MABEL QUILLER-COUCH

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Содержание

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CHAPTER I

A DISAPPOINTMENT

Slewbury was a very fine town in its way; a little quiet and sleepy perhaps, as country towns often are, but it was large and handsome, and beautifully situated on the side of a steep hill. It had a grand market-place, a large town-hall where concerts were often given, and some well-kept public gardens, of all of which the Slewbury people were very proud, and justly so.

But then, as Paul Anketell and his friends often remarked, "What was there for boys?" There was absolutely nothing. No river, no sea, no mountains, or anything. All there was for them in the way of amusement was to go for walks and pick flowers, and wander about a field or two. Certainly one could climb a tree, and whittle sticks or make whistles, but one could not be doing that all the time. No, Paul had long since come to the conclusion that Slewbury was a miserable place in which to live; he hated it; and he could not understand why his father had ever settled there.

When he was a man, he declared over and over again to Stella

and Michael, he would have a house close to a river, a mountain, and the sea, then he would have boats and rods, and a sailing boat, so that he would never be hard up for something to do. To a great extent Paul was right; Slewbury was a dull, sleepy and prim old town, but boys ought to be able to make amusements for themselves anywhere; they should have resources within themselves. Paul had loads of toys, and books, and tools, and a nice large garden to play in when the weather was fine. But he was a restless boy, full of longing for adventure and travel, and new sights, and sounds, and experiences, and the happiest time of the whole year to him was the summer holiday when all the family went away to the sea, or to some beautiful spot amongst the mountains.

True, the sea had always been the English sea—at least it had come to them at an English seaside town—and the mountains had been either Welsh or Scotch mountains, but the three little Anketells were true British children and were quite sure there could be no more beautiful mountains or coasts anywhere in the world.

As soon as the Christmas holidays were over and school work had set in, the children began to think of where they should go when the summer holidays came, and what they would do, and many and many a discussion they had as to their favourite spots, and whether they should go to an old favourite, or try a new one. Plans were made, toys collected, and boxes packed long before the happy day came, but it all added to the pleasure and

excitement and importance of the long-looked-forward-to event.

But dearly as they loved their own country, they had no objection to going further afield, and when one day Mr. Anketell suggested that that year they should spend their holiday in Norway, their excitement knew no bounds. All previous travels and expeditions seemed to sink into insignificance beside this. To be actually going to live, and sleep, and eat, on board a real steamer, and to cross the sea to another land seemed to them a splendid outlook. Every book and picture that could tell them anything about Norway was eagerly hunted up, all the Norwegian fairy tales were read again and again, until Stella and Michael at last felt quite sure that they would meet fairies, and dwarfs, and Vikings wherever they went. They had no idea what a Viking was like, but they thought it must be something between a giant and a knight, with all the good qualities of both.

There never could have been a greater inducement to learn geography and history than this long-talked-of trip. All through the term Stella and Mike studied the map of Norway until they very nearly knew it by heart, and when Paul came home for the Easter holidays they met him brimful of information on the subject. But Paul was not going to allow himself to be taught anything by 'the children,' as he called them, and he soon had them sufficiently awed by his superior knowledge and loftier understanding. He cared nothing for fairies, and quickly dashed all Stella's hopes of seeing any, but he could teach them a great deal about the sports, and the shooting, and the other attractions

to be found there—at least, he thought he could—but his father and mother had often to smile to themselves as they listened to the marvellous stories he told the children, and sometimes they had to check him to set him right on various points, a thing he objected to very much indeed. For Paul had read so much, heard so much, and thought so much of the marvels of that northern land, that nothing was too impossible and improbable for him to believe, and one night, just as he was going to bed, a new idea came to him, an idea so splendid that it prevented for a long time his going to sleep, and even after he was asleep he dreamed the whole night through that he was having a terrific fight with a huge bear, and when he awoke in the morning and thought that his dream might very likely prove a reality, he hardly knew how to contain himself until he had made sure.

He tumbled into his bath and out again, and into his clothes in a shorter time than it usually took him to make up his mind to get out of bed; and rushing downstairs two or three steps at a time, burst like a tornado into the dining-room, where his father and mother had assembled for prayers.

"I say," he shouted, without a thought as to whether he was interrupting any conversation—"oh, I say, father, mother, aren't there big white bears in the Norwegian fjords, white Polar bears, I mean? And shall we see them, and if there are, may we go hunting when we are there? It would be simply splendid; I'd rather go bear-hunting than anything; it would be grand to kill a bear."

He had been so eager to get down and satisfy himself on this point that he had not stayed to dress himself properly, and he burst into the room with his collar unfastened, and his tie missing altogether. He was so eager, too, that he did not notice the anxiety on his parents' faces, or in their manner, and only wondered why they looked at him so sadly, and without answering any of his burning questions.

At last he grew impatient. "Father, do tell me, shall you take your guns with you? and mayn't I have one?"

"Hush, hush, dear, do not be so excitable! There are no bears to shoot where we thought of going, nor wild animals of any kind, you may be quite sure, or we should not have dreamed of taking Stella and Michael there for their holidays."

"But, mother, dear, they would be quite safe with father and me to take care of them. Do let's go to a part where there are bears! I'd give anything to bring home a fur rug with a great head on it, and say I'd shot it myself."

"Paul, do not talk any more now. Father is dreadfully worried, and has a very great deal to think of. You understand, dear. Now fasten your collar and go to your place, I hear the servants coming in to prayers." And Mrs. Anketell stooped and kissed him. "Pray God to help dear father in his troubles," she whispered, "and make us all brave to bear our share."

Paul went to his seat quietly, wondering very much what it all meant. Surely his father had plenty of courage to face anything and everything, and he knew that he himself had. As for his

mother and Stella—well, mother did not need to be brave with father to take care of her, and Stella was only a girl, and no one would expect much of her; as for Michael, he was only six, a mere baby. He sat in his chair puzzled, and wondering, and coming no nearer a solution of his mother's meaning. But Paul was soon to learn it, and he never forgot the hour which followed, when the servants had left the room, and he and his father and mother were seated alone at the table.

The urn was hissing and singing, the sweet spring sunshine shone in on the silver on the table, on the bright covers, and on the big bowl of yellow daffodils on the old oak sideboard. A deep consciousness of all these details, and of the beauty of the scene, was impressed on his mind then— though at the time he was wholly unaware of the fact—and through all his after life remained with him so vividly that he could recall every detail of the scene, and the look of everything in the low, familiar room as it was that morning. He could recall, too, the unusual gravity of his parents, the anxious face of his mother, and how the tears sprang to her eyes when his father looked up and noticed her anxiety and tried to cheer her.

"Darling, you must not take it so hardly," he said tenderly; "things might be much worse. With some self-denial and economy we shall weather this storm, as we did many when first we were married." Then they smiled at each other, and Paul saw that they grew happier again at once.

"Shall I tell the boy about it now?" asked Mr. Anketell. "He

must know sooner or later."

Mrs. Anketell looked at Paul for a moment with an expression on her face that he could not read, but he thought she looked sorry about something, and very, very sad; then she looked away at her husband and nodded assent.

"Paul, my son," said his father, turning to him and laying his hand gently on the boy's arm, "I want you to listen to me, and give me your whole attention. You are old enough now to be our confidant in many things, and of course you will understand that what we may confide in you we trust to your honour to respect as a confidence, and to speak about to no one."

Paul said, "Yes, father," in rather a frightened voice. He knew that it was considered 'sneakish' to tell a secret, but he had never dreamed that secrets could be such very solemn things.

"Well, my boy, we have met with a very great misfortune, and have lost a large sum of money, and from being a comparatively wealthy man, I have suddenly become a comparatively poor one. If only I myself were concerned I would not care, but for your mother's sake, and for the sake of you children, I am very much troubled and grieved. I am afraid we shall all have to give up many things, and do without many things, and save in every way we can."

Paul had grown very grave, and for a moment he sat thinking, wondering what he could do; he was very anxious to help. "Father," he cried, at last, "I know one way we can save a good bit of money every year: I can leave school, and I could go out

to work. I know Farmer Vinning would give me a job; he said he wished he had a boy half as spry as I am, and— and then I could bring home my wages every week to mother." And for the moment Paul could not see what hardship people found in being economical. But his father only shook his head and laughed.

"It would be poor economy to take you away from school for a long time yet, my son," he said. Then, seeing how Paul's face fell, he went on: "The things we can do for the greatest advantage to others and ourselves, too, are not always the things we would like best to do. To be a real help and comfort to us, you must stick at your work as hard as you can, and make the best use possible of the next few years. Then you will, I hope, be able not only to help your mother, but to give them all a home if they should need one."

"But I want to help now," said Paul, dolefully. To work harder at school seemed a very poor way of saving money.

"You will be able to, dear, at once, too. We shall all have to give up something, many of the things we care for most. You can help by giving up cheerfully," said his mother.

"Oh, that's nothing," said Paul, still doleful.

"It means more than you can imagine now," she said, softly; "a trouble bravely born and smiled over is lightened for everyone of half its weight."

"Can't I give up my music;" Paul burst in on his mother's speech, too eager to notice what she was saying.

Mrs. Anketell laughed in spite of her sadness. "We are very

anxious to give you all as good an education as is possible, and for the sake of the future you must not give up any of it yet. No, what we shall have to give up will be our pleasures. The horses must go, all but Nell for father, and Jumbo for the hard work. Some of the servants will have to go, too, I am afraid," she said, looking at her husband, and once more the anxious look came back to her eyes.

"I can clean boots," said Paul, "and I can wash the dog-cart."

"Very good," said Mr. Anketell, encouragingly. "You can learn to work in the garden, too. A boy of your age can give a good deal of help there."

Now, if there was one thing more than another that Paul hated, it was gardening, and his response to this suggestion was not hearty. Mrs. Anketell was silent for a few moments, then she said with, Paul thought, but little concern, "We shall have to give up the Norwegian cruise, of course, John; but that is only a trifle compared with other things."

Paul's heart seemed to leap right up into his throat, and then sank right down, down, as, it seemed to him, no one's heart could ever have sunk before. He could not believe but that there was some mistake, that his ears were deceiving him. "What did you say, mother?" he cried. "Give up the Norwegian cruise! Oh, no, no, we couldn't give that up! We *must* go to Norway; we can save in other ways—I'll begin at once. I won't want any new clothes for a year, and I'll go back to school without a hamper,– but we *must* go to Norway."

"I see you have already begun to save your neckties," said his father mischievously; but Paul was far too much upset to laugh at anything.

"Father, we *must* go!" he cried. "We have counted on it for weeks, and had planned everything, and—"

"So had we, Paul, and it will be a keen disappointment to us, keener than you can understand; but it has to be, and we must put a brave face on it. This is the first trial, my boy. It is very easy to talk of trials, and how we will face them; but it is the actual facing them, not the talking, that tries our courage and shows what we are made of. It requires no courage to give up what we care little or nothing about. Be as brave as you know how to be over this disappointment, my boy, and don't add to your mother's troubles by grumbling and complaining. We feel terribly any pain that this loss may bring to you children, and to know you are fretting and grumbling will make it a hundred times harder for us."

"Of course we will go somewhere for the summer holidays," said Mrs. Anketell gently. "Stella and Michael will need a change before winter, and father needs one too, I am sure."

"Not as much as you do, dear," he said, tenderly, looking sadly at her pale face.

She shook her head and smiled. "I don't deny I shall be glad of one; in fact we shall all be better for it," she said; "but it must be a much less expensive one than the one we planned."

Here was another grievance to add to his list. Paul's feelings were hurt that he had been left out as not requiring a change, and

altogether the blow which he had had was too much for him to bear well at the first shock; so that he felt a very unhappy and ill-used boy as he left the table and made his way slowly up to the nursery.

CHAPTER II

HOW PAUL BORE IT

Stella and Michael had finished their breakfast and were playing together. Michael was standing up in the high window-seat, grasping a long pole with a curtain hook at the end of it, with which he made frantic but futile efforts to land Stella, who was dashing about in a perfectly break-neck fashion in a box on the floor.

"We are playing at being in Norway," he shouted, when he caught sight of his elder brother. "Stella has been wrecked, and is trying to get to land in a boat, but the waves are dashing it on the rocks so hard, she will be wrecked before I can land her, if I don't take care."

Here Stella banged her box against the wall, and rebounded again. "I have got to catch her with the boat hook, and then I shall drag her boat—" But Stella had caught sight of Paul's face, and abandoning her boat to the mercy of the waves, she walked out of her apparently perilous position and caught Paul's arm.

"What is the matter?" she asked anxiously. "They haven't made the holidays shorter, have they?" This was always one of her greatest fears.

"Don't be silly!" snapped Paul crossly. "As if they could. Why, if they were to try to I'd refuse to go."

Stella looked awed, but anxious. "Do tell me, Paul, what is it! Is father cross with you?"

At these words a recollection of his father's gentleness and trouble came over him, and he felt a little ashamed and sorry. "No, no," he said, sinking into a chair by the table, and letting his head fall forward on his arms, "I wouldn't mind that so much if—if, oh, it's awfully hard lines, it—"

Stella waited patiently. She was a sensible little woman, and not such a baby as Paul chose to consider her. Because she had meals with Michael in the nursery, that she might be a companion for him, Paul was in the habit of looking on her as of Michael's age, and understanding. He forgot that at her age he had considered himself old enough to quit the nursery meals for the dining-room, and had done so too. Stella was four years older than her younger brother, and there was a great deal of the little mother in the way she cared for him. But Paul, boy-like, saw only that she joined in Michael's games, and was apparently quite content, so he rather despised her.

"What is it, Paul? Do tell me!" she pleaded at last. She longed to put her arms about him, and try to comfort him; but since he had been at school he had grown, as does many a boy, to object to endearments, and to think them something to be ashamed of. Her heart grew heavy with a nameless fear. Michael, too, ceased to complain of Stella's having left her boat and her game, and

looked with wondering eyes at his grief-stricken elder brother. It was so unusual to see Paul cast down like this.

"We aren't going to Norway, after all," said Paul—he spoke gruffly to try to conceal the sob in his throat,—"and I call it beastly hard lines. It isn't as though it would cost so very much more than any other holiday, and father knows we have never been so far before, and how we were looking forward to it, and that I—"

"Not going to Norway!" cried Stella, in an accent almost of relief. "Oh, is that all? I was afraid something dreadful had happened." She could not help the feeling, she had been so frightened by a nameless fear she could scarcely have put into words. But when the first relief was over the disappointment came home to her keenly. Paul had painted in such glowing colours all the joys, and adventures, and wonderful things which lay in store, that that trip was no ordinary one for them. It was the great event of their lifetime. It was to have been one long experience of travel by day and night, by sea and land, and of adventure with strange and wild creatures—Vikings, wolves, reindeers, Valkyries, giants, ice-mountains, and caves, fairies and fairies' homes. Stella had never been able to make up her mind as to what Vikings and Valkyries would be like, but they were all one delightful thrilling jumble of wild animals, giants, and strange people, such as ordinary persons never set eyes on.

"Oh, Paul, it can't be really true?" she cried, in great distress.

"Oh, you don't care," snapped Paul, crossly, "so don't pretend.

You can't care, so don't put it on. You said 'Is that all?' as if it were nothing. But of course one can't expect much from a girl. I believe you were really frightened at going and are glad we are not."

Stella's lip quivered. "I was *not* frightened," she said stoutly, "and I am *not* glad; but I thought at first something dreadful had happened to father or mother—I didn't know what, but something dreadful."

Paul snorted contemptuously. "I wouldn't have minded anything else as much as this," he said loftily, putting on a very superior air.

"If you had your leg cut off you couldn't *never* go to fight wolves," said Michael soberly. He had been standing, boat-hook in hand, listening to the conversation. To him to have a leg cut off seemed the most dreadful thing that could happen.

"But, Paul, why can't we go?" asked Stella, her brother's injustice fading at once from her mind. "Do you know?"

"Yes, I know. Father told me all about it. He has lost a heap of money, and we've got to get rid of most of the horses and the servants, and—" He stopped suddenly in alarm; he was already abusing that confidence his father had placed in him. Nurse was in the adjoining room and the door between was open. Supposing she had heard, what should he do? He could never undo his foolish speech! He peeped at her in a state of great alarm. No, she was dusting under the bed, and could not have heard,—at least he thought not. Stella and Michael must be bound over to secrecy.

"Don't you ever dare to tell any one what I have told you!" he said sternly. "Promise, honour bright. Mind Mike, if you do, I'll —I'll— well, you'll soon find out who comes after sneaks!"

"Be quiet, Paul. How dare you? You are not to frighten him like that," cried Stella indignantly. "Mikey is not a sneak, and you ought not to tell stories about bogies coming. You know there aren't any."

"Frighten!" retorted Paul; "he *must* be a coward if that frightens him," but he had the grace to look ashamed.

"You meant to frighten him," said Stella stoutly; "you know you did, and you are very mean."

Paul tried to turn the conversation. He felt ashamed of himself, and did not like the feeling at all. "Well, if you want to know why we are not going to Norway, you had better go and ask mother. I mustn't tell you what father told me, so it is no use to try to make me."

"Is mother—is mother unhappy about it, Paul?"

"I should just think she is, and father too."

"Did daddy cry?" asked Michael, his big eyes growing bigger with awe.

"Cry! Men don't cry; but mother did."

At which Stella's little heart overflowed with love, and her eyes filled with tears. "I'm going to see her," she said tearfully. "She mustn't be sad. I'll tell her it doesn't matter a bit, we don't mind not going. I don't want to go for a cruise. I'd quite as soon stay at home, and—I can take care of Michael, or I can dust, or—or—"

The rest of her sentence was lost as she rushed out of the nursery and down to her mother's room.

"Mother!" she cried, flinging herself into her arms, and clasping her round the neck. "Mummy, dear, I am so sorry; but we don't mind the least little bit. We don't want to have any holiday at all this year, only don't you cry any more, mummy darling," and she kissed her again and again, striving all she knew to make up to her for the trouble which had befallen them.

CHAPTER III

PAUL'S HOPES RISE

A few days later Paul returned to school, and Stella and Michael settled down to lessons at home with their governess. They missed their elder brother very much, for though he domineered over them a good deal, they looked up to him as a hero, and a very splendid fellow, and they felt sad and lonely when he went back to school.

At first Paul, too, felt very miserable, and out of spirits. When it came to leaving his home he felt more real sorrow for the trouble they were in than he had at all, and real shame for having behaved so crossly and unkindly about his disappointment, and he became filled with a great desire to work well, and make up in that way for his past behaviour. So the weeks sped by; half term came and went, and early in July came a letter from Stella. They were to go away for a summer holiday, after all, she wrote excitedly, and evidently impressed with the idea that she was conveying wonderful news. They were to go to Dartmoor. Father had taken rooms in a big farmhouse on the moors, and it was lovely; there were horses and wagons, and hay-fields and orchards, and big tors where they could go for picnics.

"Dartmoor!" exclaimed Paul, as he thrust the letter into his pocket. "What a place! What is there for me to do? Just go for walks with the kids, I s'pose; I'd quite as soon stay at home." And he sniffed scornfully, and went about all day in a bad temper.

"Dartmoor is a ripping fine place!" Paul had confided his woes to his chum, Dennis Rogers, and that was the response he met with. "I only wish I was going there this summer. We were there two years ago; oh, my, it *was* jolly! I wonder what part you are going to, and if you'll be anywhere near the convict prison."

Paul pricked up his ears.

"The convict prison," he cried eagerly. "I'd forgotten that that was down there. Oh, I do hope we go quite close to it. I'd like awfully to see the convicts. Did you ever see any of them? Were you near them?"

"See them! I should just think so. I saw a convict's funeral once, too; the coffin was carried by the convicts all in their prison clothes, with whacking great broad arrows over them."

"What were they like? Did they look like murderers? Did you see any of those that are in Madame Tussard's?" asked Paul, full of curiosity.

"Some of them were pretty bad-looking, but the rest were just like ordinary people. You'd never think from their faces, that they were murderers, and burglars, and forgers, and all that sort of thing. I felt awfully sorry for them, but my mater hurried me away, and wouldn't let me have a good look at them. I know one thing, I would have helped them to escape if they had tried to."

"I do hope we shall be in that part," said Paul, excitedly. "I'd give anything to see the prisoners and the prison. I say, did any escape while you were there?"

"No, 'twas hard luck. One got away in the winter after we left, and wasn't caught for a day or two; it was foggy, and that helped him, of course. Then there is otter-hunting in some of the rivers," went on Dennis, tiring of the subject of the convicts. "Oh, it's an awfully fine place! There are wild cattle on the moor too, and they are no end of excitement; they go for you like anything if you rile them. You *are* in luck's way, old chap. I wish I was going too, instead of to some silly place in Norway where there's nothing to do when you get there but walk. I hate being shut up in a stuffy steamer too. I'm ill all the time—so are most of the people—and I don't see where the fun comes in. But my people are set on it, so I suppose I've got to go. I don't want to, a bit."

"Don't you!" said Paul sarcastically, all his old disappointment returning. "I wish we could change places then. I think Dartmoor is awfully tame compared with Norway."

And then a hot discussion followed, each boy sticking up, of course, for his own favourite place.

But when, three weeks later, Paul travelled homewards, his disappointment was quite forgotten, and he was in the best of spirits, for it is beyond the power of any ordinary boy to feel morose and sulky the day his school breaks up and he goes home for his summer holiday; and when the family joined him at Slewbury station,—all except his father, who was to follow later,

—and they journeyed on together, he was the life of the whole merry party.

"Mother," he exclaimed with sudden recollection, after the home news had been listened to and school news told, "what is the name of the place we are going to? Shall we be near the convict prison?"

Конец ознакомительного фрагмента.