

JEROME

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THEY AND I

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Jerome K. Jerome

They and I

CHAPTER I

"It is not a large house," I said. "We don't want a large house. Two spare bedrooms, and the little three-cornered place you see marked there on the plan, next to the bathroom, and which will just do for a bachelor, will be all we shall require – at all events, for the present. Later on, if I ever get rich, we can throw out a wing. The kitchen I shall have to break to your mother gently. Whatever the original architect could have been thinking of –"

"Never mind the kitchen," said Dick: "what about the billiard-room?"

The way children nowadays will interrupt a parent is nothing short of a national disgrace. I also wish Dick would not sit on the table, swinging his legs. It is not respectful. "Why, when I was a boy," as I said to him, "I should as soon have thought of sitting on a table, interrupting my father –"

"What's this thing in the middle of the hall, that looks like a grating?" demanded Robina.

"She means the stairs," explained Dick.

"Then why don't they look like stairs?" commented Robina.

"They do," replied Dick, "to people with sense."

"They don't," persisted Robina, "they look like a grating." Robina, with the plan spread out across her knee, was sitting balanced on the arm of an easy-chair. Really, I hardly see the use of buying chairs for these people. Nobody seems to know what they are for – except it be one or another of the dogs. Perches are all they want.

"If we threw the drawing-room into the hall and could do away with the stairs," thought Robina, "we should be able to give a dance now and then."

"Perhaps," I suggested, "you would like to clear out the house altogether, leaving nothing but the four bare walls. That would give us still more room, that would. For just living in, we could fix up a shed in the garden; or –"

"I'm talking seriously," said Robina: "what's the good of a drawing-room? One only wants it to show the sort of people into that one wishes hadn't come. They'd sit about, looking miserable, just as well anywhere else. If we could only get rid of the stairs –"

"Oh, of course! we could get rid of the stairs," I agreed. "It would be a bit awkward at first, when we wanted to go to bed. But I daresay we should get used to it. We could have a ladder and climb up to our rooms through the windows. Or we might adopt the Norwegian method and have the stairs outside."

"I wish you would be sensible," said Robin.

"I am trying to be," I explained; "and I am also trying to put a little sense into you. At present you are crazy about dancing. If you had your way, you would turn the house into a dancing-saloon with primitive sleeping-accommodation attached. It will last six months, your dancing craze. Then you will want the house transformed into a swimming-bath, or a skating-rink, or cleared out for hockey. My idea may be conventional. I don't expect you to sympathise with it. My notion is just an ordinary Christian house, not a gymnasium. There are going to be bedrooms in this house, and there's going to be a staircase leading to them. It may strike you as sordid, but there is also going to be a kitchen: though why when building the house they should have put the kitchen —"

"Don't forget the billiard-room," said Dick.

"If you thought more of your future career and less about billiards," Robin pointed out to him, "perhaps you'd get through your Little-go in the course of the next few years. If Pa only had sense –"

I mean if he wasn't so absurdly indulgent wherever you are concerned, he would not have a billiard-table in the house."

"You talk like that," retorted Dick, "merely because you can't play."

"I can beat you, anyhow," retorted Robin.

"Once," admitted Dick – "once in six weeks."

"Twice," corrected Robin.

"You don't play," Dick explained to her; "you just whack round and trust to Providence."

"I don't whack round," said Robin; "I always aim at something. When you try and it doesn't come off, you say it's 'hard luck;' and when I try and it does come off, you say it's fluking. So like a man."

"You both of you," I said, "attach too much importance to the score. When you try for a cannon off the white and hit it on the wrong side and send it into a pocket, and your own ball travels on and makes a losing hazard off the red, instead of being vexed with yourselves –"

"If you get a really good table, governor," said Dick, "I'll teach you billiards."

I do believe Dick really thinks he can play. It is the same with golf. Beginners are invariably lucky. "I think I shall like it," they tell you; "I seem to have the game in me, if you understand."

There is a friend of mine, an old sea-captain. He is the sort of man that when the three balls are lying in a straight line, tucked up under the cushion, looks pleased; because then he knows he can make a cannon and leave the red just where he wants it. An Irish youngster named Malooney, a college chum of Dick's, was staying with us; and the afternoon being wet, the Captain said he would explain it to Malooney, how a young man might practise billiards without any danger of cutting the cloth. He taught him how to hold the cue, and he told him how to make a bridge. Malooney was grateful, and worked for about an hour. He did not show much promise. He is a powerfully built young man, and he didn't seem able to get it into his head that he wasn't playing cricket. Whenever he hit a little low the result was generally lost ball. To save time – and damage to furniture – Dick and I fielded for him. Dick stood at long-stop, and I was short slip. It was dangerous work, however, and when Dick had caught him out twice running, we agreed that we had won, and took him in to tea. In the evening – none of the rest of us being keen to try our luck a second time – the Captain said, that just for the joke of the thing he would give Malooney eighty-five and play him a hundred up. To confess the truth, I find no particular fun myself in playing billiards with the Captain. The game consists, as far as I am concerned, in walking round the table, throwing him back the balls, and saying "Good!" By the time my turn comes I don't seem to care what happens: everything seems against me. He is a kind old gentleman and he means well, but the tone in which he says "Hard lines!" whenever I miss an easy stroke irritates me. I feel I'd like to throw the balls at his head and fling the table out of window. I suppose it is that I am in a fretful state of mind, but the mere way in which he chalks his cue aggravates me. He carries his own chalk in his waistcoat pocket – as if our chalk wasn't good enough for him – and when he has finished chalking, he smooths the tip round with his finger and thumb and taps the cue against the table. "Oh! go on with the game," I want to say to him; "don't be so full of tricks."

The Captain led off with a miss in baulk. Malooney gripped his cue, drew in a deep breath, and let fly. The result was ten: a cannon and all three balls in the same pocket. As a matter of fact he made the cannon twice; but the second time, as we explained to him, of course did not count.

"Good beginning!" said the Captain.

Malooney seemed pleased with himself, and took off his coat.

Malooney's ball missed the red on its first journey up the table by about a foot, but found it later on and sent it into a pocket.

"Ninety-nine plays nothing," said Dick, who was marking. "Better make it a hundred and fifty, hadn't we, Captain?"

“Well, I’d like to get in a shot,” said the Captain, “before the game is over. Perhaps we had better make it a hundred and fifty, if Mr. Malooney has no objection.”

“Whatever you think right, sir,” said Rory Malooney.

Malooney finished his break for twenty-two, leaving himself hanging over the middle pocket and the red tucked up in baulk.

“Nothing plays a hundred and eight,” said Dick.

“When I want the score,” said the Captain, “I’ll ask for it.”

“Beg pardon, sir,” said Dick.

“I hate a noisy game,” said the Captain.

The Captain, making up his mind without much waste of time, sent his ball under the cushion, six inches outside baulk.

“What will I do here?” asked Malooney.

“I don’t know what you will do,” said the Captain; “I’m waiting to see.”

Owing to the position of the ball, Malooney was unable to employ his whole strength. All he did that turn was to pocket the Captain’s ball and leave himself under the bottom cushion, four inches from the red. The Captain said a nautical word, and gave another miss. Malooney squared up to the balls for the third time. They flew before him, panic-stricken. They banged against one another, came back and hit one another again for no reason whatever. The red, in particular, Malooney had succeeded apparently in frightening out of its wits. It is a stupid ball, generally speaking, our red – its one idea to get under a cushion and watch the game. With Malooney it soon found it was safe nowhere on the table. Its only hope was pockets. I may have been mistaken, my eye may have been deceived by the rapidity of the play, but it seemed to me that the red never waited to be hit. When it saw Malooney’s ball coming for it at the rate of forty miles an hour, it just made for the nearest pocket. It rushed round the table looking for pockets. If in its excitement, it passed an empty pocket, it turned back and crawled in. There were times when in its terror it jumped the table and took shelter under the sofa or behind the sideboard. One began to feel sorry for the red.

The Captain had scored a legitimate thirty-eight, and Malooney had given him twenty-four, when it really seemed as if the Captain’s chance had come. I could have scored myself as the balls were then.

“Sixty-two plays one hundred and twenty-eight. Now then, Captain, game in your hands,” said Dick.

We gathered round. The children left their play. It was a pretty picture: the bright young faces, eager with expectation, the old worn veteran squinting down his cue, as if afraid that watching Malooney’s play might have given it the squirms.

“Now follow this,” I whispered to Malooney. “Don’t notice merely what he does, but try and understand why he does it. Any fool – after a little practice, that is – can hit a ball. But why do you hit it? What happens after you’ve hit it? What – ”

“Hush,” said Dick.

The Captain drew his cue back and gently pushed it forward.

“Pretty stroke,” I whispered to Malooney; “now, that’s the sort – ”

I offer, by way of explanation, that the Captain by this time was probably too full of bottled-up language to be master of his nerves. The ball travelled slowly past the red. Dick said afterwards that you couldn’t have put so much as a sheet of paper between them. It comforts a man, sometimes, when you tell him this; and at other times it only makes him madder. It travelled on and passed the white – you could have put quite a lot of paper between it and the white – and dropped with a contented thud into the top left-hand pocket.

“Why does he do that?” Malooney whispered. Malooney has a singularly hearty whisper.

Dick and I got the women and children out of the room as quickly as we could, but of course Veronica managed to tumble over something on the way – Veronica would find something to tumble

over in the desert of Sahara; and a few days later I overheard expressions, scorching their way through the nursery door, that made my hair rise up. I entered, and found Veronica standing on the table. Jumbo was sitting upon the music-stool. The poor dog himself was looking scared, though he must have heard a bit of language in his time, one way and another.

“Veronica,” I said, “are you not ashamed of yourself? You wicked child, how dare you – ”

“It’s all right,” said Veronica. “I don’t really mean any harm. He’s a sailor, and I have to talk to him like that, else he don’t know he’s being talked to.”

I pay hard-working, conscientious ladies to teach this child things right and proper for her to know. They tell her clever things that Julius Cæsar said; observations made by Marcus Aurelius that, pondered over, might help her to become a beautiful character. She complains that it produces a strange buzzy feeling in her head; and her mother argues that perhaps her brain is of the creative order, not intended to remember much – thinks that perhaps she is going to be something. A good round-dozen oaths the Captain must have let fly before Dick and I succeeded in rolling her out of the room. She had only heard them once, yet, so far as I could judge, she had got them letter perfect.

The Captain, now no longer under the necessity of employing all his energies to suppress his natural instincts, gradually recovered form, and eventually the game stood at one hundred and forty-nine all, Malooney to play. The Captain had left the balls in a position that would have disheartened any other opponent than Malooney. To any other opponent than Malooney the Captain would have offered irritating sympathy. “Afraid the balls are not rolling well for you to-night,” the Captain would have said; or, “Sorry, sir, I don’t seem to have left you very much.” To-night the Captain wasn’t feeling playful.

“Well, if he scores off that!” said Dick.

“Short of locking up the balls and turning out the lights, I don’t myself see how one is going to stop him,” sighed the Captain.

The Captain’s ball was in hand. Malooney went for the red and hit – perhaps it would be more correct to say, frightened – it into a pocket. Malooney’s ball, with the table to itself, then gave a solo performance, and ended up by breaking a window. It was what the lawyers call a nice point. What was the effect upon the score?

Malooney argued that, seeing he had pocketed the red before his own ball left the table, his three should be counted first, and that therefore he had won. Dick maintained that a ball that had ended up in a flower-bed couldn’t be deemed to have scored anything. The Captain declined to assist. He said that, although he had been playing billiards for upwards of forty years, the incident was new to him. My own feeling was that of thankfulness that we had got through the game without anybody being really injured. We agreed that the person to decide the point would be the editor of *The Field*.

It remains still undecided. The Captain came into my study the next morning. He said: “If you haven’t written that letter to *The Field*, don’t mention my name. They know me on *The Field*. I would rather it did not get about that I have been playing with a man who cannot keep his ball within the four walls of a billiard-room.”

“Well,” I answered, “I know most of the fellows on *The Field* myself. They don’t often get hold of anything novel in the way of a story. When they do, they are apt to harp upon it. My idea was to keep my own name out of it altogether.”

“It is not a point likely to crop up often,” said the Captain. “I’d let it rest if I were you.”

I should like to have had it settled. In the end, I wrote the editor a careful letter, in a disguised hand, giving a false name and address. But if any answer ever appeared I must have missed it.

Myself I have a sort of consciousness that somewhere inside me there is quite a good player, if only I could persuade him to come out. He is shy, that is all. He does not seem able to play when people are looking on. The shots he misses when people are looking on would give you a wrong idea of him. When nobody is about, a prettier game you do not often see. If some folks who fancy themselves could see me when there is nobody about, it might take the conceit out of them. Only

once I played up to what I feel is my real form, and then it led to argument. I was staying at an hotel in Switzerland, and the second evening a pleasant-spoken young fellow, who said he had read all my books – later, he appeared surprised on learning I had written more than two – asked me if I would care to play a hundred up. We played even, and I paid for the table. The next evening he said he thought it would make a better game if he gave me forty and I broke. It was a fairly close finish, and afterwards he suggested that I should put down my name for the handicap they were arranging.

“I am afraid,” I answered, “that I hardly play well enough. Just a quiet game with you is one thing; but in a handicap with a crowd looking on – ”

“I should not let that trouble you,” he said; “there are some here who play worse than you – just one or two. It passes the evening.”

It was merely a friendly affair. I paid my twenty marks, and was given plus a hundred. I drew for my first game a chatty type of man, who started minus twenty. We neither of us did much for the first five minutes, and then I made a break of forty-four.

There was not a fluke in it from beginning to end. I was never more astonished in my life. It seemed to me it was the cue was doing it.

Minus Twenty was even more astonished. I heard him as I passed:

“Who handicapped this man?” he asked.

“I did,” said the pleasant-spoken youngster.

“Oh,” said Minus Twenty – “friend of yours, I presume?”

There are evenings that seem to belong to you. We finished that two hundred and fifty under the three-quarters of an hour. I explained to Minus Twenty – he was plus sixty-three at the end – that my play that night had been exceptional. He said that he had heard of cases similar. I left him talking volubly to the committee. He was not a nice man at all.

After that I did not care to win; and that of course was fatal. The less I tried, the more impossible it seemed for me to do wrong. I was left in at the last with a man from another hotel. But for that I am convinced I should have carried off the handicap. Our hotel didn’t, anyhow, want the other hotel to win. So they gathered round me, and offered me sound advice, and begged me to be careful; with the natural result that I went back to my usual form quite suddenly.

Never before or since have I played as I played that week. But it showed me what I could do. I shall get a new table, with proper pockets this time. There is something wrong about our pockets. The balls go into them and then come out again. You would think they had seen something there to frighten them. They come out trembling and hold on to the cushion.

I shall also get a new red ball. I fancy it must be a very old ball, our red. It seems to me to be always tired.

“The billiard-room,” I said to Dick, “I see my way to easily enough. Adding another ten feet to what is now the dairy will give us twenty-eight by twenty. I am hopeful that will be sufficient even for your friend Malooney. The drawing-room is too small to be of any use. I may decide – as Robina has suggested – to ‘throw it into the hall.’ But the stairs will remain. For dancing, private theatricals – things to keep you children out of mischief – I have an idea I will explain to you later on. The kitchen – ”

“Can I have a room to myself?” asked Veronica.

Veronica was sitting on the floor, staring into the fire, her chin supported by her hand. Veronica, in those rare moments when she is resting from her troubles, wears a holy, far-away expression apt to mislead the stranger. Governesses, new to her, have their doubts whether on these occasions they are justified in dragging her back to discuss mere dates and tables. Poets who are friends of mine, coming unexpectedly upon Veronica standing by the window, gazing upward at the evening star, have thought it was a vision, until they got closer and found that she was sucking peppermints.

“I should so like to have a room all to myself,” added Veronica.

“It would be a room!” commented Robin.

“It wouldn’t have your hairpins sticking up all over the bed, anyhow,” murmured Veronica dreamily.

“I like that!” said Robin; “why – ”

“You’re harder than I am,” said Veronica.

“I should wish you to have a room, Veronica,” I said. “My fear is that in place of one untidy bedroom in the house – a room that makes me shudder every time I see it through the open door; and the door, in spite of all I can say, generally is wide open – ”

“I’m not untidy,” said Robin, “not really. I know where everything is in the dark – if people would only leave them alone.”

“You are. You’re about the most untidy girl I know,” said Dick.

“I’m not,” said Robin; “you don’t see other girls’ rooms. Look at yours at Cambridge. Malooney told us you’d had a fire, and we all believed him at first.”

“When a man’s working – ” said Dick.

“He must have an orderly place to work in,” suggested Robin.

Dick sighed. “It’s never any good talking to you,” said Dick. “You don’t even see your own faults.”

“I can,” said Robin; “I see them more than anyone. All I claim is justice.”

“Show me, Veronica,” I said, “that you are worthy to possess a room. At present you appear to regard the whole house as your room. I find your gaiters on the croquet lawn. A portion of your costume – an article that anyone possessed of the true feelings of a lady would desire to keep hidden from the world – is discovered waving from the staircase window.”

“I put it out to be mended,” explained Veronica.

“You opened the door and flung it out. I told you of it at the time,” said Robin. “You do the same with your boots.”

“You are too high-spirited for your size,” explained Dick to her. “Try to be less dashing.”

“I could also wish, Veronica,” I continued, “that you shed your back comb less easily, or at least that you knew when you had shed it. As for your gloves – well, hunting your gloves has come to be our leading winter sport.”

“People look in such funny places for them,” said Veronica.

“Granted. But be just, Veronica,” I pleaded. “Admit that it is in funny places we occasionally find them. When looking for your things one learns, Veronica, never to despair. So long as there remains a corner unexplored inside or outside the house, within the half-mile radius, hope need not be abandoned.”

Veronica was still gazing dreamily into the fire.

“I suppose,” said Veronica, “it’s reditty.”

“It’s what?” I said.

“She means heredity,” suggested Dick – “cheeky young beggar! I wonder you let her talk to you the way she does.”

“Besides,” added Robin, “as I am always explaining to you, Pa is a literary man. With him it is part of his temperament.”

“It’s hard on us children,” said Veronica.

We were all agreed – with the exception of Veronica – that it was time Veronica went to bed. As chairman I took it upon myself to closure the debate.

CHAPTER II

“Do you mean, Governor, that you have actually bought the house?” demanded Dick, “or are we only talking about it?”

“This time, Dick,” I answered, “I have done it.”

Dick looked serious. “Is it what you wanted?” he asked.

“No, Dick,” I replied, “it is not what I wanted. I wanted an old-fashioned, picturesque, rambling sort of a place, all gables and ivy and oriel windows.”

“You are mixing things up,” Dick interrupted, “gables and oriel windows don’t go together.”

“I beg your pardon, Dick,” I corrected him, “in the house I wanted, they do. It is the style of house you find in the Christmas number. I have never seen it anywhere else, but I took a fancy to it from the first. It is not too far from the church, and it lights up well at night. ‘One of these days,’ I used to say to myself when a boy, ‘I’ll be a clever man and live in a house just like that.’ It was my dream.”

“And what is this place like?” demanded Robin, “this place you have bought.”

“The agent,” I explained, “claims for it that it is capable of improvement. I asked him to what school of architecture he would say it belonged; he said he thought that it must have been a local school, and pointed out – what seems to be the truth – that nowadays they do not build such houses.”

“Near to the river?” demanded Dick.

“Well, by the road,” I answered, “I daresay it may be a couple of miles.”

“And by the shortest way?” questioned Dick.

“That is the shortest way,” I explained; “there’s a prettier way through the woods, but that is about three miles and a half.”

“But we had decided it was to be near the river,” said Robin.

“We also decided,” I replied, “that it was to be on sandy soil, with a south-west aspect. Only one thing in this house has a south-west aspect, and that’s the back door. I asked the agent about the sand. He advised me, if I wanted it in any quantity, to get an estimate from the Railway Company. I wanted it on a hill. It is on a hill, with a bigger hill in front of it. I didn’t want that other hill. I wanted an uninterrupted view of the southern half of England. I wanted to take people out on the step, and cram them with stories about our being able on clear days to see the Bristol Channel. They might not have believed me, but without that hill I could have stuck to it, and they could not have been certain – not dead certain – I was lying.

“Personally, I should have liked a house where something had happened. I should have liked, myself, a blood-stain – not a fussy blood-stain, a neat unobtrusive blood-stain that would have been content, most of its time, to remain hidden under the mat, shown only occasionally as a treat to visitors. I had hopes even of a ghost. I don’t mean one of those noisy ghosts that doesn’t seem to know it is dead. A lady ghost would have been my fancy, a gentle ghost with quiet, pretty ways. This house – well, it is such a sensible-looking house, that is my chief objection to it. It has got an echo. If you go to the end of the garden and shout at it very loudly, it answers you back. This is the only bit of fun you can have with it. Even then it answers you in such a tone you feel it thinks the whole thing silly – is doing it merely to humour you. It is one of those houses that always seems to be thinking of its rates and taxes.”

“Any reason at all for your having bought it?” asked Dick.

“Yes, Dick,” I answered. “We are all of us tired of this suburb. We want to live in the country and be good. To live in the country with any comfort it is necessary to have a house there. This being admitted, it follows we must either build a house or buy one. I would rather not build a house. Talboys built himself a house. You know Talboys. When I first met him, before he started building, he was a cheerful soul with a kindly word for everyone. The builder assures him that in another twenty years, when the colour has had time to tone down, his house will be a picture. At present it makes

him bilious, the mere sight of it. Year by year, they tell him, as the dampness wears itself away, he will suffer less and less from rheumatism, ague, and lumbago. He has a hedge round the garden; it is eighteen inches high. To keep the boys out he has put up barbed-wire fencing. But wire fencing affords no real privacy. When the Talboys are taking coffee on the lawn, there is generally a crowd from the village watching them. There are trees in the garden; you know they are trees – there is a label tied to each one telling you what sort of tree it is. For the moment there is a similarity about them. Thirty years hence, Talboys estimates, they will afford him shade and comfort; but by that time he hopes to be dead. I want a house that has got over all its troubles; I don't want to spend the rest of my life bringing up a young and inexperienced house."

"But why this particular house?" urged Robin, "if, as you say, it is not the house you wanted."

"Because, my dear girl," I answered, "it is less unlike the house I wanted than other houses I have seen. When we are young we make up our minds to try and get what we want; when we have arrived at years of discretion we decide to try and want what we can get. It saves time. During the last two years I have seen about sixty houses, and out of the lot there was only one that was really the house I wanted. Hitherto I have kept the story to myself. Even now, thinking about it irritates me. It was not an agent who told me of it. I met a man by chance in a railway carriage. He had a black eye. If ever I meet him again I'll give him another. He accounted for it by explaining that he had had trouble with a golf ball, and at the time I believed him. I mentioned to him in conversation I was looking for a house. He described this place to me, and it seemed to me hours before the train stopped at a station. When it did I got out and took the next train back. I did not even wait for lunch. I had my bicycle with me, and I went straight there. It was – well, it was the house I wanted. If it had vanished suddenly, and I had found myself in bed, the whole thing would have seemed more reasonable. The proprietor opened the door to me himself. He had the bearing of a retired military man. It was afterwards I learnt he was the proprietor."

"I said, 'Good afternoon; if it is not troubling you, I would like to look over the house.' We were standing in the oak-panelled hall. I noticed the carved staircase about which the man in the train had told me, also the Tudor fireplaces. That is all I had time to notice. The next moment I was lying on my back in the middle of the gravel with the door shut. I looked up. I saw the old maniac's head sticking out of a little window. It was an evil face. He had a gun in his hand."

"I'm going to count twenty," he said. "If you are not the other side of the gate by then, I shoot."

"I ran over the figures myself on my way to the gate. I made it eighteen."

"I had an hour to wait for the train. I talked the matter over with the station-master."

"Yes," he said, "there'll be trouble up there one of these days."

"I said, 'It seems to me to have begun.'"

"He said, 'It's the Indian sun. It gets into their heads. We have one or two in the neighbourhood. They are quiet enough till something happens.'"

"If I'd been two seconds longer," I said, "I believe he'd have done it."

"It's a taking house," said the station-master; "not too big and not too little. It's the sort of house people seem to be looking for."

"I don't envy," I said, "the next person that finds it."

"He settled himself down here," said the station-master, "about ten years ago. Since then, if one person has offered to take the house off his hands, I suppose a thousand have. At first he would laugh at them good-temperedly – explain to them that his idea was to live there himself, in peace and quietness, till he died. Two out of every three of them would express their willingness to wait for that, and suggest some arrangement by which they might enter into possession, say, a week after the funeral. The last few months it has been worse than ever. I reckon you're about the eighth that has been up there this week, and to-day only Thursday. There's something to be said, you know, for the old man."

"And did he," asked Dick – "did he shoot the next party that came along?"

“Don’t be so silly, Dick,” said Robin; “it’s a story. Tell us another, Pa.”

“I don’t know what you mean, Robina, by a story,” I said. “If you mean to imply – ”

Robina said she didn’t; but I know quite well she did. Because I am an author, and have to tell stories for my living, people think I don’t know any truth. It is vexing enough to be doubted when one is exaggerating; to have sneers flung at one by one’s own kith and kin when one is struggling to confine oneself to bald, bare narrative – well, where is the inducement to be truthful? There are times when I almost say to myself that I will never tell the truth again.

“As it happens,” I said, “the story is true, in many places. I pass over your indifference to the risk I ran; though a nice girl at the point where the gun was mentioned would have expressed alarm. Anyhow, at the end you might have said something more sympathetic than merely, ‘Tell us another.’ He did not shoot the next party that arrived, for the reason that the very next day his wife, alarmed at what had happened, went up to London and consulted an expert – none too soon, as it turned out. The poor old fellow died six months later in a private lunatic asylum; I had it from the station-master on passing through the junction again this spring. The house fell into the possession of his nephew, who is living in it now. He is a youngish man with a large family, and people have learnt that the place is not for sale. It seems to me rather a sad story. The Indian sun, as the station-master thinks, may have started the trouble; but the end was undoubtedly hastened by the annoyance to which the unfortunate gentleman had been subjected; and I myself might have been shot. The only thing that comforts me is thinking of that fool’s black eye – the fool that sent me there.”

“And none of the other houses,” suggested Dick, “were any good at all?”

“There were drawbacks, Dick,” I explained. “There was a house in Essex; it was one of the first your mother and I inspected. I nearly shed tears of joy when I read the advertisement. It had once been a priory. Queen Elizabeth had slept there on her way to Greenwich. A photograph of the house accompanied the advertisement. I should not have believed the thing had it been a picture. It was under twelve miles from Charing Cross. The owner, it was stated, was open to offers.”

“All humbug, I suppose,” suggested Dick.

“The advertisement, if anything,” I replied, “had under-estimated the attractiveness of that house. All I blame the advertisement for is that it did not mention other things. It did not mention, for instance, that since Queen Elizabeth’s time the neighbourhood had changed. It did not mention that the entrance was between a public-house one side of the gate and a fried-fish shop on the other; that the Great Eastern Railway-Company had established a goods depot at the bottom of the garden; that the drawing-room windows looked out on extensive chemical works, and the dining-room windows, which were round the corner, on a stonemason’s yard. The house itself was a dream.”

“But what is the sense of it?” demanded Dick. “What do house agents think is the good of it? Do they think people likely to take a house after reading the advertisement without ever going to see it?”

“I asked an agent once that very question,” I replied. “He said they did it first and foremost to keep up the spirits of the owner – the man who wanted to sell the house. He said that when a man was trying to part with a house he had to listen to so much abuse of it from people who came to see it that if somebody did not stick up for the house – say all that could be said for it, and gloss over its defects – he would end by becoming so ashamed of it he would want to give it away, or blow it up with dynamite. He said that reading the advertisement in the agent’s catalogue was the only thing that reconciled him to being the owner of the house. He said one client of his had been trying to sell his house for years – until one day in the office he read by chance the agent’s description of it. Upon which he went straight home, took down the board, and has lived there contentedly ever since. From that point of view there is reason in the system; but for the house-hunter it works badly.

“One agent sent me a day’s journey to see a house standing in the middle of a brickfield, with a view of the Grand Junction Canal. I asked him where was the river he had mentioned. He explained it was the other side of the canal, but on a lower level; that was the only reason why from the house you couldn’t see it. I asked him for his picturesque scenery. He explained it was farther on, round the

bend. He seemed to think me unreasonable, expecting to find everything I wanted just outside the front-door. He suggested my shutting out the brickfield – if I didn't like the brickfield – with trees. He suggested the eucalyptus-tree. He said it was a rapid grower. He also told me that it yielded gum.

“Another house I travelled down into Dorsetshire to see. It contained, according to the advertisement, ‘perhaps the most perfect specimen of Norman arch extant in Southern England.’ It was to be found mentioned in Dugdale, and dated from the thirteenth century. I don't quite know what I expected. I argued to myself that there must have been ruffians of only moderate means even in those days. Here and there some robber baron who had struck a poor line of country would have had to be content with a homely little castle. A few such, hidden away in unfrequented districts, had escaped destruction. More civilised descendants had adapted them to later requirements. I had in my mind, before the train reached Dorchester, something between a miniature Tower of London and a mediæval edition of Ann Hathaway's cottage at Stratford. I pictured dungeons and a drawbridge, perhaps a secret passage. Lamchick has a secret passage, leading from behind a sort of portrait in the dining-room to the back of the kitchen chimney. They use it for a linen closet. It seems to me a pity. Of course originally it went on farther. The vicar, who is a bit of an antiquarian, believes it comes out somewhere in the churchyard. I tell Lamchick he ought to have it opened up, but his wife doesn't want it touched. She seems to think it just right as it is. I have always had a fancy for a secret passage. I decided I would have the drawbridge repaired and made practicable. Flanked on each side with flowers in tubs, it would have been a novel and picturesque approach.”

“Was there a drawbridge?” asked Dick.

“There was no drawbridge,” I explained. “The entrance to the house was through what the caretaker called the conservatory. It was not the sort of house that goes with a drawbridge.”

“Then what about the Norman arches?” argued Dick.

“Not arches,” I corrected him; “Arch. The Norman arch was downstairs in the kitchen. It was the kitchen, that had been built in the thirteenth century – and had not had much done to it since, apparently. Originally, I should say, it had been the torture chamber; it gave you that idea. I think your mother would have raised objections to the kitchen – anyhow, when she came to think of the cook. It would have been necessary to put it to the woman before engaging her: —

“You don't mind cooking in a dungeon in the dark, do you?”

“Some cooks would. The rest of the house was what I should describe as present-day mixed style. The last tenant but one had thrown out a bathroom in corrugated iron.”

“Then there was a house in Berkshire that I took your mother to see, with a trout stream running through the grounds. I imagined myself going out after lunch, catching trout for dinner; inviting swagger friends down to ‘my little place in Berkshire’ for a few days' trout-fishing. There is a man I once knew who is now a baronet. He used to be keen on fishing. I thought maybe I'd get him. It would have looked well in the Literary Gossip column: ‘Among the other distinguished guests’ – you know the sort of thing. I had the paragraph already in my mind. The wonder is I didn't buy a rod.”

“Wasn't there any trout stream?” questioned Robin.

“There was a stream,” I answered; “if anything, too much stream. The stream was the first thing your mother noticed. She noticed it a quarter of an hour before we came to it – before we knew it was the stream. We drove back to the town, and she bought a smelling-bottle, the larger size.

“It gave your mother a headache, that stream, and made me mad. The agent's office was opposite the station. I allowed myself half an hour on my way back to tell him what I thought of him, and then I missed the train. I could have got it in if he had let me talk all the time, but he would interrupt. He said it was the people at the paper-mill – that he had spoken to them about it more than once; he seemed to think sympathy was all I wanted. He assured me, on his word as a house-agent, that it had once been a trout stream. The fact was historical. Isaac Walton had fished there – that was prior to the paper-mill. He thought a collection of trout, male and female, might be bought and placed in it; preference being given to some hardy breed of trout, accustomed to roughing it. I told

him I wasn't looking for a place where I could play at being Noah; and left him, as I explained to him, with the intention of going straight to my solicitors and instituting proceedings against him for talking like a fool; and he put on his hat and went across to his solicitors to commence proceedings against me for libel.

"I suppose that, with myself, he thought better of it in the end. But I'm tired of having my life turned into one perpetual first of April. This house that I have bought is not my heart's desire, but about it there are possibilities. We will put in lattice windows, and fuss-up the chimneys. Maybe we will let in a tablet over the front-door, with a date – always looks well: it is a picturesque figure, the old-fashioned five. By the time we have done with it – for all practical purposes – it will be a Tudor manor-house. I have always wanted an old Tudor manor-house. There is no reason, so far as I can see, why there should not be stories connected with this house. Why should not we have a room in which Somebody once slept? We won't have Queen Elizabeth. I'm tired of Queen Elizabeth. Besides, I don't believe she'd have been nice. Why not Queen Anne? A quiet, gentle old lady, from all accounts, who would not have given trouble. Or, better still, Shakespeare. He was constantly to and fro between London and Stratford. It would not have been so very much out of his way. 'The room where Shakespeare slept!' Why, it's a new idea. Nobody ever seems to have thought of Shakespeare. There is the four-post bedstead. Your mother never liked it. She will insist, it harbours things. We might hang the wall with scenes from his plays, and have a bust of the old gentleman himself over the door. If I'm left alone and not worried, I'll probably end by believing that he really did sleep there."

"What about cupboards?" suggested Dick. "The Little Mother will clamour for cupboards."

It is unexplainable, the average woman's passion for cupboards. In heaven, her first request, I am sure, is always, "Can I have a cupboard?" She would keep her husband and children in cupboards if she had her way: that would be her idea of the perfect home, everybody wrapped up with a piece of camphor in his or her own proper cupboard. I knew a woman once who was happy – for a woman. She lived in a house with twenty-nine cupboards: I think it must have been built by a woman. They were spacious cupboards, many of them, with doors in no way different from other doors. Visitors would wish each other good-night and disappear with their candles into cupboards, staggering out backwards the next moment, looking scared. One poor gentleman, this woman's husband told me, having to go downstairs again for something he had forgotten, and unable on his return to strike anything else but cupboards, lost heart and finished up the night in a cupboard. At breakfast-time guests would hurry down, and burst open cupboard doors with a cheery "Good-morning." When that woman was out, nobody in that house ever knew where anything was; and when she came home she herself only knew where it ought to have been. Yet once, when one of those twenty-nine cupboards had to be cleared out temporarily for repairs, she never smiled, her husband told me, for more than three weeks – not till the workmen were out of the house, and that cupboard in working order again. She said it was so confusing, having nowhere to put her things.

The average woman does not want a house, in the ordinary sense of the word. What she wants is something made by a genii. You have found, as you think, the ideal house. You show her the Adams fireplace in the drawing-room. You tap the wainscoting of the hall with your umbrella: "Oak," you impress upon her, "all oak." You draw her attention to the view: you tell her the local legend. By fixing her head against the window-pane she can see the tree on which the man was hanged. You dwell upon the sundial; you mention for a second time the Adams fireplace.

"It's all very nice," she answers, "but where are the children going to sleep?"

It is so disheartening.

If it isn't the children, it's the water. She wants water – wants to know where it comes from. You show her where it comes from.

"What, out of that nasty place!" she exclaims.

She is equally dissatisfied whether it be drawn from a well, or whether it be water that has fallen from heaven and been stored in tanks. She has no faith in Nature's water. A woman never believes that

water can be good that does not come from a water-works. Her idea appears to be that the Company makes it fresh every morning from some old family recipe.

If you do succeed in reconciling her to the water, then she feels sure that the chimneys smoke; they look as if they smoked. Why – as you tell her – the chimneys are the best part of the house. You take her outside and make her look at them. They are genuine sixteenth-century chimneys, with carving on them. They couldn't smoke. They wouldn't do anything so inartistic. She says she only hopes you are right, and suggests cowls, if they do.

After that she wants to see the kitchen – where's the kitchen? You don't know where it is. You didn't bother about the kitchen. There must be a kitchen, of course. You proceed to search for the kitchen. When you find it she is worried because it is the opposite end of the house to the dining-room. You point out to her the advantage of being away from the smell of the cooking. At that she gets personal: tells you that you are the first to grumble when the dinner is cold; and in her madness accuses the whole male sex of being impractical. The mere sight of an empty house makes a woman fretful.

Of course the stove is wrong. The kitchen stove always is wrong. You promise she shall have a new one. Six months later she will want the old one back again: but it would be cruel to tell her this. The promise of that new stove comforts her. The woman never loses hope that one day it will come – the all-satisfying kitchen stove, the stove of her girlish dreams.

The question of the stove settled, you imagine you have silenced all opposition. At once she begins to talk about things that nobody but a woman or a sanitary inspector can talk about without blushing.

It calls for tact, getting a woman into a new house. She is nervous, suspicious.

"I am glad, my dear Dick," I answered; "that you have mentioned cupboards. It is with cupboards that I am hoping to lure your mother. The cupboards, from her point of view, will be the one bright spot; there are fourteen of them. I am trusting to cupboards to tide me over many things. I shall want you to come with me, Dick. Whenever your mother begins a sentence with: 'But now to be practical, dear,' I want you to murmur something about cupboards – not irritatingly as if it had been prearranged: have a little gumption."

"Will there be room for a tennis court?" demanded Dick.

"An excellent tennis court already exists," I informed him. "I have also purchased the adjoining paddock. We shall be able to keep our own cow. Maybe we'll breed horses."

"We might have a croquet lawn," suggested Robin.

"We might easily have a croquet lawn," I agreed. "On a full-sized lawn I believe Veronica might be taught to play. There are natures that demand space. On a full-sized lawn, protected by a stout iron border, less time might be wasted exploring the surrounding scenery for Veronica's lost ball."

"No chance of a golf links anywhere in the neighbourhood?" feared Dick.

"I am not so sure," I answered. "Barely a mile away there is a pretty piece of gorse land that appears to be no good to anyone. I daresay for a reasonable offer – "

"I say, when will this show be ready?" interrupted Dick.

"I propose beginning the alterations at once," I explained. "By luck there happens to be a gamekeeper's cottage vacant and within distance. The agent is going to get me the use of it for a year – a primitive little place, but charmingly situate on the edge of a wood. I shall furnish a couple of rooms; and for part of every week I shall make a point of being down there, superintending. I have always been considered good at superintending. My poor father used to say it was the only work I seemed to take an interest in. By being on the spot to hurry everybody on I hope to have the 'show,' as you term it, ready by the spring."

"I shall never marry," said Robin.

"Don't be so easily discouraged," advised Dick; "you are still young."

"I don't ever want to get married," continued Robin. "I should only quarrel with my husband, if I did. And Dick will never do anything – not with his head."

“Forgive me if I am dull,” I pleaded, “but what is the connection between this house, your quarrels with your husband if you ever get one, and Dick’s head?”

By way of explanation, Robin sprang to the ground, and before he could stop her had flung her arms around Dick’s neck.

“We can’t help it, Dick dear,” she told him. “Clever parents always have duffing children. But we’ll be of some use in the world after all, you and I.”

The idea was that Dick, when he had finished failing in examinations, should go out to Canada and start a farm, taking Robin with him. They would breed cattle, and gallop over the prairies, and camp out in the primeval forest, and slide about on snow-shoes, and carry canoes on their backs, and shoot rapids, and stalk things – so far as I could gather, have a sort of everlasting Buffalo-Bill’s show all to themselves. How and when the farm work was to get itself done was not at all clear. The Little Mother and myself were to end our days with them. We were to sit about in the sun for a time, and then pass peacefully away. Robin shed a few tears at this point, but regained her spirits, thinking of Veronica, who was to be lured out on a visit and married to some true-hearted yeoman: which is not at present Veronica’s ambition. Veronica’s conviction is that she would look well in a coronet: her own idea is something in the ducal line. Robina talked for about ten minutes. By the time she had done she had persuaded Dick that life in the backwoods of Canada had been his dream from infancy. She is that sort of girl.

I tried talking reason, but talking to Robin when she has got a notion in her head is like trying to fix a halter on a two-year-old colt. This tumble-down, six-roomed cottage was to be the saving of the family. An ecstatic look transfigured Robina’s face even as she spoke of it. You might have fancied it a shrine. Robina would do the cooking. Robina would rise early and milk the cow, and gather the morning egg. We would lead the simple life, learn to fend for ourselves. It would be so good for Veronica. The higher education could wait; let the higher ideals have a chance. Veronica would make the beds, dust the rooms. In the evening Veronica, her little basket by her side, would sit and sew while I talked, telling them things, and Robina moved softly to and fro about her work, the household fairy. The Little Mother, whenever strong enough, would come to us. We would hover round her, tending her with loving hands. The English farmer must know something, in spite of all that is said. Dick could arrange for lessons in practical farming. She did not say it crudely; but hinted that, surrounded by example, even I might come to take an interest in honest labour, might end by learning to do something useful.

Robina talked, I should say, for a quarter of an hour. By the time she had done, it appeared to me rather a beautiful idea. Dick’s vacation had just commenced. For the next three months there would be nothing else for him to do but – to employ his own expressive phrase – “rot round.” In any event, it would be keeping him out of mischief. Veronica’s governess was leaving. Veronica’s governess generally does leave at the end of about a year. I think sometimes of advertising for a lady without a conscience. At the end of a year, they explain to me that their conscience will not allow them to remain longer; they do not feel they are earning their salary. It is not that the child is not a dear child, it is not that she is stupid. Simply it is – as a German lady to whom Dick had been giving what he called finishing lessons in English, once put it – that she does not seem to be “taking any.” Her mother’s idea is that it is “sinking in.” Perhaps if we allowed Veronica to lie fallow for awhile, something might show itself. Robina, speaking for herself, held that a period of quiet usefulness, away from the society of other silly girls and sillier boys, would result in her becoming a sensible woman. It is not often that Robina’s yearnings take this direction: to thwart them, when they did, seemed wrong.

We had some difficulty with the Little Mother. That these three babies of hers will ever be men and women capable of running a six-roomed cottage appears to the Little Mother in the light of a fantastic dream. I explained to her that I should be there, at all events for two or three days in every week, to give an eye to things. Even that did not content her. She gave way eventually on Robina’s solemn undertaking that she should be telegraphed for the first time Veronica coughed.

On Monday we packed a one-horse van with what we deemed essential. Dick and Robina rode their bicycles. Veronica, supported by assorted bedding, made herself comfortable upon the tailboard. I followed down by train on the Wednesday afternoon.

CHAPTER III

It was the cow that woke me the first morning. I did not know it was our cow – not at the time. I didn't know we had a cow. I looked at my watch; it was half-past two. I thought maybe she would go to sleep again, but her idea was that the day had begun. I went to the window, the moon was at the full. She was standing by the gate, her head inside the garden; I took it her anxiety was lest we might miss any of it. Her neck was stretched out straight, her eyes towards the sky; which gave to her the appearance of a long-eared alligator. I have never had much to do with cows. I don't know how you talk to them. I told her to "be quiet," and to "lie down"; and made pretence to throw a boot at her. It seemed to cheer her, having an audience; she added half a dozen extra notes. I never knew before a cow had so much in her. There is a thing one sometimes meets with in the suburbs – or one used to; I do not know whether it is still extant, but when I was a boy it was quite common. It has a hurdy-gurdy fixed to its waist and a drum strapped on behind, a row of pipes hanging from its face, and bells and clappers from most of its other joints. It plays them all at once, and smiles. This cow reminded me of it – with organ effects added. She didn't smile; there was that to be said in her favour.

I hoped that if I made believe to be asleep she would get discouraged. So I closed the window ostentatiously, and went back to bed. But it only had the effect of putting her on her mettle. "He did not care for that last," I imagined her saying to herself, "I wasn't at my best. There wasn't feeling enough in it." She kept it up for about half an hour, and then the gate against which, I suppose, she had been leaning, gave way with a crash. That frightened her, and I heard her gallop off across the field. I was on the point of dozing off again when a pair of pigeons settled on the window-sill and began to coo. It is a pretty sound when you are in the mood for it. I wrote a poem once – a simple thing, but instinct with longing – while sitting under a tree and listening to the cooing of a pigeon. But that was in the afternoon. My only longing now was for a gun. Three times I got out of bed and "shoo'd" them away. The third time I remained by the window till I had got it firmly into their heads that I really did not want them. My behaviour on the former two occasions they had evidently judged to be mere playfulness. I had just got back to bed again when an owl began to screech. That is another sound I used to think attractive – so weird, so mysterious. It is Swinburne, I think, who says that you never get the desired one and the time and the place all right together. If the beloved one is with you, it is the wrong place or at the wrong time; and if the time and the place happen to be right, then it is the party that is wrong. The owl was all right: I like owls. The place was all right. He had struck the wrong time, that was all. Eleven o'clock at night, when you can't see him, and naturally feel that you want to, is the proper time for an owl. Perched on the roof of a cow-shed in the early dawn he looks silly. He clung there, flapping his wings and screeching at the top of his voice. What it was he wanted I am sure I don't know; and anyhow it didn't seem the way to get it. He came to this conclusion himself at the end of twenty minutes, and shut himself up and went home. I thought I was going to have at last some peace, when a corncrake – a creature upon whom Nature has bestowed a song like to the tearing of calico-sheets mingled with the sharpening of saws – settled somewhere in the garden and set to work to praise its Maker according to its lights. I have a friend, a poet, who lives just off the Strand, and spends his evenings at the Garrick Club. He writes occasional verse for the evening papers, and talks about the "silent country, drowsy with the weight of languors." One of these times I'll lure him down for a Saturday to Monday and let him find out what the country really is – let him hear it. He is becoming too much of a dreamer: it will do him good, wake him up a bit. The corncrake after awhile stopped quite suddenly with a jerk, and for quite five minutes there was silence.

"If this continues for another five," I said to myself, "I'll be asleep." I felt it coming over me. I had hardly murmured the words when the cow turned up again. I should say she had been somewhere and had had a drink. She was in better voice than ever.

It occurred to me that this would be an opportunity to make a few notes on the sunrise. The literary man is looked to for occasional description of the sunrise. The earnest reader who has heard about this sunrise thirsts for full particulars. Myself, for purposes of observation, I have generally chosen December or the early part of January. But one never knows. Maybe one of these days I'll want a summer sunrise, with birds and dew-besprinkled flowers: it goes well with the rustic heroine, the miller's daughter, or the girl who brings up chickens and has dreams. I met a brother author once at seven o'clock in the morning in Kensington Gardens. He looked half asleep and so disagreeable that I hesitated for awhile to speak to him: he is a man that as a rule breakfasts at eleven. But I summoned my courage and accosted him.

"This is early for you," I said.

"It's early for anyone but a born fool," he answered.

"What's the matter?" I asked. "Can't you sleep?"

"Can't I sleep?" he retorted indignantly. "Why, I daren't sit down upon a seat, I daren't lean up against a tree. If I did I'd be asleep in half a second."

"What's the idea?" I persisted. "Been reading Smiles's 'Self Help and the Secret of Success'? Don't be absurd," I advised him. "You'll be going to Sunday school next and keeping a diary. You have left it too late: we don't reform at forty. Go home and go to bed." I could see he was doing himself no good.

"I'm going to bed," he answered, "I'm going to bed for a month when I've finished this confounded novel that I'm on. Take my advice," he said – he laid his hand upon my shoulder – "Never choose a colonial girl for your heroine. At our age it is simple madness."

"She's a fine girl," he continued, "and good. Has a heart of gold. She's wearing me to a shadow. I wanted something fresh and unconventional. I didn't grasp what it was going to do. She's the girl that gets up early in the morning and rides bare-back – the horse, I mean, of course; don't be so silly. Over in New South Wales it didn't matter. I threw in the usual local colour – the eucalyptus-tree and the kangaroo – and let her ride. It is now that she is over here in London that I wish I had never thought of her. She gets up at five and wanders about the silent city. That means, of course, that I have to get up at five in order to record her impressions. I have walked six miles this morning. First to St. Paul's Cathedral; she likes it when there's nobody about. You'd think it wasn't big enough for her to see if anybody else was in the street. She thinks of it as of a mother watching over her sleeping children; she's full of all that sort of thing. And from there to Westminster Bridge. She sits on the parapet and reads Wordsworth, till the policeman turns her off. This is another of her favourite spots." He indicated with a look of concentrated disgust the avenue where we were standing. "This is where she likes to finish up. She comes here to listen to a blackbird."

"Well, you are through with it now," I said to console him. "You've done it; and it's over."

"Through with it!" he laughed bitterly. "I'm just beginning it. There's the entire East End to be done yet: she's got to meet a fellow there as big a crank as herself. And walking isn't the worst. She's going to have a horse; you can guess what that means. – Hyde Park will be no good to her. She'll find out Richmond and Ham Common. I've got to describe the scenery and the mad joy of the thing."

"Can't you imagine it?" I suggested.

"I'm going to imagine all the enjoyable part of it," he answered. "I must have a groundwork to go upon. She's got to have feelings come to her upon this horse. You can't enter into a rider's feelings when you've almost forgotten which side of the horse you get up."

I walked with him to the Serpentine. I had been wondering how it was he had grown stout so suddenly. He had a bath towel round him underneath his coat.

"It'll give me my death of cold, I know it will," he chattered while unlacing his boots.

"Can't you leave it till the summer-time," I suggested, "and take her to Ostend?"

"It wouldn't be unconventional," he growled. "She wouldn't take an interest in it."

"But do they allow ladies to bathe in the Serpentine?" I persisted.

“It won’t be the Serpentine,” he explained. “It’s going to be the Thames at Greenwich. But it must be the same sort of feeling. She’s got to tell them all about it during a lunch in Queen’s Gate, and shock them all. That’s all she does it for, in my opinion.”

He emerged a mottled blue. I helped him into his clothes, and he was fortunate enough to find an early cab. The book appeared at Christmas. The critics agreed that the heroine was a delightful creation. Some of them said they would like to have known her.

Remembering my poor friend, it occurred to me that by going out now and making a few notes about the morning, I might be saving myself trouble later on. I slipped on a few things – nothing elaborate – put a notebook in my pocket, opened the door and went down.

Perhaps it would be more correct to say “opened the door and was down.” It was my own fault, I admit. We had talked this thing over before going to bed, and I myself had impressed upon Veronica the need for caution. The architect of the country cottage does not waste space. He dispenses with landings; the bedroom door opens on to the top stair. It does not do to walk out of your bedroom, for the reason there is nothing outside to walk on. I had said to Veronica, pointing out this fact to her:

“Now don’t, in the morning, come bursting out of the room in your usual volcanic style, because if you do there will be trouble. As you perceive, there is no landing. The stairs commence at once; they are steep, and they lead down to a brick floor. Open the door quietly, look where you are going, and step carefully.”

Dick had added his advice to mine. “I did that myself the first morning,” Dick had said. “I stepped straight out of the bedroom into the kitchen; and I can tell you, it hurts. You be careful, young ’un. This cottage doesn’t lend itself to dash.”

Robina had fallen down with a tray in her hand. She said that never should she forget the horror of that moment, when, sitting on the kitchen floor, she had cried to Dick – her own voice sounding to her as if it came from somewhere quite far off: “Is it broken? Tell me the truth. Is it broken anywhere?” and Dick had replied: “Broken! why, it’s smashed to atoms. What did you expect?” Robina had asked the question with reference to her head, while Dick had thought she was alluding to the teapot. In that moment, had said Robina, her whole life had passed before her. She let Veronica feel the bump.

Veronica was disappointed with the bump, having expected something bigger, but had promised to be careful. We had all agreed that if in spite of our warnings she forgot, and came blundering down in the morning, it would serve her right. It was thinking of all this that, as I lay upon the floor, made me feel angry with everybody. I hate people who can sleep through noises that wake me up. Why was I the only person in the house to be disturbed? Dick’s room was round the corner; there was some excuse for him. But Robina and Veronica’s window looked straight down upon the cow. If Robina and Veronica were not a couple of logs, the cow would have aroused them. We should have discussed the matter with the door ajar. Robina would have said, “Whatever you do, be careful of the stairs, Pa,” and I should have remembered. The modern child appears to me to have no feeling for its parent.

I picked myself up and started for the door. The cow continued bellowing steadily. My whole anxiety was to get to her quickly and to hit her. But the door took more finding than I could have believed possible. The shutters were closed and the whole place was in pitch darkness. The idea had been to furnish this cottage only with things that were absolutely necessary, but the room appeared to me to be overcrowded. There was a milking-stool, which is a thing made purposely heavy so that it may not be easily upset. If I tumbled over it once I tumbled over it a dozen times. I got hold of it at last and carried it about with me. I thought I would use it to hit the cow – that is, when I had found the front-door. I knew it led out of the parlour, but could not recollect its exact position. I argued that if I kept along the wall I should be bound to come to it. I found the wall, and set off full of hope. I suppose the explanation was that, without knowing it, I must have started with the door, not the front-door, the other door, leading into the kitchen. I crept along, carefully feeling my way, and struck quite new things altogether – things I had no recollection of and that hit me in fresh places. I climbed

over what I presumed to be a beer-barrel and landed among bottles; there were dozens upon dozens of them. To get away from these bottles I had to leave the wall; but I found it again, as I thought, and I felt along it for another half a dozen yards or so and then came again upon bottles: the room appeared to be paved with bottles. A little farther on I rolled over another beer-barrel: as a matter of fact it was the same beer-barrel, but I did not know this. At the time it seemed to me that Robina had made up her mind to run a public-house. I found the milking-stool again and started afresh, and before I had gone a dozen steps was in among bottles again. Later on, in the broad daylight, it was easy enough to understand what had happened. I had been carefully feeling my way round and round a screen. I got so sick of these bottles and so tired of rolling over these everlasting beer-barrels, that I abandoned the wall and plunged boldly into space.

I had barely started, when, looking up, I saw the sky above me: a star was twinkling just above my head. Had I been wide awake, and had the cow stopped bellowing for just one minute, I should have guessed that somehow or another I had got into a chimney. But as things were, the wonder and the mystery of it all appalled me. "Alice's Adventures in Wonderland" would have appeared to me, at that moment, in the nature of a guide to travellers. Had a rocking-horse or a lobster suddenly appeared to me I should have sat and talked to it; and if it had not answered me I should have thought it sulky and been hurt. I took a step forward and the star disappeared, just as if somebody had blown it out. I was not surprised in the least. I was expecting anything to happen.

I found a door and it opened quite easily. A wood was in front of me. I couldn't see any cow anywhere, but I still heard her. It all seemed quite natural. I would wander into the wood; most likely I should meet her there, and she would be smoking a pipe. In all probability she would know some poetry.

With the fresh air my senses gradually came back to me, and I began to understand why it was I could not see the cow. The reason was that the house was between us. By some mysterious process I had been discharged into the back garden. I still had the milking-stool in my hand, but the cow no longer troubled me. Let her see if she could wake Veronica by merely bellowing outside the door; it was more than I had ever been able to do.

I sat down on the stool and opened my note-book. I headed the page: "Sunrise in July: observations and emotions," and I wrote down at once, lest I should forget it, that towards three o'clock a faint light is discernible, and added that this light gets stronger as the time goes on.

It sounded footling even to myself, but I had been reading a novel of the realistic school that had been greatly praised for its actuality. There is a demand in some quarters for this class of observation. I likewise made a note that the pigeon and the corncrake appear to be among the earliest of Nature's children to welcome the coming day; and added that the screech-owl may be heard, perhaps at its best, by anyone caring to rise for the purpose, some quarter of an hour before the dawn. That was all I could think of just then. As regards emotions, I did not seem to have any.

I lit a pipe and waited for the sun. The sky in front of me was tinged with a faint pink. Every moment it flushed a deeper red. I maintain that anyone, not an expert, would have said that was the portion of the horizon on which to keep one's eye. I kept my eye upon it, but no sun appeared. I lit another pipe. The sky in front of me was now a blaze of glory. I scribbled a few lines, likening the scattered clouds to brides blushing at the approach of the bridegroom. That would have been all right if later on they hadn't begun to turn green: it seemed the wrong colour for a bride. Later on still they went yellow, and that spoilt the simile past hope. One cannot wax poetical about a bride who at the approach of the bridegroom turns first green and then yellow: you can only feel sorry for her. I waited some more. The sky in front of me grew paler every moment. I began to fear that something had happened to that sun. If I hadn't known so much astronomy I should have said that he had changed his mind and had gone back again. I rose with the idea of seeing into things. He had been up apparently for hours: he had got up at the back of me. It seemed to be nobody's fault. I put

my pipe into my pocket and strolled round to the front. The cow was still there; she was pleased to see me, and started bellowing again.

I heard a sound of whistling. It proceeded from a farmer's boy. I hailed him, and he climbed a gate and came to me across the field. He was a cheerful youth. He nodded to the cow and hoped she had had a good night: he pronounced it "nihet."

"You know the cow?" I said.

"Well," he explained, "we don't precisely move in the same set. Sort o' business relationship more like – if you understand me?"

Something about this boy was worrying me. He did not seem like a real farmer's boy. But then nothing seemed quite real this morning. My feeling was to let things go.

"Whose cow is it?" I asked.

He stared at me.

"I want to know to whom it belongs," I said. "I want to restore it to him."

"Excuse me," said the boy, "but where do you live?"

He was making me cross. "Where do I live?" I retorted. "Why, in this cottage. You don't think I've got up early and come from a distance to listen to this cow? Don't talk so much. Do you know whose cow it is, or don't you?"

"It's your cow," said the boy.

It was my turn to stare.

"But I haven't got a cow," I told him.

"Yus you have," he persisted; "you've got that cow."

She had stopped bellowing for a moment. She was not the cow I felt I could ever take a pride in. At some time or another, quite recently, she must have sat down in some mud.

"How did I get her?" I demanded.

"The young lady," explained the boy, "she came rahnd to our plice on Tuesday –"

I began to see light. "An excitable young lady – talks very fast – never waits for the answer?"

"With jolly fine eyes," added the boy approvingly.

"And she ordered a cow?"

"Didn't seem to 'ave strength enough to live another dy withaht it."

"Any stipulation made concerning the price of the cow?"

"Any what?"

"The young lady with the eyes – did she think to ask the price of the cow?"

"No sordid details was entered into, so far as I could 'ear," replied the boy.

They would not have been – by Robina.

"Any hint let fall as to what the cow was wanted for?"

"The lady gives us to understand," said the boy, "that fresh milk was 'er idea."

That surprised me: that was thoughtful of Robina. "And this is the cow?"

"I towed her rahnd last night. I didn't knock at the door and tell yer abaht 'er, cos, to be quite frank with yer, there wasn't anybody in."

"What is she bellowing for?" I asked.

"Well," said the boy, "it's only a theory, o' course, but I should sy, from the look of 'er, that she wanted to be milked."

"But it started bellowing at half-past two," I argued. "It doesn't expect to be milked at half-past two, does it?"

"Meself," said the boy, "I've given up looking for sense in cows."

In some unaccountable way this boy was hypnotising me. Everything had suddenly become out of place.

The cow had suddenly become absurd: she ought to have been a milk-can. The wood struck me as neglected: there ought to have been notice-boards about, "Keep off the Grass," "Smoking Strictly

Prohibited”: there wasn’t a seat to be seen. The cottage had surely got itself there by accident: where was the street? The birds were all out of their cages; everything was upside down.

“Are you a real farmer’s boy?” I asked him.

“O’ course I am,” he answered. “What do yer tike me for – a hartist in disguise?”

It came to me. “What is your name?”

“‘Enery – ‘Enery ‘Opkins.”

“Where were you born?”

“Camden Tahn.”

Here was a nice beginning to a rural life! What place could be the country while this boy Hopkins was about? He would have given to the Garden of Eden the atmosphere of an outlying suburb.

“Do you want to earn an occasional shilling?” I put it to him.

“I’d rather it come reggler,” said Hopkins. “Better for me kerrickter.”

“You drop that Cockney accent and learn Berkshire, and I’ll give you half a sovereign when you can talk it,” I promised him. “Don’t, for instance, say ‘ain’t,” I explained to him. “Say ‘bain’t.’ Don’t say ‘The young lydy, she came rahnd to our pllice;’ say ‘The missy, ’er coomed down; ’er coomed, and ’er ses to the maister, ’er ses..’ That’s the sort of thing I want to surround myself with here. When you informed me that the cow was mine, you should have said: ‘Whoi, ’er be your cow, surelie ’er be.”

“Sure it’s Berkshire?” demanded Hopkins. “You’re confident about it?” There is a type that is by nature suspicious.

“It may not be Berkshire pure and undefiled,” I admitted. “It is what in literature we term ‘dialect.’ It does for most places outside the twelve-mile radius. The object is to convey a feeling of rustic simplicity. Anyhow, it isn’t Camden Town.”

I started him with a shilling then and there to encourage him. He promised to come round in the evening for one or two books, written by friends of mine, that I reckoned would be of help to him; and I returned to the cottage and set to work to rouse Robina. Her tone was apologetic. She had got the notion into her head that I had been calling her for quite a long time. I explained that this was not the case.

“How funny!” she answered. “I said to Veronica more than an hour ago: ‘I’m sure that’s Pa calling us.’ I suppose I must have been dreaming.”

“Well, don’t dream any more,” I suggested. “Come down and see to this confounded cow of yours.”

“Oh,” said Veronica, “has it come?”

“It has come,” I told her. “As a matter of fact, it has been here some time. It ought to have been milked four hours ago, according to its own idea.”

Robina said she would be down in a minute.

She was down in twenty-five, which was sooner than I had expected. She brought Veronica with her. She said she would have been down sooner if she had not waited for Veronica. It appeared that this was just precisely what Veronica had been telling her. I was feeling irritable. I had been up half a day, and hadn’t had my breakfast.

“Don’t stand there arguing,” I told them. “For goodness’ sake let’s get to work and milk this cow. We shall have the poor creature dying on our hands if we’re not careful.”

Robina was wandering round the room.

“You haven’t come across a milking-stool anywhere, have you, Pa?” asked Robina.

“I have come across your milking-stool, I estimate, some thirteen times,” I told her. I fetched it from where I had left it, and gave it to her; and we filed out in procession; Veronica with a galvanised iron bucket bringing up the rear.

The problem that was forcing itself upon my mind was: did Robina know how to milk a cow? Robina, I argued, the idea once in her mind, would immediately have ordered a cow, clamouring for it – as Hopkins had picturesquely expressed it – as though she had not strength to live another

day without a cow. Her next proceeding would have been to buy a milking-stool. It was a tasteful milking-stool, this one she had selected, ornamented with the rough drawing of a cow in poker work: a little too solid for my taste, but one that I should say would wear well. The pail she had not as yet had time to see about. This galvanised bucket we were using was, I took it, a temporary makeshift. When Robina had leisure she would go into the town and purchase something at an art stores. That, to complete the scheme, she would have done well to have taken a few practical lessons in milking would come to her, as an inspiration, with the arrival of the cow. I noticed that Robina's steps as we approached the cow were less elastic. Just outside the cow Robina halted.

"I suppose," said Robina, "there's only one way of milking a cow?"

"There may be fancy ways," I answered, "necessary to you if later on you think of entering a competition. This morning, seeing we are late, I shouldn't worry too much about style. If I were you, this morning I should adopt the ordinary unimaginative method, and aim only at results."

Robina sat down and placed her bucket underneath the cow.

"I suppose," said Robina, "it doesn't matter which – which one I begin with?"

It was perfectly plain she hadn't the least notion how to milk a cow. I told her so, adding comments. Now and then a little fatherly talk does good. As a rule I have to work myself up for these occasions. This morning I was feeling fairly fit: things had conspired to this end. I put before Robina the aims and privileges of the household fairy as they appeared, not to her, but to me. I also confided to Veronica the result of many weeks' reflections concerning her and her behaviour. I also told them both what I thought about Dick. I do this sort of thing once every six months: it has an excellent effect for about three days.

Robina wiped away her tears, and seized the first one that came to her hand. The cow, without saying a word, kicked over the empty bucket, and walked away, disgust expressed in every hair of her body. Robina, crying quietly, followed her. By patting her on her neck, and letting her wipe her nose upon my coat – which seemed to comfort her – I persuaded her to keep still while Robina worked for ten minutes at high pressure. The result was about a glassful and a half, the cow's capacity, to all appearance, being by this time some five or six gallons.

Robina broke down, and acknowledged she had been a wicked girl. If the cow died, so she said, she should never forgive herself. Veronica at this burst into tears also; and the cow, whether moved afresh by her own troubles or by theirs, commenced again to bellow. I was fortunately able to find an elderly labourer smoking a pipe and eating bacon underneath a tree; and with him I bargained that for a shilling a day he should milk the cow till further notice.

We left him busy, and returned to the cottage. Dick met us at the door with a cheery "Good morning." He wanted to know if we had heard the storm. He also wanted to know when breakfast would be ready. Robina thought that happy event would be shortly after he had boiled the kettle and made the tea and fried the bacon, while Veronica was laying the table.

"But I thought –"

Robina said that if he dared to mention the word "household-fairy" she would box his ears, and go straight up to bed, and leave everybody to do everything. She said she meant it.

Dick has one virtue: it is philosophy. "Come on, young 'un," said Dick to Veronica. "Trouble is good for us all."

"Some of us," said Veronica, "it makes bitter."

We sat down to breakfast at eight-thirty.

CHAPTER IV

Our architect arrived on Friday afternoon, or rather, his assistant.

I felt from the first I was going to like him. He is shy, and that, of course, makes him appear awkward. But, as I explained to Robina, it is the shy young men who, generally speaking, turn out best: few men could have been more painfully shy up to twenty-five than myself.

Robina said that was different: in the case of an author it did not matter. Robina's attitude towards the literary profession would not annoy me so much were it not typical. To be a literary man is, in Robina's opinion, to be a licensed idiot. It was only a week or two ago that I overheard from my study window a conversation between Veronica and Robina upon this very point. Veronica's eye had caught something lying on the grass. I could not myself see what it was, in consequence of an intervening laurel bush. Veronica stooped down and examined it with care. The next instant, uttering a piercing whoop, she leapt into the air; then, clapping her hands, began to dance. Her face was radiant with a holy joy. Robina, passing near, stopped and demanded explanation.

"Pa's tennis racket!" shouted Veronica – Veronica never sees the use of talking in an ordinary tone of voice when shouting will do just as well. She continued clapping her hands and taking little bounds into the air.

"Well, what are you going on like that for?" asked Robina. "It hasn't bit you, has it?"

"It's been out all night in the wet," shouted Veronica. "He forgot to bring it in."

"You wicked child!" said Robina severely. "It's nothing to be pleased about."

"Yes, it is," explained Veronica. "I thought at first it was mine. Oh, wouldn't there have been a talk about it, if it had been! Oh my! wouldn't there have been a row!" She settled down to a steady rhythmic dance, suggestive of a Greek chorus expressing satisfaction with the gods.

Robina seized her by the shoulders and shook her back into herself. "If it had been yours," said Robina, "you would deserve to have been sent to bed."

"Well, then, why don't he go to bed?" argued Veronica.

Robina took her by the arm and walked her up and down just underneath my window. I listened, because the conversation interested me.

"Pa, as I am always explaining to you," said Robina, "is a literary man. He cannot help forgetting things."

"Well, I can't help forgetting things," insisted Veronica.

"You find it hard," explained Robina kindly; "but if you keep on trying you will succeed. You will get more thoughtful. I used to be forgetful and do foolish things once, when I was a little girl."

"Good thing for us if we was all literary," suggested Veronica.

"If we 'were' all literary," Robina corrected her. "But you see we are not. You and I and Dick, we are just ordinary mortals. We must try and think, and be sensible. In the same way, when Pa gets excited and raves – I mean, seems to rave – it's the literary temperament. He can't help it."

"Can't you help doing anything when you are literary?" asked Veronica.

"There's a good deal you can't help," answered Robina. "It isn't fair to judge them by the ordinary standard."

They drifted towards the kitchen garden – it was the time of strawberries – and the remainder of the talk I lost. I noticed that for some days afterwards Veronica displayed a tendency to shutting herself up in the schoolroom with a copybook, and that lead pencils had a way of disappearing from my desk. One in particular that had suited me I determined if possible to recover. A subtle instinct guided me to Veronica's sanctum. I found her thoughtfully sucking it. She explained to me that she was writing a little play.

"You get things from your father, don't you?" she enquired of me.

“You do,” I admitted; “but you ought not to take them without asking. I am always telling you of it. That pencil is the only one I can write with.”

“I didn’t mean the pencil,” explained Veronica. “I was wondering if I had got your literary temper.”

It is puzzling, when you come to think of it, this estimate accorded by the general public to the *littérateur*. It stands to reason that the man who writes books, explaining everything and putting everybody right, must be himself an exceptionally clever man; else how could he do it! The thing is pure logic. Yet to listen to Robina and her like you might think we had not sense enough to run ourselves, as the saying is – let alone running the universe. If I would let her, Robina would sit and give me information by the hour.

“The ordinary girl..” Robina will begin, with the air of a University Extension Lecturer.

It is so exasperating. As if I did not know all there is to be known about girls! Why, it is my business. I point this out to Robina.

“Yes, I know,” Robina will answer sweetly. “But I was meaning the real girl.”

It would make not the slightest difference were I even quite a high-class literary man – Robina thinks I am: she is a dear child. Were I Shakespeare himself, and could I in consequence say to her: “Methinks, child, the creator of Ophelia and Juliet, and Rosamund and Beatrice, must surely know something about girls,” Robina would still make answer:

“Of course, Pa dear. Everybody knows how clever you are. But I was thinking for the moment of real girls.”

I wonder to myself sometimes, Is literature to the general reader ever anything more than a fairy-tale? We write with our heart’s blood, as we put it. We ask our conscience, Is it right thus to lay bare the secrets of our souls? The general reader does not grasp that we are writing with our heart’s blood: to him it is just ink. He does not believe we are laying bare the secrets of our souls: he takes it we are just pretending. “Once upon a time there lived a girl named Angelina who loved a party by the name of Edwin.” He imagines – he, the general reader – when we tell him all the wonderful thoughts that were inside Angelina, that it was we who put them there. He does not know, he will not try to understand, that Angelina is in reality more real than is Miss Jones, who rides up every morning in the ’bus with him, and has a pretty knack of rendering conversation about the weather novel and suggestive. As a boy I won some popularity among my schoolmates as a teller of stories. One afternoon, to a small collection with whom I was homing across Regent’s Park, I told the story of a beautiful Princess. But she was not the ordinary Princess. She would not behave as a Princess should. I could not help it. The others heard only my voice, but I was listening to the wind. She thought she loved the Prince – until he had wounded the Dragon unto death and had carried her away into the wood. Then, while the Prince lay sleeping, she heard the Dragon calling to her in its pain, and crept back to where it lay bleeding, and put her arms about its scaly neck and kissed it; and that healed it. I was hoping myself that at this point it would turn into a prince itself, but it didn’t; it just remained a dragon – so the wind said. Yet the Princess loved it: it wasn’t half a bad dragon, when you knew it. I could not tell them what became of the Prince: the wind didn’t seem to care a hang about the Prince.

Myself, I liked the story, but Hocker, who was a Fifth Form boy, voicing our little public, said it was rot, so far, and that I had got to hurry up and finish things rightly.

“But that is all,” I told them.

“No, it isn’t,” said Hocker. “She’s got to marry the Prince in the end. He’ll have to kill the Dragon again; and mind he does it properly this time. Whoever heard of a Princess leaving a Prince for a Dragon!”

“But she wasn’t the ordinary sort of Princess,” I argued.

“Then she’s got to be,” criticised Hocker. “Don’t you give yourself so many airs. You make her marry the Prince, and be slippy about it. I’ve got to catch the four-fifteen from Chalk Farm station.”

“But she didn’t,” I persisted obstinately. “She married the Dragon and lived happy ever afterwards.”

Hocker adopted sterner measures. He seized my arm and twisted it behind me.

“She married who?” demanded Hocker: grammar was not Hocker’s strong point.

“The Dragon,” I growled.

“She married who?” repeated Hocker.

“The Dragon,” I whined.

“She married who?” for the third time urged Hocker.

Hocker was strong, and the tears were forcing themselves into my eyes in spite of me. So the Princess in return for healing the Dragon made it promise to reform. It went back with her to the Prince, and made itself generally useful to both of them for the rest of the tour. And the Prince took the Princess home with him and married her; and the Dragon died and was buried. The others liked the story better, but I hated it; and the wind sighed and died away.

The little crowd becomes the reading public, and Hocker grows into an editor; he twists my arm in other ways. Some are brave, so the crowd kicks them and scurries off to catch the four-fifteen. But most of us, I fear, are slaves to Hocker. Then, after awhile, the wind grows sulky and will not tell us stories any more, and we have to make them up out of our own heads. Perhaps it is just as well. What were doors and windows made for but to keep out the wind.

He is a dangerous fellow, this wandering Wind; he leads me astray. I was talking about our architect.

He made a bad start, so far as Robina was concerned, by coming in at the back-door. Robina, in a big apron, was washing up. He apologised for having blundered into the kitchen, and offered to go out again and work round to the front. Robina replied, with unnecessary severity as I thought, that an architect, if anyone, might have known the difference between the right side of a house and the wrong; but presumed that youth and inexperience could always be pleaded as excuse for stupidity. I cannot myself see why Robina should have been so much annoyed. Labour, as Robina had been explaining to Veronica only a few hours before, exalts a woman. In olden days, ladies – the highest in the land – were proud, not ashamed, of their ability to perform domestic duties. This, later on, I pointed out to Robina. Her answer was that in olden days you didn’t have chits of boys going about, calling themselves architects, and opening back-doors without knocking; or if they did knock, knocking so that nobody on earth could hear them.

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