a Prince of Youth! What had I to do with tombs? I fled.

Even Letitia, kind as ever to me, seemed always busy and preoccupied – sweeping, dusting, baking, cleansing those everlasting pots and pans, or reading to her father, who listened dreamily, dozing often, but always waking if she stopped. Content to have her at his side because discontent to have her absent, even for the little while her duties or the doctor's orders led her, though quite unwillingly, away. Impatience for her return would make him querulous, which caused her tears, not for its failing consciousness of her devotion, but for its warning to her

of his gentle spirit's slow decline despite her care.

"Where have you been so long, Letitia?"

"So long, father? Only an hour gone."

"Only an hour? I thought you would never come."

"See, father, I've brought you a softer pillow," she would say, smiling his complaints into oblivion. It was the smile with which she had caught the grape-thief by the fence, the one with which she had charmed a Devonshire lad, now gone three years and more – the tenderest smile I ever saw, save one, and the saddest, though not mournful, it was so genuine, so gentle, and so unselfish, and her eyes shone lovingly the while. Its sadness, as I think now of it, lay not so much in the smile itself as in the wonder of it that she smiled at all.

The mater – was she not always mother to the motherless? – was Letitia's angel in those weary days, carried fresh loaves of good brown bread to her, a pot of beans, or a pie, perhaps, passing with them through the hole in the picket-fence. I can see her now standing on Letitia's kitchen doorstep with the swathed dish in her hands.

"The good fairy," Letitia called her; and when she was for crying – for cry she must sometimes, though not for the world before her father's eyes – she shed her tears in the kitchen in the mater's arms. So it was that while I was yet a school-boy an elder sister was born unto our house and became forever one of the Weatherbys by a tie – not of blood, I have said before, yet it was of blood, now that I come to think of it – it was of gentle, gentle

human blood.

There was an old nurse now to share Letitia's vigils, but only the daughter's tender hands knew how to please. She scarcely left him. Doctor or friends met the same answer, smiling but unalterable: she would rather stay. Not a night passed that she did not waken of her own anxiety to slip softly to his bedside. He smiled her welcome, and she sat beside him with his poor, thin hand in hers, sometimes till the dawn of day.

Day by day like that, all through the silent watches of the darkened world, that gentle handmaiden laid her sacrifice upon the altar of her duty, without a murmur, without one bitter word. It was her youth she laid there; it was her girlhood and her bloom of womanhood, her first, her very last young years – sparkle of eyes, rose and fulness of maiden cheeks, the golden moments of that flower-time when Love goes choosing, playtime's silvery laughter and blithe, untrammelled song.

"Titia," he said to her, "there's no poem – 'alf so beaut'ful – 's your love, m' dear."

The words were a crown to her. He set it on her bowed head with his trembling fingers.

"Soft – brown 'air," he murmured. He could not see how the gray was coming there.

Spring came, scenting his room with apple blooms; summer, filling it with orient airs – but he was gone.

VI

COUSIN DOVE

Up in the attic of the Primrose house one day, I was helping Letitia with those family treasures which were too antiquated for future usage, but far too precious with memories to cast out utterly – discarded laces, broken fans, pencilled school-books, dolls and toys that had been Letitia's, the very cradle in which she had been rocked by the mother she could not remember, even the little home-made pieced and quilted coverlet they had tucked about her while she slept. She folded it, and I laid it carefully in a wooden box.

Конец ознакомительного фрагмента.

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