KENNETH GRAHAME

THE GOLDEN AGE

Kenneth Grahame

The Golden Age

Grahame K.

The Golden Age / K. Grahame — «Public Domain»,

Содержание

Kenneth Grahame
The Golden Age

PROLOGUE: THE OLYMPIANS

LOOKING back to those days of old, ere the gate shut to behind me, I can see now that to children with a proper equipment of parents these things would have worn a different aspect. But to those whose nearest were aunts and uncles, a special attitude of mind may be allowed. They treated us, indeed, with kindness enough as to the needs of the flesh, but after that with indifference (an indifference, as I recognise, the result of a certain stupidity), and therewith the commonplace conviction that your child is merely animal. At a very early age I remember realising in a quite impersonal and kindly way the existence of that stupidity, and its tremendous influence in the world; while there grew up in me, as in the parallel case of Caliban upon Setebos, a vague sense of a ruling power, wilful, and freakish, and prone to the practice of vagaries – 'just choosing so': as, for instance, the giving of authority over us to these hopeless and incapable creatures, when it might far more reasonably have been given to ourselves over them. These elders, our betters by a trick of chance, commanded no respect, but only a certain blend of envy – of their good luck – and pity – for their inability to make use of it. Indeed, it was one of the most hopeless features in their character (when we troubled ourselves to waste a thought on them: which wasn't often) that, having absolute licence to indulge in the pleasures of life, they could get no good of it. They might dabble in the pond all day, hunt the chickens, climb trees in the most uncompromising Sunday clothes; they were free to issue forth and buy gunpowder in the full eye of the sun – free to fire cannons and explode mines on the lawn: yet they never did any one of these things. No irresistible Energy haled them to church o' Sundays; yet they went there regularly of their own accord, though they betrayed no greater delight in the experience than ourselves.

On the whole, the existence of these Olympians seemed to be entirely void of interests, even as their movements were confined and slow, and their habits stereotyped and senseless. To anything but appearances they were blind. For them the orchard (a place elf-haunted, wonderful!) simply produced so many apples and cherries: or it didn't – when the failures of Nature were not infrequently ascribed to us. They never set foot within fir-wood or hazel-copse, nor dreamt of the marvels hid therein. The mysterious sources, sources as of old Nile, that fed the duck-pond had no magic for them. They were unaware of Indians, nor recked they anything of bisons or of pirates (with pistols!), though the whole place swarmed with such portents. They cared not to explore for robbers' caves, nor dig for hidden treasure. Perhaps, indeed, it was one of their best qualities that they spent the greater part of their time stuffily indoors.

To be sure there was an exception in the curate, who would receive, unblenching, the information that the meadow beyond the orchard was a prairie studded with herds of buffalo, which it was our delight, moccasined and tomahawked, to ride down with those whoops that announce the scenting of blood. He neither laughed nor sneered, as the Olympians would have done; but, possessed of a serious idiosyncrasy, he would contribute such lots of valuable suggestion as to the pursuit of this particular sort of big game that, as it seemed to us, his mature age and eminent position could scarce have been attained without a practical knowledge of the creature in its native lair. Then, too, he was always ready to constitute himself a hostile army or a band of marauding Indians on the shortest possible notice: in brief, a distinctly able man, with talents, so far as we could judge, immensely above the majority. I trust he is a bishop by this time. He had all the necessary qualifications, as we knew.

These strange folk had visitors sometimes – stiff and colourless Olympians like themselves, equally without vital interests and intelligent pursuits: emerging out of the clouds, and passing away

again to drag on an aimless existence somewhere beyond our ken. Then brute force was pitilessly applied. We were captured, washed, and forced into clean collars: silently submitting as was our wont, with more contempt than anger. Anon, with unctuous hair and faces stiffened in a conventional grin, we sat and listened to the usual platitudes. How could reasonable people spend their precious time so? That was ever our wonder as we bounded forth at last: to the old clay-pit to make pots, or to hunt bears among the hazels.

It was perennial matter for amazement how these Olympians would talk over our heads – during meals, for instance – of this or the other social or political inanity, under the delusion that these pale phantasms of reality were among the importances of life. We *illuminati*, eating silently, our heads full of plans and conspiracies, could have told them what real life was. We had just left it outside, and were all on fire to get back to it. Of course we didn't waste the revelation on them: the futility of imparting our ideas had long been demonstrated. One in thought and purpose, linked by the necessity of combating one hostile fate, a power antagonistic ever – a power we lived to evade – we had no confidants save ourselves. This strange anæmic order of beings was further removed from us, in fact, than the kindly beasts who shared our natural existence in the sun. The estrangement was fortified by an abiding sense of injustice, arising from the refusal of the Olympians ever to defend, to retract, to admit themselves in the wrong, or to accept similar concessions on our part. For instance, when I flung the cat out of an upper window (though I did it from no ill-feeling, and it didn't hurt the cat), I was ready, after a moment's reflection, to own I was wrong, as a gentleman should. But was the matter allowed to end there? I trow not. Again, when Harold was locked up in his room all day, for assault and battery upon a neighbour's pig – an action he would have scorned: being indeed on the friendliest terms with the porker in question – there was no handsome expression of regret on the discovery of the real culprit. What Harold had felt was not so much the imprisonment – indeed, he had very soon escaped by the window, with assistance from his allies, and had only gone back in time for his release – as the Olympian habit. A word would have set all right; but of course that word was never spoken.

Well! The Olympians are all past and gone. Somehow the sun does not seem to shine so brightly as it used; the trackless meadows of old time have shrunk and dwindled away to a few poor acres. A saddening doubt, a dull suspicion, creeps over me. *Et in Arcadia ego*– I certainly did once inhabit Arcady. Can it be that I also have become an Olympian?

A HOLIDAY

THE masterful wind was up and out, shouting and chasing, the lord of the morning. Poplars swayed and tossed with a roaring swish; dead leaves sprang aloft, and whirled into space; and all the clear-swept heaven seemed to thrill with sound like a great harp. It was one of the first awakenings of the year. The earth stretched herself, smiling in her sleep; and everything leapt and pulsed to the stir of the giant's movement. With us it was a whole holiday; the occasion a birthday – it matters not whose. Some one of us had had presents, and pretty conventional speeches, and had glowed with that sense of heroism which is no less sweet that nothing has been done to deserve it. But the holiday was for all, the rapture of awakening Nature for all, the various outdoor joys of puddles and sun and hedge-breaking for all. Colt-like I ran through the meadows, frisking happy heels in the face of Nature laughing responsive. Above, the sky was bluest of the blue; wide pools left by the winter's floods flashed the colour back, true and brilliant; and the soft air thrilled with the germinating touch that seems to kindle something in my own small person as well as in the rash primrose already lurking in sheltered haunts. Out into the brimming sun-bathed world I sped, free of lessons, free of discipline and correction, for one day at least. My legs ran of themselves, and though I heard my name called faint and shrill behind, there was no stopping for me. It was only Harold, I concluded, and his legs, though shorter than mine, were good for a longer spurt than this. Then I heard it called again, but this time more faintly, with a pathetic break in the middle; and I pulled up short, recognising Charlotte's plaintive note.

She panted up anon, and dropped on the turf beside me. Neither had any desire for talk; the glow and the glory of existing on this perfect morning were satisfaction full and sufficient.

'Where's Harold?' I asked presently.

'Oh, he's just playin' muffin-man, as usual,' said Charlotte with petulance. 'Fancy wanting to be a muffin-man on a whole holiday!'

It was a strange craze, certainly; but Harold, who invented his own games and played them without assistance, always stuck staunchly to a new fad, till he had worn it quite out. Just at present he was a muffin-man, and day and night he went through passages and up and down staircases, ringing a noiseless bell and offering phantom muffins to invisible wayfarers. It sounds a poor sort of sport; and yet – to pass along busy streets of your own building, for ever ringing an imaginary bell and offering airy muffins of your own make to a bustling thronging crowd of your own creation – there were points about the game, it cannot be denied, though it seemed scarce in harmony with this radiant wind-swept morning!

'And Edward, where is he?' I questioned again.

'He's coming along by the road,' said Charlotte. 'He'll be crouching in the ditch when we get there, and he's going to be a grizzly bear and spring out on us, only you mustn't say I told you, 'cos it's to be a surprise.'

'All right,' I said magnanimously. 'Come on and let's be surprised.' But I could not help feeling that on this day of days even a grizzly felt misplaced and common.

Sure enough an undeniable bear sprang out on us as we dropped into the road; then ensued shrieks, growlings, revolver-shots, and unrecorded heroisms, till Edward condescended at last to roll over and die, bulking large and grim, an unmitigated grizzly. It was an understood thing, that whoever took upon himself to be a bear must eventually die, sooner or later, even if he were the eldest born; else, life would have been all strife and carnage, and the Age of Acorns have displaced our hard-won civilisation. This little affair concluded with satisfaction to all parties concerned, we rambled along the road, picking up the defaulting Harold by the way, muffinless now and in his right and social mind.

'What would you do?' asked Charlotte presently – the book of the moment always dominating her thoughts until it was sucked dry and cast aside, – 'What would you do if you saw two lions in the road, one on each side, and you didn't know if they was loose or if they was chained up?'

'Do?' shouted Edward valiantly, 'I should – I should – I should – ' His boastful accents died away into a mumble: 'Dunno what I should do.'

'Shouldn't do anything,' I observed after consideration; and, really, it would be difficult to arrive at a wiser conclusion.

'If it came to *doing*,' remarked Harold reflectively, 'the lions would do all the doing there was to do, wouldn't they?'

'But if they was *good* lions,' rejoined Charlotte, 'they would do as they would be done by.'

'Ah, but how are you to know a good lion from a bad one?' said Edward. 'The books don't tell you at all, and the lions ain't marked any different.'

'Why, there aren't any good lions,' said Harold hastily.

'O yes, there are, heaps and heaps,' contradicted Edward. 'Nearly all the lions in the story-books are good lions. There was Androcles' lion, and St. Jerome's lion, and – and – and the Lion and the Unicorn – '

'He beat the Unicorn,' observed Harold dubiously, 'all round the town.'

'That *proves* he was a good lion,' cried Edward triumphantly. 'But the question is, how are you to tell 'em when you see 'em?'

'*I* should ask Martha,' said Harold of the simple creed.

Edward snorted contemptuously, then turned to Charlotte. 'Look here,' he said; 'let's play at lions, anyhow, and I'll run on to that corner and be a lion, – I'll be two lions, one on each side of the road, – and you'll come along, and you won't know whether I'm chained up or not, and that'll be the fun!'

'No, thank you,' said Charlotte firmly; 'you'll be chained up till I'm quite close to you, and then you'll be loose, and you'll tear me in pieces, and make my frock all dirty, and p'raps you'll hurt me as well. *I* know your lions!'

'No, I won't, I swear I won't,' protested Edward. 'I'll be quite a new lion this time – something you can't even imagine.' And he raced off to his post. Charlotte hesitated – then she went timidly on, at each step growing less Charlotte, the mummer of a minute, and more the anxious Pilgrim of all time. The lion's wrath waxed terrible at her approach; his roaring filled the startled air. I waited until they were both thoroughly absorbed, and then I slipped through the hedge out of the trodden highway, into the vacant meadow spaces. It was not that I was unsociable, nor that I knew Edward's lions to the point of satiety; but the passion and the call of the divine morning were high in my blood. Earth to earth! That was the frank note, the joyous summons of the day; and they could not but jar and seem artificial, these human discussions and pretences, when boon nature, reticent no more, was singing that full-throated song of hers that thrills and claims control of every fibre. The air was wine, the moist earth-smell wine, the lark's song, the wafts from the cow-shed at top of the field, the pant and smoke of a distant train – all were wine – or song, was it? or odour, this unity they all blent into? I had no words then to describe it, that earth-effluence of which I was so conscious; nor, indeed, have I found words since. I ran sideways, shouting; I dug glad heels into the squelching soil; I splashed diamond showers from puddles with a stick; I hurled clods skywards at random, and presently I somehow found myself singing. The words were mere nonsense – irresponsible babble; the tune was an improvisation, a weary, unrhythmic thing of rise and fall: and yet it seemed to me a genuine utterance, and just at that moment the one thing fitting and right and perfect. Humanity would have rejected it with scorn. Nature, everywhere singing in the same key, recognised and accepted it without a flicker of dissent.

All the time the hearty wind was calling to me companionably from where he swung and bellowed in the tree-tops. 'Take me for guide to-day,' he seemed to plead. 'Other holidays you have tramped it in the track of the stolid, unswerving sun; a belated truant, you have dragged a weary foot

homeward with only a pale, expressionless moon for company. To-day why not I, the trickster, the hypocrite? I who whip round corners and bluster, relapse and evade, then rally and pursue! I can lead you the best and rarest dance of any; for I am the strong capricious one, the lord of misrule, and I alone am irresponsible and unprincipled, and obey no law.' And for me, I was ready enough to fall in with the fellow's humour; was not this a whole holiday? So we sheered off together, arm-in-arm, so to speak; and with fullest confidence I took the jigging, thwartwise course my chainless pilot laid for me.

A whimsical comrade I found him, ere he had done with me. Was it in jest, or with some serious purpose of his own, that he brought me plump upon a pair of lovers, silent, face to face o'er a discreet unwinking stile? As a rule this sort of thing struck me as the most pitiful tomfoolery. Two calves rubbing noses through a gate were natural and right and within the order of things; but that human beings, with salient interests and active pursuits beckoning them on from every side, could thus – ! Well, it was a thing to hurry past, shamed of face, and think on no more. But this morning everything I met seemed to be accounted for and set in tune by that same magical touch in the air; and it was with a certain surprise that I found myself regarding these fatuous ones with kindliness instead of contempt, as I rambled by, unheeded of them. There was indeed some reconciling influence abroad, which could bring the like antics into harmony with bud and growth and the frolic air.

A puff on the right cheek from my wilful companion sent me off at a fresh angle, and presently I came in sight of the village church, sitting solitary within its circle of elms. From forth the vestry window projected two small legs, gyrating, hungry for foothold, with larceny – not to say sacrilege – in their every wriggle: a godless sight for a supporter of the Establishment. Though the rest was hidden, I knew the legs well enough; they were usually attached to the body of Bill Saunders, the peerless bad boy of the village. Bill's coveted booty, too, I could easily guess at that; it came from the Vicar's store of biscuits, kept (as I knew) in a cupboard along with his official trappings. For a moment I hesitated; then I passed on my way. I protest I was not on Bill's side; but then, neither was I on the Vicar's, and there was something in this immoral morning which seemed to say that perhaps, after all, Bill had as much right to the biscuits as the Vicar, and would certainly enjoy them better; and anyhow it was a disputable point, and no business of mine. Nature, who had accepted me for ally, cared little who had the world's biscuits, and assuredly was not going to let any friend of hers waste his time in playing policeman for Society.

He was tugging at me anew, my insistent guide; and I felt sure, as I rambled off in his wake, that he had more holiday matter to show me. And so, indeed, he had; and all of it was to the same lawless tune. Like a black pirate flag on the blue ocean of air, a hawk hung ominous; then, plummet-wise, dropped to the hedgerow, whence there rose, thin and shrill, a piteous voice of squealing. By the time I got there a whisk of feathers on the turf – like scattered playbills – was all that remained to tell of the tragedy just enacted. Yet Nature smiled and sang on, pitiless, gay, impartial. To her, who took no sides, there was every bit as much to be said for the hawk as for the chaffinch. Both were her children, and she would show no preferences.

Further on, a hedgehog lay dead athwart the path – nay, more than dead; decadent, distinctly; a sorry sight for one that had known the fellow in more bustling circumstances. Nature might at least have paused to shed one tear over this rough-jacketed little son of hers, for his wasted aims, his cancelled ambitions, his whole career of usefulness cut suddenly short. But not a bit of it! Jubilant as ever, her song went bubbling on, and 'Death-in-Life' – and again, 'Life-in-Death,' were its alternate burdens. And looking round, and seeing the sheep-nibbled heels of turnips that dotted the ground, their hearts eaten out of them in frost-bound days now over and done, I seemed to discern, faintly, a something of the stern meaning in her valorous chant.

My invisible companion was singing also, and seemed at times to be chuckling softly to himself, – doubtless at thought of the strange new lessons he was teaching me; perhaps, too, at a special bit of waggishness he had still in store. For when at last he grew weary of such insignificant earth-bound company, he deserted me at a certain spot I knew; then dropped, subsided, and slunk

away into nothingness. I raised my eyes, and before me, grim and lichened, stood the ancient whipping-post of the village; its sides fretted with the initials of a generation that scorned its mute lesson, but still clipped by the stout rusty shackles that had tethered the wrists of such of that generation's ancestors as had dared to mock at order and law. Had I been an infant Sterne, here was a grand chance for sentimental output! As things were, I could only hurry homewards, my moral tail well between my legs, with an uneasy feeling, as I glanced back over my shoulder, that there was more in this chance than met the eye.

And outside our gate I found Charlotte, alone and crying. Edward, it seemed, had persuaded her to hide, in the full expectation of being duly found and ecstatically pounced upon; then he had caught sight of the butcher's cart, and, forgetting his obligations, had rushed off for a ride. Harold, it further appeared, greatly coveting tadpoles, and top-heavy with the eagerness of possession, had fallen into the pond. This, in itself, was nothing; but on attempting to sneak in by the back-door, he had rendered up his duckweed-bedabbled person into the hands of an aunt, and had been promptly sent off to bed; and this, on a holiday, was very much. The moral of the whipping-post was working itself out; and I was not in the least surprised when, on reaching home, I was seized upon and accused of doing something I had never even thought of. And my frame of mind was such, that I could only wish most heartily that I had done it.

A WHITE-WASHED UNCLE

IN our small lives that day was eventful when another uncle was to come down from town, and submit his character and qualifications (albeit unconsciously) to our careful criticism. Earlier uncles had been weighed in the balance, and – alas! – found grievously wanting. There was Uncle Thomas – a failure from the first. Not that his disposition was malevolent, nor were his habits such as to unfit him for decent society; but his rooted conviction seemed to be that the reason of a child's existence was to serve as a butt for senseless adult jokes – or what, from the accompanying guffaws of laughter, appeared to be intended for jokes. Now, we were anxious that he should have a perfectly fair trial; so in the tool-house, between breakfast and lessons, we discussed and examined all his witticisms one by one, calmly, critically, dispassionately. It was no good: we could not discover any salt in them. And as only a genuine gift of humour could have saved Uncle Thomas – for he pretended to naught besides – he was reluctantly writ down a hopeless impostor.

Uncle George – the youngest – was distinctly more promising. He accompanied us cheerily round the establishment – suffered himself to be introduced to each of the cows – held out the right hand of fellowship to the pig – and even hinted that a pair of pink-eyed Himalayan rabbits might arrive – unexpectedly – from town some day. We were just considering whether in this fertile soil an apparently accidental remark on the solid qualities of guinea-pigs or ferrets might haply blossom and bring forth fruit, when our governess appeared on the scene. Uncle George's manner at once underwent a complete and contemptible change. His interest in rational topics seemed, 'like a fountain's sickening pulse,' to flag and ebb away; and though Miss Smedley's ostensible purpose was to take Selina for her usual walk. I can vouch for it that Selina spent her morning ratting, along with the keeper's boy and me; while if Miss Smedley walked with any one, it would appear to have been with Uncle George.

But, despicable as his conduct had been, he underwent no hasty condemnation. The defection was discussed in all its bearings, but it seemed sadly clear at last that this uncle must possess some innate badness of character and fondness for low company. We who from daily experience knew Miss Smedley like a book – were we not only too well aware that she had neither accomplishments nor charms – no characteristic, in fact, but an inbred viciousness of temper and disposition? True, she knew the dates of the English kings by heart; but how could that profit Uncle George, who, having passed into the army, had ascended beyond the need of useful information? Our bows and arrows, on the other hand, had been freely placed at his disposal; and a soldier should not have hesitated in his choice a moment. No: Uncle George had fallen from grace, and was unanimously damned. And the non-arrival of the Himalayan rabbits was only another nail in his coffin. Uncles, therefore, were just then a heavy and lifeless market, and there was little inclination to deal. Still it was agreed that Uncle William, who had just returned from India, should have as fair a trial as the others; more especially as romantic possibilities might well be embodied in one who had held the gorgeous East in fee.

Selina had kicked my shins – like the girl she is! – during a scuffle in the passage, and I was still rubbing them with one hand when I found that the uncle-on-approbation was half-heartedly shaking the other. A florid, elderly man, quite unmistakably nervous, he let drop one grimy paw after another, and, turning very red, with an awkward simulation of heartiness, 'Well, h' are y' all?' he said, 'Glad to see me, eh?' As we could hardly, in justice, be expected to have formed an opinion on him at that early stage, we could but look at each other in silence; which scarce served to relieve the tension of the situation. Indeed, the cloud never really lifted during his stay. In talking things over later, some one put forward the suggestion that he must at some time or other have committed a stupendous crime. But I could not bring myself to believe that the man, though evidently unhappy, was really guilty of anything; and I caught him once or twice looking at us with evident kindliness, though, seeing himself observed, he blushed and turned away his head.

When at last the atmosphere was clear of his depressing influence, we met despondently in the potato-cellar – all of us, that is, but Harold, who had been told off to accompany his relative to the station; and the feeling was unanimous, that, as an uncle, William could not be allowed to pass. Selina roundly declared him a beast, pointing out that he had not even got us a half-holiday; and, indeed, there seemed little to do but to pass sentence. We were about to put it to the vote, when Harold appeared on the scene; his red face, round eyes, and mysterious demeanour, hinting at awful portents. Speechless he stood a space: then, slowly drawing his hand from the pocket of his knickerbockers, he displayed on a dirty palm one – two – three – four half-crowns! We could but gaze – tranced, breathless, mute. Never had any of us seen, in the aggregate, so much bullion before. Then Harold told his tale.

'I took the old fellow to the station,' he said, 'and as we went along I told him all about the stationmaster's family, and how I had seen the porter kissing our housemaid, and what a nice fellow he was, with no airs or affectation about him, and anything I thought would be of interest; but he didn't seem to pay much attention, but walked along puffing his cigar, and once I thought – I'm not certain, but I *thought*– I heard him say, "Well, thank God, that's over!" When we got to the station he stopped suddenly, and said, "Hold on a minute!" Then he shoved these into my hand in a frightened sort of way, and said, "Look here, youngster! These are for you and the other kids. Buy what you like – make little beasts of yourselves – only don't tell the old people, mind! Now cut away home!" So I cut.'

A solemn hush fell on the assembly, broken first by the small Charlotte. 'I didn't know,' she observed dreamily, 'that there were such good men anywhere in the world. I hope he'll die to-night, for then he'll go straight to heaven!' But the repentant Selina bewailed herself with tears and sobs, refusing to be comforted; for that in her haste she had called this white-souled relative a beast.

'I'll tell you what we'll do,' said Edward, the master-mind, rising – as he always did – to the situation: 'We'll christen the piebald pig after him – the one that hasn't got a name yet. And that'll show we're sorry for our mistake!'

'I – I christened that pig this morning,' Harold guiltily confessed; 'I christened it after the curate. I'm very sorry – but he came and bowled to me last night, after you others had all been sent to bed early – and somehow I felt I *had* to do it!'

'Oh, but that doesn't count,' said Edward hastily; 'because we weren't all there. We'll take that christening off, and call it Uncle William. And you can save up the curate for the next litter!'

And the motion being agreed to without a division, the House went into Committee of Supply.

ALARUMS AND EXCURSIONS

'LET'S pretend,' suggested Harold, 'that we're Cavaliers and Roundheads; and *you* be a Roundhead!'

'O bother,' I replied drowsily, 'we pretended that yesterday; and it's not my turn to be a Roundhead, anyhow.' The fact is, I was lazy, and the call to arms fell on indifferent ears. We three younger ones were stretched at length in the orchard. The sun was hot, the season merry June, and never (I thought) had there been such wealth and riot of buttercups throughout the lush grass. Green-and-gold was the dominant key that day. Instead of active 'pretence' with its shouts and its perspiration, how much better – I held – to lie at ease and pretend to one's self, in green and golden fancies, slipping the husk and passing, a careless lounger, through a sleepy imaginary world all gold and green! But the persistent Harold was not to be fobbed off.

'Well then,' he began afresh, 'let's pretend we're Knights of the Round Table; and (with a rush) *I'll* be Lancelot!'

'I won't play unless I'm Lancelot,' I said. I didn't mean it really, but the game of Knights always began with this particular contest.

'O *please*,' implored Harold. 'You know when Edward's here I never get a chance of being Lancelot. I haven't been Lancelot for weeks!'

Then I yielded gracefully. 'All right,' I said. 'I'll be Tristram.'

'O, but you can't,' cried Harold again. 'Charlotte has always been Tristram. She won't play unless she's allowed to be Tristram! Be somebody else this time.'

Charlotte said nothing, but breathed hard, looking straight before her. The peerless hunter and harper was her special hero of romance, and rather than see the part in less appreciative hands, she would have gone back in tears to the stuffy schoolroom.

'I don't care,' I said: 'I'll be anything. I'll be Sir Kay. Come on!'

Then once more in this country's story the mail-clad knights paced through the greenwood shaw, questing adventure, redressing wrong; and bandits, five to one, broke and fled discomfited to their caves. Once more were damsels rescued, dragons disembowelled, and giants, in every corner of the orchard, deprived of their already superfluous number of heads; while Palomides the Saracen waited for us by the well, and Sir Breuse Saunce Pité vanished in craven flight before the skilled spear that was his terror and his bane. Once more the lists were dight in Camelot, and all was gay with shimmer of silk and gold; the earth shook with thunder of hooves, ash-staves flew in splinters, and the firmament rang to the clash of sword on helm. The varying fortune of the day swung doubtful – now on this side, now on that; till at last Lancelot, grim and great, thrusting through the press, unhorsed Sir Tristram (an easy task), and bestrode her, threatening doom; while the Cornish knight, forgetting hard-won fame of old, cried piteously, 'You're hurting me, I tell you! and you're tearing my frock!' Then it happed that Sir Kay, hurtling to the rescue, stopped short in his stride, catching sight suddenly, through apple-boughs, of a gleam of scarlet afar off; while the confused tramp of many horses, mingled with talk and laughter, was borne to the ears of his fellow-champions and himself.

'What is it?' inquired Tristram, sitting up and shaking out her curls; while Lancelot forsook the clanging lists and trotted nimbly to the boundary-hedge.

I stood spell-bound for a moment longer, and then, with a cry of 'Soldiers!' I was off to the hedge, Sir Tristram picking herself up and scurrying after us.

Down the road they came, two and two, at an easy walk; scarlet flamed in the eye, bits jingled and saddles squeaked delightfully; while the men, in a halo of dust, smoked their short clays like the heroes they were. In a swirl of intoxicating glory the troop clinked and clattered by, while we shouted and waved, jumping up and down, and the big jolly horsemen acknowledged the salute with easy condescension. The moment they were past we were through the hedge and after them. Soldiers

were not the common stuff of everyday life. There had been nothing like this since the winter before last, when on a certain afternoon – bare of leaf and monochromatic in its hue of sodden fallow and frost-nipt copse – suddenly the hounds had burst through the fence with their mellow cry, and all the paddock was for the minute reverberant of thudding hoof and dotted with glancing red. But this was better, since it could only mean that blows and bloodshed were in the air.

'Is there going to be a battle?' panted Harold, hardly able to keep up for excitement.

'Of course there is,' I replied. 'We're just in time. Come on!'

Perhaps I ought to have known better; and yet – ? The pigs and poultry, with whom we chiefly consorted, could instruct us little concerning the peace that lapped in these latter days our seagirt realm. In the schoolroom we were just now dallying with the Wars of the Roses; and did not legends of the country-side inform us how cavaliers had once galloped up and down these very lanes from their quarters in the village? Here, now, were soldiers unmistakable; and if their business was not fighting, what was it? Sniffing the joy of battle, we followed hard in their tracks.

'Won't Edward be sorry,' puffed Harold, 'that he's begun that beastly Latin?'

It did, indeed, seem hard. Edward, the most martial spirit of us all, was drearily conjugating *amo* (of all verbs!) between four walls; while Selina, who ever thrilled ecstatic to a red coat, was struggling with the uncouth German tongue. 'Age,' I reflected, 'carries its penalties.'

It was a grievous disappointment to us that the troop passed through the village unmolested. Every cottage, I pointed out to my companions, ought to have been loopholed, and strongly held. But no opposition was offered to the soldiers: who, indeed, conducted themselves with a recklessness and a want of precaution that seemed simply criminal.

At the last cottage a transitory gleam of common sense flickered across me, and, turning on Charlotte, I sternly ordered her back. The small maiden, docile but exceedingly dolorous, dragged reluctant feet homewards, heavy at heart that she was to behold no stout fellows slain that day; but Harold and I held steadily on, expecting every instant to see the environing hedges crackle and spit forth the leaden death.

'Will they be Indians?' asked my brother (meaning the enemy) 'or Roundheads, or what?'

I reflected. Harold always required direct straightforward answers – not faltering suppositions.

'They won't be Indians,' I replied at last; 'nor yet Roundheads. There haven't been any Roundheads seen about here for a long time. They'll be Frenchmen.'

Harold's face fell. 'All right,' he said: 'Frenchmen'll do; but I did hope they'd be Indians.'

'If they were going to be Indians,' I explained, 'I – I don't think I'd go on. Because when Indians take you prisoner they scalp you first, and then burn you at the stake. But Frenchmen don't do that sort of thing.'

'Are you quite sure?' asked Harold doubtfully.

'Quite,' I replied. 'Frenchmen only shut you up in a thing called the Bastille; and then you get a file sent in to you in a loaf of bread, and saw the bars through, and slide down a rope, and they all fire at you – but they don't hit you – and you run down to the seashore as hard as you can, and swim off to a British frigate, and there you are!'

Harold brightened up again. The programme was rather attractive. 'If they try to take us prisoner,' he said, 'we – we won't run, will we?'

Meanwhile, the craven foe was a long time showing himself; and we were reaching strange outland country, uncivilised, wherein lions might be expected to prowl at nightfall. I had a stitch in my side, and both Harold's stockings had come down. Just as I was beginning to have gloomy doubts of the proverbial courage of Frenchmen, the officer called out something, the men closed up, and, breaking into a trot, the troops – already far ahead – vanished out of our sight. With a sinking at the heart, I began to suspect we had been fooled.

'Are they charging?' cried Harold, very weary, but rallying gamely.

'I think not,' I replied doubtfully. 'When there's going to be a charge, the officer always makes a speech, and then they draw their swords and the trumpets blow, and – but let's try a short cut. We may catch them up yet.'

So we struck across the fields and into another road, and pounded down that, and then over more fields, panting, down-hearted, yet hoping for the best. The sun went in, and a thin drizzle began to fall; we were muddy, breathless, almost dead-beat; but we blundered on, till at last we struck a road more brutally, more callously unfamiliar than any road I ever looked upon. Not a hint nor a sign of friendly direction or assistance on the dogged white face of it! There was no longer any disguising it: we were hopelessly lost. The small rain continued steadily, the evening began to come on. Really there are moments when a fellow is justified in crying; and I would have cried too, if Harold had not been there. That right-minded child regarded an elder brother as a veritable god; and I could see that he felt himself as secure as if a whole Brigade of Guards had hedged him round with protecting bayonets. But I dreaded sore lest he should begin again with his questions.

As I gazed in dumb appeal on the face of unresponsive nature, the sound of nearing wheels sent a pulse of hope through my being: increasing to rapture as I recognised in the approaching vehicle the familiar carriage of the old doctor. If ever a god emerged from a machine, it was when this heaven-sent friend, recognising us, stopped and jumped out with a cheery hail. Harold rushed up to him at once. 'Have you been there?' he cried. 'Was it a jolly fight? who beat? were there many people killed?'

The doctor appeared puzzled. I briefly explained the situation.

'I see,' said the doctor, looking grave and twisting his face this way and that. 'Well, the fact is, there isn't going to be any battle to-day. It's been put off, on account of the change in the weather. You will have due notice of the renewal of hostilities. And now you'd better jump in and I'll drive you home. You've been running a fine rig! Why, you might have both been taken and shot as spies!'

This special danger had never even occurred to us. The thrill of it accentuated the cosy homelike feeling of the cushions we nestled into as we rolled homewards. The doctor beguiled the journey with blood-curdling narratives of personal adventure in the tented field, he having followed the profession of arms (so it seemed) in every quarter of the globe. Time, the destroyer of all things beautiful, subsequently revealed the baselessness of these legends; but what of that? There are higher things than truth; and we were almost reconciled, by the time we were put down at our gate, to the fact that the battle had been postponed.

THE FINDING OF THE PRINCESS

IT was the day I was promoted to a toothbrush. The girls, irrespective of age, had been thus distinguished some time before; why, we boys could never rightly understand, except that it was part and parcel of a system of studied favouritism on behalf of creatures both physically inferior and (as was shown by a fondness for tale-bearing) of weaker mental fibre to us boys. It was not that we yearned after these strange instruments in themselves. Edward, indeed, applied his to the scrubbing-out of his squirrel's cage, and for personal use, when a superior eye was grim on him, borrowed Harold's or mine, indifferently. But the nimbus of distinction that clung to them – that we coveted exceedingly. What more, indeed, was there to ascend to, before the remote, but still possible, razor and strop?

Perhaps the exaltation had mounted to my head; or nature and the perfect morning joined to hint at disaffection. Anyhow, having breakfasted, and triumphantly repeated the collect I had broken down in the last Sunday – 't was one without rhythm or alliteration: a most objectionable collect – having achieved thus much, the small natural man in me rebelled, and I vowed, as I straddled and spat about the stable-yard in feeble imitation of the coachman, that lessons might go to the Inventor of them. It was only geography that morning, any way: and the practical thing was worth any quantity of bookish theoric. As for me, I was going on my travels, and imports and exports, populations and capitals, might very well wait while I explored the breathing coloured world outside.

True, a fellow-rebel was wanted; and Harold might, as a rule, have been counted on with certainty. But just then Harold was very proud. The week before he had 'gone into tables,' and had been endowed with a new slate, having a miniature sponge attached wherewith we washed the faces of Charlotte's dolls, thereby producing an unhealthy pallor which struck terror into the child's heart, always timorous regarding epidemic visitations. As to 'tables,' nobody knew exactly what they were, least of all Harold; but it was a step over the heads of the rest, and therefore a subject for self-adulation and – generally speaking – airs; so that Harold, hugging his slate and his chains, was out of the question now. In such a matter, girls were worse than useless, as wanting the necessary tenacity of will and contempt for self-constituted authority. So eventually I slipped through the hedge a solitary protestant, and issued forth on the lane what time the rest of the civilised world was sitting down to lessons.

The scene was familiar enough; and yet, this morning, how different it all seemed! The act, with its daring, tinted everything with new strange hues; affecting the individual with a sort of bruised feeling just below the pit of the stomach, that was intensified whenever his thoughts flew back to the ink-stained smelly schoolroom. And could this be really me? or was I only contemplating, from the schoolroom aforesaid, some other jolly young mutineer, faring forth under the genial sun? Anyhow, here was the friendly well, in its old place, half-way up the lane. Hither the yoke-shouldering village-folk were wont to come to fill their clinking buckets; when the drippings made worms of wet in the thick dust of the road. They had flat wooden crosses inside each pail, which floated on the top and (we were instructed) served to prevent the water from slopping over. We used to wonder by what magic this strange principle worked, and who first invented the crosses, and whether he got a peerage for it. But indeed the well was a centre of mystery, for a hornet's nest was somewhere hard by, and the very thought was fearsome. Wasps we knew well and disdained, storming them in their fastnesses. But these great Beasts, vestured in angry orange, three stings from which – so 'twas averred – would kill a horse, these were of a different kidney, and their dreadful drone suggested prudence and retreat. At this time neither villagers nor hornets encroached on the stillness: lessons, apparently, pervaded all nature. So, after dabbling awhile in the well – what boy has ever passed a bit of water without messing in it? – I scrambled through the hedge, shunning the hornet-haunted side, and struck into the silence of the copse.

If the lane had been deserted, this was loneliness become personal. Here mystery lurked and peeped; here brambles caught and held you with a purpose of their own; here saplings whipped your face with human spite. The copse, too, proved vaster in extent, more direfully drawn out, than one would ever have guessed from its frontage on the lane: and I was really glad when at last the wood opened and sloped down to a streamlet brawling forth into the sunlight. By this cheery companion I wandered along, conscious of little but that Nature, in providing store of water-rats, had thoughtfully furnished provender of right-sized stones. Rapids, also, there were, telling of canoes and portages – crinkling bays and inlets – caves for pirates and hidden treasures – the wise Dame had forgotten nothing – till at last, after what lapse of time I know not, my further course, though not the stream's, was barred by some six feet of stout wire netting, stretched from side to side just where a thick hedge, arching till it touched, forbade all further view.

The excitement of the thing was becoming thrilling. A Black Flag must surely be fluttering close by? Here was most plainly a malignant contrivance of the Pirates, designed to baffle our gun-boats when we dashed up-stream to shell them from their lair! A gun-boat, indeed, might well have hesitated, so stout was the netting, so close the hedge. But I spied where a rabbit was wont to pass, close down by the water's edge; where a rabbit could go a boy could follow, howbeit stomach-wise and with one leg in the stream; so the passage was achieved, and I stood inside, safe but breathless at the sight.

Gone was the brambled waste, gone the flickering tangle of woodland. Instead, terrace after terrace of shaven sward, stone-edged, urn-cornered, stepped delicately down to where the stream, now tamed and educated, passed from one to another marble basin, in which on occasion gleams of red hinted at gold-fish poised among the spreading water-lilies. The scene lay silent and slumbrous in the brooding noon-day sun: the drowsing peacock squatted humped on the lawn, no fish leaped in the pools, no bird declared himself from the trim secluding hedges. Self-confessed it was here, then, at last, the Garden of Sleep!

Two things, in those old days, I held in especial distrust: gamekeepers and gardeners. Seeing, however, no baleful apparitions of either quality, I pursued my way between rich flower-beds, in search of the necessary Princess. Conditions declared her presence patently as trumpets; without this centre such surroundings could not exist. A pavilion, gold-topped, wreathed with lush jessamine, beckoned with a special significance over close-set shrubs. There, if anywhere, She should be enshrined. Instinct, and some knowledge of the habits of princesses, triumphed; for (indeed) there She was! In no tranced repose, however, but laughingly, struggling to disengage her hand from the grasp of a grown-up man who occupied the marble bench with her. (As to age, I suppose now that the two swung in respective scales that pivoted on twenty. But children heed no minor distinctions. To them, the inhabited world is composed of the two main divisions: children and upgrown people; the latter in no way superior to the former – only hopelessly different. These two, then, belonged to the grown-up section.) I paused, thinking it strange they should prefer seclusion when there were fish to be caught, and butterflies to hunt in the sun outside; and as I cogitated thus, the grown-up man caught sight of me.

'Hallo, sprat!' he said with some abruptness; 'Where do you spring from?'

'I came up the stream,' I explained politely and comprehensively, 'and I was only looking for the Princess.'

'Then you are a water-baby,' he replied. 'And what do you think of the Princess, now you've found her?'

'I think she is lovely,' I said (and doubtless I was right, having never learned to flatter). 'But she's wide-awake, so I suppose somebody has kissed her!'

This very natural deduction moved the grown-up man to laughter; but the Princess, turning red and jumping up, declared that it was time for lunch.

'Come along, then,' said the grown-up man; 'and you too, water-baby. Come and have something solid. You must want it.'

I accompanied them without any feeling of false delicacy. The world, as known to me, was spread with food each several mid-day, and the particular table one sat at seemed a matter of no importance. The palace was very sumptuous and beautiful, just what a palace ought to be; and we were met by a stately lady, rather more grown-up than the Princess – apparently her mother. My friend the Man was very kind, and introduced me as the Captain, saying I had just run down from Aldershot. I didn't know where Aldershot was, but I had no manner of doubt that he was perfectly right. As a rule, indeed, grown-up people are fairly correct on matters of fact; it is in the higher gift of imagination that they are so sadly to seek.

The lunch was excellent and varied. Another gentleman in beautiful clothes – a lord presumably – lifted me into a high carved chair, and stood behind it, brooding over me like a Providence. I endeavoured to explain who I was and where I had come from, and to impress the company with my own toothbrush and Harold's tables; but either they were stupid – or is it a characteristic of Fairyland that every one laughs at the most ordinary remarks? My friend the Man said good-naturedly, 'All right, Water-baby; you came up the stream, and that's good enough for us.' The lord – a reserved sort of man, I thought – took no share in the conversation.

Конец ознакомительного фрагмента.