

**JOHN DAVYS
BERESFORD**

THE WONDER

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The Wonder

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Конец ознакомительного фрагмента.

J. D. Beresford

The Wonder

PART ONE

MY EARLY ASSOCIATIONS

WITH GINGER STOTT

CHAPTER I

THE MOTIVE

I

I could not say at which station the woman and her baby entered the train.

Since we had left London, I had been struggling with Baillie's translation of Hegel's "Phenomenology." It was not a book to read among such distracting circumstances as those of a railway journey, but I was eagerly planning a little dissertation of my own at that time, and my work as a journalist gave me little leisure for quiet study.

I looked up when the woman entered my compartment, though I did not notice the name of the station. I caught sight of the baby she was carrying, and turned back to my book. I thought the child was a freak, an abnormality; and such things disgust me.

I returned to the study of my Hegel and read: "For knowledge is not the divergence of the ray, but the ray itself by which the truth comes to us; and if this ray be removed, the bare direction or the empty place would alone be indicated."

I kept my eyes on the book—the train had started again—but the next passage conveyed no meaning to my mind, and as I attempted to re-read it an impression was interposed between me and the work I was studying.

I saw projected on the page before me an image which I mistook at first for the likeness of Richard Owen. It was the conformation of the head that gave rise to the mistake, a head domed and massive, white and smooth—it was a head that had always interested me. But as I looked, my mind already searching for the reason of this hallucination, I saw that the lower part of the face was that of an infant. My eyes wandered from the book, and my gaze fluttered along the four persons seated opposite to me, till it rested on the reality of my vision. And even as my attention was thus irresistibly dragged from my book, my mind clung with a feeble desperation to its task, and I murmured under my breath like a child repeating a mechanically learned lesson: "Knowledge is not the divergence of the ray but the ray itself...."

For several seconds the eyes of the infant held mine. Its

gaze was steady and clear as that of a normal child, but what differentiated it was the impression one received of calm intelligence. The head was completely bald, and there was no trace of eyebrows, but the eyes themselves were protected by thick, short lashes.

The child turned its head, and I felt my muscles relax. Until then I had not been conscious that they had been stiffened. My gaze was released, pushed aside as it were, and I found myself watching the object of the child's next scrutiny.

This object was a man of forty or so, inclined to corpulence, and untidy. He bore the evidences of failure in the process of becoming. He wore a beard that was scanty and ragged, there were bald patches of skin on the jaw; one inferred that he wore that beard only to save the trouble of shaving. He was sitting next to me, the middle passenger of the three on my side of the carriage, and he was absorbed in the pages of a half-penny paper—I think he was reading the police reports—which was interposed between him and the child in the corner diagonally opposite to that which I occupied.

The man was hunched up, slouching, his legs crossed, his elbows seeking support against his body; he held his clumsily folded paper close to his eyes. He had the appearance of being very myopic, but he did not wear glasses.

As I watched him, he began to fidget. He uncrossed his legs and hunched his body deeper into the back of his seat. Presently his eyes began to creep up the paper in front of him. When they

reached the top, he hesitated a moment, making a survey under cover, then he dropped his hands and stared stupidly at the infant in the corner, his mouth slightly open, his feet pulled in under the seat of the carriage.

As the child let him go, his head drooped, and then he turned and looked at me with a silly, vacuous smile. I looked away hurriedly; this was not a man with whom I cared to share experience.

The process was repeated. The next victim was a big, rubicund, healthy-looking man, clean shaved, with light-blue eyes that were slightly magnified by the glasses of his gold-mounted spectacles. He, too, had been reading a newspaper—the *Evening Standard*—until the child's gaze claimed his attention, and he, too, was held motionless by that strange, appraising stare. But when he was released, his surprise found vent in words. "This," I thought, "is the man accustomed to act."

"A very remarkable child, ma'am," he said, addressing the thin, ascetic-looking mother.

II

The mother's appearance did not convey the impression of poverty. She was, indeed, warmly, decently, and becomingly clad. She wore a long black coat, braided and frogged; it had the air of belonging to an older fashion, but the material of it was new. And her bonnet, trimmed with jet ornaments growing

on stalks that waved tremulously—that, also, was a modern replica of an older mode. On her hands were black thread gloves, somewhat ill-fitting.

Her face was not that of a country woman. The thin, high-bridged nose, the fallen cheeks, the shadows under eyes gloomy and retrospective—these were marks of the town; above all, perhaps, that sallow greyness of the skin which speaks of confinement....

The child looked healthy enough. Its great bald head shone resplendently like a globe of alabaster.

"A very remarkable child, ma'am," said the rubicund man who sat facing the woman.

The woman twitched her untidy-looking black eyebrows, her head trembled slightly and set the jet fruit of her bonnet dancing and nodding.

"Yes, sir," she replied.

"Very remarkable," said the man, adjusting his spectacles and leaning forward. His action had an air of deliberate courage; he was justifying his fortitude after that temporary aberration.

I watched him a little nervously. I remembered my feelings when, as a child, I had seen some magnificent enter the lion's den in a travelling circus. The failure on my right was, also, absorbed in the spectacle; he stared, open-mouthed, his eyes blinking and shifting.

The other three occupants of the compartment, sitting on the same side as the woman, back to the engine, dropped papers

and magazines and turned their heads, all interest. None of these three had, so far as I had observed, fallen under the spell of inspection by the infant, but I noticed that the man—an artisan apparently—who sat next to the woman had edged away from her, and that the three passengers opposite to me were huddled towards my end of the compartment.

The child had abstracted its gaze, which was now directed down the aisle of the carriage, indefinitely focussed on some point outside the window. It seemed remote, entirely unconcerned with any human being.

I speak of it asexually. I was still uncertain as to its sex. It is true that all babies look alike to me; but I should have known that this child was male, the conformation of the skull alone should have told me that. It was its dress that gave me cause to hesitate. It was dressed absurdly, not in "long-clothes," but in a long frock that hid its feet and was bunched about its body.

III

"Er—does it—er—can it—talk?" hesitated the rubicund man, and I grew hot at his boldness. There seemed to be something disrespectful in speaking before the child in this impersonal way.

"No, sir, he's never made a sound," replied the woman, twitching and vibrating. Her heavy, dark eyebrows jerked spasmodically, nervously.

"Never cried?" persisted the interrogator.

"Never once, sir."

"Dumb, eh?" He said it as an aside, half under his breath.

"E's never spoke, sir."

"Hm!" The man cleared his throat and braced himself with a deliberate and obvious effort. "Is it—he—not water on the brain—what?"

I felt that a rigour of breathless suspense held every occupant of the compartment. I wanted, and I know that every other person there wanted, to say, "Look out! Don't go too far." The child, however, seemed unconscious of the insult: he still stared out through the window, lost in profound contemplation.

"No, sir, oh no!" replied the woman. "E's got more sense than an ordinary child." She held the infant as if it were some priceless piece of earthenware, not nursing it as a woman nurses a baby, but balancing it with supreme attention in her lap.

"How old is he?"

We had been awaiting this question.

"A year and nine muns, sir."

"Ought to have spoken before that, oughtn't he?"

"Never even cried, sir," said the woman. She regarded the child with a look into which I read something of apprehension. If it were apprehension it was a feeling that we all shared. But the rubicund man was magnificent, though, like the lion tamer of my youthful experience, he was doubtless conscious of the aspect his temerity wore in the eyes of beholders. He must have been showing off.

"Have you taken opinion?" he asked; and then, seeing the woman's lack of comprehension, he translated the question—badly, for he conveyed a different meaning—thus,

"I mean, have you had a doctor for him?"

The train was slackening speed.

"Oh! yes, sir."

"And what do *they* say?"

The child turned its head and looked the rubicund man full in the eyes. Never in the face of any man or woman have I seen such an expression of sublime pity and contempt....

I remembered a small urchin I had once seen at the Zoological Gardens. Urged on by a band of other urchins, he was throwing pebbles at a great lion that lolled, finely indifferent, on the floor of its playground. Closer crept the urchin; he grew splendidly bold; he threw larger and larger pebbles, until the lion rose suddenly with a roar, and dashed fiercely down to the bars of its cage.

I thought of that urchin's scared, shrieking face now, as the rubicund man leant quickly back into his corner.

Yet that was not all, for the infant, satisfied, perhaps, with its victim's ignominy, turned and looked at me with a cynical smile. I was, as it were, taken into its confidence. I felt flattered, undeservedly yet enormously flattered. I blushed, I may have simpered.

The train drew up in Great Hittenden station.

The woman gathered her priceless possession carefully into

her arms, and the rubicund man adroitly opened the door for her.

"Good day, sir," she said, as she got out.

"Good day," echoed the rubicund man with relief, and we all drew a deep breath of relief with him in concert, as though we had just witnessed the safe descent of some over-daring aviator.

IV

As the train moved on, we six, who had been fellow-passengers for some thirty or forty minutes before the woman had entered our compartment, we who had not till then exchanged a word, broke suddenly into general conversation.

"Water on the brain; I don't care what any one says," asserted the rubicund man.

"My sister had one very similar," put in the failure, who was sitting next to me. "It died," he added, by way of giving point to his instance.

"Ought not to exhibit freaks like that in public," said an old man opposite to me.

"You're right, sir," was the verdict of the artisan, and he spat carefully and scraped his boot on the floor; "them things ought to be kep' private."

"Mad, of course, that's to say imbecile," repeated the rubicund man.

"Horrid head he'd got," said the failure, and shivered histrionically.

They continued to demonstrate their contempt for the infant by many asseverations. The reaction grew. They were all bold now, and all wanted to speak. They spoke as the survivors from some common peril; they were increasingly anxious to demonstrate that they had never suffered intimidation, and in their relief they were anxious to laugh at the thing which had for a time subdued them. But they never named it as a cause for fear. Their speech was merely innuendo.

At the last, however, I caught an echo of the true feeling.

It was the rubicund man who, most daring during the crisis, was now bold enough to admit curiosity.

"What's your opinion, sir?" he said to me. The train was running into Wenderby; he was preparing to get out; he leaned forward, his fingers on the handle of the door.

I was embarrassed. Why had I been singled out by the child? I had taken no part in the recent interjectory conversation. Was this a consequence of the notice that had been paid to me?

"I?" I stammered, and then reverted to the rubicund man's original phrase, "It—it was certainly a very remarkable child," I said.

The rubicund man nodded and pursed his lips. "Very," he muttered as he alighted, "Very remarkable. Well, good day to you."

I returned to my book, and was surprised to find that my index finger was still marking the place at which I had been interrupted some fifteen minutes before. My arm felt stiff and cramped.

I read: "... and if this ray be removed, the bare direction or the empty place would alone be indicated."

CHAPTER II

NOTES FOR A BIOGRAPHY OF GINGER STOTT

I

Ginger Stott is a name that was once as well known as any in England. Stott has been the subject of leading articles in every daily paper; his life has been written by an able journalist who interviewed Stott himself, during ten crowded minutes, and filled three hundred pages with details, seventy per cent. of which were taken from the journals, and the remainder supplied by a brilliant imagination. Ten years ago Ginger Stott was on a pinnacle, there was a Stott vogue. You found his name at the bottom of signed articles written by members of the editorial staff; you bought Stott collars, although Stott himself did not wear collars; there was a Stott waltz, which is occasionally hummed by clerks, and whistled by errand-boys to this day; there was a periodical which lived for ten months, entitled *Ginger Stott's Weekly*; in brief, during one summer there was a Stott apotheosis.

But that was ten years ago, and the rising generation has almost forgotten the once well-known name. One rarely sees him mentioned in the morning paper now, and then it is but the

briefest reference; some such note as this "Pickering was at the top of his form, recalling the finest achievements of Ginger Stott at his best," or "Flack is a magnificent find for Kent: he promises to completely surpass the historic feats of Ginger Stott." These journalistic superlatives only irritate those who remember the performances referred to. We who watched the man's career know that Pickering and Flack are but tyros compared to Stott; we know that none of his successors has challenged comparison with him. He was a meteor that blazed across the sky, and if he ever has a true successor, such stars as Pickering and Flack will shine pale and dim in comparison.

It makes one feel suddenly old to recall that great matinee at the Lyceum, given for Ginger Stott's benefit after he met with his accident. In ten years so many great figures in that world have died or fallen into obscurity. I can count on my fingers the number of those who were then, and are still, in the forefront of popularity. Of the others poor Captain Wallis, for instance, is dead—and no modern writer, in my opinion, can equal the brilliant descriptiveness of Wallis's articles in the *Daily Post*. Bobby Maisefield, again, Stott's colleague, is a martyr to rheumatism, and keeps a shop in Ailesworth, the scene of so many of his triumphs. What a list one might make, but how uselessly. It is enough to note how many names have dropped out, how many others are the names of those we now speak of as veterans. In ten years! It certainly makes one feel old.

II

No apology is needed for telling again the story of Stott's career. Certain details will still be familiar, it is true, the historic details that can never be forgotten while cricket holds place as our national game. But there are many facts of Stott's life familiar to me, which have never been made public property. If I must repeat that which is known, I can give the known a new setting; perhaps a new value.

He came of mixed races. His mother was pure Welsh, his father a Yorkshire collier; but when Ginger was nine years old his father died, and Mrs. Stott came to live in Ailesworth where she had immigrant relations, and it was there that she set up the little paper-shop, the business by which she maintained herself and her boy. That shop is still in existence, and the name has not been altered. You may find it in the little street that runs off the market place, going down towards the Borstal Institution.

There are many people alive in Ailesworth to-day who can remember the sturdy, freckled, sandy-haired boy who used to go round with the morning and evening papers; the boy who was to change the fortunes of a county.

Ginger was phenomenally thorough in all he undertook. It was one of the secrets of his success. It was this thoroughness that kept him engaged in his mother's little business until he was seventeen. Up to that age he never found time for cricket—

sufficient evidence of his remarkable and most unusual qualities.

It was sheer chance, apparently, that determined his choice of a career.

He had walked into Stoke-Underhill to deliver a parcel, and on his way back his attention was arrested by the sight of a line of vehicles drawn up to the boarded fencing that encloses the Ailesworth County Ground. The occupants of these vehicles were standing up, struggling to catch a sight of the match that was being played behind the screen erected to shut out non-paying sightseers. Among the horses' feet, squirming between the spokes of wheels, utterly regardless of all injury, small boys glued their eyes to knot-holes in the fence, while others climbed surreptitiously, and for the most part unobserved, on to the backs of tradesmen's carts. All these individuals were in a state of tremendous excitement, and even the policeman whose duty it was to move them on, was so engrossed in watching the game that he had disappeared inside the turnstile, and had given the outside spectators full opportunity for eleemosynary enjoyment.

That tarred fence has since been raised some six feet, and now encloses a wider sweep of ground—alterations that may be classed among the minor revolutions effected by the genius of the thick-set, fair-haired youth of seventeen, who paused on that early September afternoon to wonder what all the fuss was about. The Ailesworth County Ground was not famous in those days; not then was accommodation needed for thirty thousand spectators, drawn from every county in England to witness the

unparalleled.

Ginger stopped. The interest of the spectacle pierced his absorption in the business he had in hand. Such a thing was almost unprecedented.

"What's up?" he asked of Puggy Phillips.

Puggy Phillips—hazarding his life by standing on the shiny, slightly curved top of his butcher's cart—made no appropriate answer. "Yah—*ah*—ah!" he screamed in ecstasy. "Oh! played! Pla-a-a-ayed!!"

Ginger wasted no more breath, but laid hold of the little brass rail that encircled Puggy's platform, and with a sudden hoist that lifted the shafts and startled the pony, raised himself to the level of a spectator.

"'Ere!" shouted the swaying, tottering Puggy. "What the ... are yer rup to?"

The well-drilled pony, however, settled down again quietly to maintain his end of the see-saw, and, finding himself still able to preserve his equilibrium, Puggy instantly forgot the presence of the intruder.

"What's up?" asked Ginger again.

"Oh! Well '*it*, well '*it*!" yelled Puggy. "Oh! Gow on, gow on agen! Run it *aht*. Run it ah-t."

Ginger gave it up, and turned his attention to the match.

It was not any famous struggle that was being fought out on the old Ailesworth Ground; it was only second-class cricket, the deciding match of the Minor Counties championship.

Hampdenshire and Oxfordshire, old rivals, had been neck-and-neck all through the season, and, as luck would have it, the engagement between them had been the last fixture on the card.

When Ginger rose to the level of spectator, the match was anybody's game. Bobby Maisefield was batting. He was then a promising young colt who had not earned a fixed place in the Eleven. Ginger knew him socially, but they were not friends, they had no interests in common. Bobby had made twenty-seven. He was partnered by old Trigson, the bowler, (he has been dead these eight years,) whose characteristic score of "Not out ... 0," is sufficiently representative of his methods.

It was the fourth innings, and Hampdenshire with only one more wicket to fall, still required nineteen runs to win. Trigson could be relied upon to keep his wicket up, but not to score. The hopes of Ailesworth centred in the ability of that almost untried colt Bobby Maisefield—and he seemed likely to justify the trust reposed in him. A beautiful late cut that eluded third man and hit the fence with a resounding bang, nearly drove Puggy wild with delight.

"Only fifteen more," he shouted. "Oh! Played; pla-a-a-yed!"

But as the score crept up, the tensity grew. As each ball was delivered, a chill, rigid silence held the onlookers in its grip. When Trigson, with the field collected round him, almost to be covered with a sheet, stonewalled the most tempting lob, the click of the ball on his bat was an intrusion on the stillness. And always it was followed by a deep breath of relief that sighed round

the ring like a faint wind through a plantation of larches. When Bobby scored, the tumult broke out like a crash of thunder; but it subsided again, echoless, to that intense silence so soon as the ball was "dead."

Curiously, it was not Bobby who made the winning hit but Trigson. "One to tie, two to win," breathed Puggy as the field changed over, and it was Trigson who had to face the bowling. The suspense was torture. Oxford had put on their fast bowler again, and Trigson, intimidated, perhaps, did not play him with quite so straight a bat as he had opposed to the lob-bowler. The ball hit Trigson's bat and glanced through the slips. The field was very close to the wicket, and the ball was travelling fast. No one seemed to make any attempt to stop it. For a moment the significance of the thing was not realised; for a moment only, then followed uproar, deafening, stupendous.

Puggy was stamping fiercely on the top of his cart; the tears were streaming down his face; he was screaming and yelling incoherent words. And he was representative of the crowd. Thus men shouted and stamped and cried when news came of the relief of Kimberley, or when that false report of victory was brought to Paris in the August of 1870....

The effect upon Ginger was a thing apart. He did not join in the fierce acclamation; he did not wait to see the chairing of Bobby and Trigson. The greatness of Stott's character, the fineness of his genius is displayed in his attitude towards the dramatic spectacle he had just witnessed.

As he trudged home into Ailesworth, his thoughts found vent in a muttered sentence which is peculiarly typical of the effect that had been made upon him.

"I believe I could have bowled that chap," he said.

III

In writing a history of this kind, a certain licence must be claimed. It will be understood that I am filling certain gaps in the narrative with imagined detail. But the facts are true. My added detail is only intended to give an appearance of life and reality to my history. Let me, therefore, insist upon one vital point. I have not been dependent on hearsay for one single fact in this story. Where my experience does not depend upon personal experience, it has been received from the principals themselves. Finally, it should be remembered that when I have, imaginatively, put words into the mouths of the persons of this story, they are never essential words which affect the issue. The essential speeches are reported from first-hand sources. For instance, Ginger Stott himself has told me on more than one occasion that the words with which I closed the last section, were the actual words spoken by him on the occasion in question. It was not until six years after the great Oxfordshire match that I myself first met the man, but what follows is literally true in all essentials.

There was a long, narrow strip of yard, or alley, at the back of Mrs. Stott's paper-shop, a yard that, unfortunately, no longer

exists. It has been partly built over, and another of England's memorials has thus been destroyed by the vandals of modern commerce....

This yard was fifty-three feet long, measuring from Mrs. Stott's back door to the door of the coal-shed, which marked the alley's extreme limit. This measurement, an apparently negligible trifle, had an important effect upon Stott's career. For it was in this yard that he taught himself to bowl, and the shortness of the pitch precluded his taking any run. From those long studious hours of practice he emerged with a characteristic that was—and still remains—unique. Stott never took more than two steps before delivering the ball; frequently he bowled from a standing position, and batsmen have confessed that of all Stott's puzzling mannerisms, this was the one to which they never became accustomed. S. R. L. Maturin, the finest bat Australia ever sent to this country, has told me that to this peculiarity of delivery he attributed his failure ever to score freely against Stott. It completely upset one's habit of play, he said: one had no time to prepare for the flight of the ball; it came at one so suddenly. Other bowlers have since attempted some imitation of this method without success. They had not Stott's physical advantages.

Nevertheless, the shortness of that alley threw Stott back for two years. When he first emerged to try conclusions on the field, he found his length on the longer pitch utterly unreliable, and the effort necessary to throw the ball another six yards, at first upset

his slowly acquired methods.

It was not until he was twenty years old that Ginger Stott played in his first Colts' match.

The three years that had intervened had not been prosperous years for Hampdenshire. Their team was a one-man team. Bobby Maisfield was developing into a fine bat (and other counties were throwing out inducements to him, trying to persuade him to qualify for first-class cricket), but he found no support, and Hampdenshire was never looked upon as a coming county. The best of the minor counties in those years were Staffordshire and Norfolk.

In the Colts' match Stott's analysis ran:

overs	maidens	runs	wickets
11.3	7	16	7

and reference to the score-sheet, which is still preserved among the records of the County Club, shows that six of the seven wickets were clean bowled. The Eleven had no second innings; the match was drawn, owing to rain. Stott has told me that the Eleven had to bat on a dry wicket, but after making all allowances, the performance was certainly remarkable.

After this match Stott was, of course, played regularly. That

year Hampdenshire rose once more to their old position at the head of the minor counties, and Maisfield, who had been seriously considering Surrey's offer of a place in their Eleven after two years' qualification by residence, decided to remain with the county which had given him his first chance.

During that season Stott did not record any performance so remarkable as his feat in the Colts' match, but his record for the year was eighty-seven wickets with an average of 9.31; and it is worthy of notice that Yorkshire made overtures to him, as he was qualified by birth to play for the northern county.

I think there must have been a wonderful *esprit de corps* among the members of that early Hampdenshire Eleven. There are other evidences beside this refusal of its two most prominent members to join the ranks of first-class cricket. Lord R—, the president of the H.C.C.C., has told me that this spirit was quite as marked as in the earlier case of Kent. He himself certainly did much to promote it, and his generosity in making good the deficits of the balance sheet, had a great influence on the acceleration of Hampdenshire's triumph.

In his second year, though Hampdenshire were again champions of the second-class counties, Stott had not such a fine average as in the preceding season. Sixty-one wickets for eight hundred and sixty-eight (average 14.23) seems to show a decline in his powers, but that was a wonderful year for batsmen (Maisfield scored seven hundred and forty-two runs, with an average of forty-two) and, moreover, that was the year in which

Stott was privately practising his new theory.

It was in this year that three very promising recruits, all since become famous, joined the Eleven, viz.: P. H. Evans, St. John Townley, and Flower the fast bowler. With these five cricketers Hampdenshire fully deserved their elevation into the list of first-class counties. Curiously enough, they took the place of the old champions, Gloucestershire, who, with Somerset, fell back into the obscurity of the second-class that season.

IV

I must turn aside for a moment at this point in order to explain the "new theory" of Stott's, to which I have referred, a theory which became in practice one of the elements of his most astounding successes.

Ginger Stott was not a tall man. He stood only 5 ft. 5¼ in. in his socks, but he was tremendously solid; he had what is known as a "stocky" figure, broad and deep-chested. That was where his muscular power lay, for his abnormally long arms were rather thin, though his huge hands were powerful enough.

Even without his "new theory," Stott would have been an exceptional bowler. His thoroughness would have assured his success. He studied his art diligently, and practised regularly in a barn through the winter. His physique, too, was a magnificent instrument. That long, muscular body was superbly steady on the short, thick legs. It gave him a fulcrum, firm, apparently

immovable. And those weirdly long, thin arms could move with lightning rapidity. He always stood with his hands behind him, and then—as often as not without even one preliminary step—the long arm would flash round and the ball be delivered, without giving the batsman any opportunity of watching his hand; you could never tell which way he was going to break. It was astonishing, too, the pace he could get without any run. Poor Wallis used to call him the "human catapult"; Wallis was always trying to find new phrases.

The theory first came to Stott when he was practising at the nets. It was a windy morning, and he noticed that several times the balls he bowled swerved in the air. When those swerving balls came they were almost unplayable.

Stott made no remark to any one—he was bowling to the groundsman—but the ambition to bowl "swerves,"¹ as they were afterwards called, took possession of him from that morning. It is true that he never mastered the theory completely; on a perfectly calm day he could never depend upon obtaining any swerve at all, but, within limits, he developed his theory until he had any batsman practically at his mercy.

He might have mastered the theory completely, had it not been for his accident—we must remember that he had only three seasons of first-class cricket—and, personally, I believe he would

¹ A relatively easy task for the baseball thrower, but one very difficult of accomplishment for the English bowler, who is not permitted by the laws of cricket to bend his elbow in delivering the ball.

have achieved that complete mastery. But I do not believe, as Stott did, that he could have taught his method to another man. That belief became an obsession with him, and will be dealt with later.

My own reasons for doubting that Stott's "swerve" could have been taught, is that it would have been necessary for the pupil to have had Stott's peculiarities, not only of method, but of physique. He used to spin the ball with a twist of his middle finger and thumb, just as you may see a billiard professional spin a billiard ball. To do this in his manner, it is absolutely necessary not only to have a very large and muscular hand, but to have very lithe and flexible arm muscles, for the arm is moving rapidly while the twist is given, and there must be no antagonistic muscular action. Further, I believe that part of the secret was due to the fact that Stott bowled from a standing position. Given these things, the rest is merely a question of long and assiduous practice. The human mechanism is marvellously adaptable. I have seen Stott throw a cricket ball half across the room with sufficient spin on the ball to make it shoot back to him along the carpet.

I have mentioned the wind as a factor in obtaining the swerve. It was a head-wind that Stott required. I have seen him, for sport, toss a cricket ball into the teeth of a gale, and make it describe the trajectory of a badly sliced golf-ball. This is why the big pavilion at Ailesworth is set at such a curious angle to the ground. It was built in the winter following Hampdenshire's second season of

first-class cricket, and it was so placed that when the wickets were pitched in a line with it, they might lie south-west and north-east, or in the direction of the prevailing winds.

V

The first time I ever saw Ginger Stott, was on the occasion of the historic encounter with Surrey; Hampden's second engagement in first-class cricket. The match with Notts, played at Trent Bridge a few days earlier, had not foreshadowed any startling results. The truth of the matter is that Stott had been kept, deliberately, in the background; and as matters turned out his services were only required to finish off Notts' second innings. Stott was even then a marked man, and the Hampden captain did not wish to advertise his methods too freely before the Surrey match. Neither Archie Findlater, who was captaining the team that year, nor any other person, had the least conception of how unnecessary such a reservation was to prove. In his third year, when Stott had been studied by every English, Australian, and South African batsman of any note, he was still as unplayable as when he made his *début* in first-class cricket.

I was reporting the Surrey match for two papers, and in company with poor Wallis interviewed Stott before the first innings.

His appearance made a great impression on me. I have, of

course, met him, and talked with him many times since then, but my most vivid memory of him is the picture recorded in the inadequate professional dressing-room of the old Ailesworth pavilion.

I have turned up the account of my interview in an old press-cutting book, and I do not know that I can do better than quote that part of it which describes Stott's personal appearance. I wrote the account on the off chance of being able to get it taken. It was one of my lucky hits. After that match, finished in a single day, my interview afforded copy that any paper would have paid heavily for, and gladly.

Here is the description:

"Stott—he is known to every one in Ailesworth as 'Ginger' Stott—is a short, thick-set young man, with abnormally long arms that are tanned a rich red up to the elbow. The tan does not, however, obliterate the golden freckles with which arm and face are richly speckled. There is no need to speculate as to the *raison d'être* of his nickname. The hair of his head, a close, short crop, is a pale russet, and the hair on his hands and arms is a yellower shade of the same colour. 'Ginger' is, indeed, a perfectly apt description. He has a square chin and a thin-lipped, determined mouth. His eyes are a clear, but rather light blue, his forehead is good, broad, and high, and he has a well-proportioned head. One might have put him down as an engineer, essentially intelligent, purposeful, and reserved."

The description is journalistic, but I do not know that I could

improve upon the detail of it. I can see those queer, freckled, hairy arms of his as I write—the combination of colours in them produced an effect that was almost orange. It struck one as unusual....

Surrey had the choice of innings, and decided to bat, despite the fact that the wicket was drying after rain, under the influence of a steady south-west wind and occasional bursts of sunshine. Would any captain in Stott's second year have dared to take first innings under such conditions? The question is farcical now, but not a single member of the Hampdenhire Eleven had the least conception that the Surrey captain was deliberately throwing away his chances on that eventful day.

Wallis and I were sitting together in the reporters' box. There were only four of us; two specials,—Wallis and myself,—a news-agency reporter, and a local man.

"Stott takes first over," remarked Wallis, sharpening his pencil and arranging his watch and score-sheet—he was very meticulous in his methods. "They've put him to bowl against the wind. He's medium right, isn't he?"

"Haven't the least idea," I said. "He volunteered no information; Hampdenhire have been keeping him dark."

Wallis sneered. "Think they've got a find, eh?" he said. "We'll wait and see what he can do against first-class batting."

We did not have to wait long.

As usual, Thorpe and Harrison were first wicket for Surrey, and Thorpe took the first ball.

It bowled him. It made his wicket look as untidy as any wicket I have ever seen. The off stump was out of the ground, and the other two were markedly divergent.

"Damn it, I wasn't ready for him," we heard Thorpe say in the professionals' room. Thorpe always had some excuse, but on this occasion it was justified.

C. V. Punshon was the next comer, and he got his first ball through the slips for four, but Wallis looked at me with a raised eyebrow.

"Punshon didn't know a lot about that," he said, and then he added, "I say, what a queer delivery the chap has. He stands and shoots 'em out. It's uncanny. He's a kind of human catapult." He made a note of the phrase on his pad.

Punshon succeeded in hitting the next ball, also, but it simply ran up his bat into the hands of short slip.

"Well, that's a sitter, if you like," said Wallis. "What's the matter with 'em?"

I was beginning to grow enthusiastic.

"Look here, Wallis," I said, "this chap's going to break records."

Wallis was still doubtful.

He was convinced before the innings was over.

There must be many who remember the startling poster that heralded the early editions of the evening papers:

SURREY

ALL OUT

FOR 13 RUNS

For once sub-editors did not hesitate to give the score on the contents bill. That was a proclamation which would sell. Inside, the headlines were rich and varied. I have an old paper by me, yellow now, and brittle, that may serve as a type for the rest. The headlines are as follows:—

SURREY AND HAMPSHIRE

EXTRAORDINARY BOWLING PERFORMANCE

DOUBLE HAT-TRICK

SURREY ALL OUT IN 35 MINUTES FOR 13 RUNS

STOTT TAKES 10 WICKETS FOR 5

The "double hat-trick" was six consecutive wickets, the last six, all clean bowled.

"Good God!" Wallis said, when the last wicket fell, and he looked at me with something like fear in his eyes. "This man will have to be barred; it means the end of cricket."

VI

Stott's accident came during the high flood of Hampshire

success. For two years they held undisputed place as champion county, a place which could not be upset by the most ingenious methods of calculating points. They three times defeated Australia, and played four men in the test matches. As a team they were capable of beating any Eleven opposed to them. Not even the newspaper critics denied that.

The accident appeared insignificant at the time. The match was against Notts on the Trent Bridge ground. I was reporting for three papers; Wallis was not there.

Stott had been taken off. Notts were a poor lot that year and I think Findlater did not wish to make their defeat appear too ignominious. Flower was bowling; it was a fast, true wicket, and Stott, who was a safe field, was at cover-point.

G. L. Mallinson was batting and making good use of his opportunity; he was, it will be remembered, a magnificent though erratic hitter. Flower bowled him a short-pitched, fast ball, rather wide of the off-stump. Many men might have left it alone, for the ball was rising, and the slips were crowded, but Mallinson timed the ball splendidly, and drove it with all his force. He could not keep it on the ground, however, and Stott had a possible chance. He leaped for it and just touched the ball with his right hand. The ball jumped the ring at its first bound, and Mallinson never even attempted to run. There was a big round of applause from the Trent Bridge crowd.

I noticed that Stott had tied a handkerchief round his finger, but I forgot the incident until I saw Findlater beckon to his

best bowler, a few overs later. Notts had made enough runs for decency; it was time to get them out.

I saw Stott walk up to Findlater and shake his head, and through my glasses I saw him whip the handkerchief from his finger and display his hand. Findlater frowned, said something and looked towards the pavilion, but Stott shook his head. He evidently disagreed with Findlater's proposal. Then Mallinson came up, and the great bulk of his back hid the faces of the other two. The crowd was beginning to grow excited at the interruption. Every one had guessed that something was wrong. All round the ring men were standing up, trying to make out what was going on.

I drew my inferences from Mallinson's face, for when he turned round and strolled back to his wicket, he was wearing a broad smile. Through my field glasses I could see that he was licking his lower lip with his tongue. His shoulders were humped and his whole expression one of barely controlled glee. (I always see that picture framed in a circle; a bioscopic presentation.) He could hardly refrain from dancing. Then little Beale, who was Mallinson's partner, came up and spoke to him, and I saw Mallinson hug himself with delight as he explained the situation.

When Stott unwillingly came back to the pavilion, a low murmur ran round the ring, like the buzz of a great crowd of disturbed blue flies. In that murmur I could distinctly trace the signs of mixed feelings. No doubt the crowd had come there to witness the performances of the new phenomenon—

the abnormal of every kind has a wonderful attraction for us—but, on the other hand, the majority wanted to see their own county win. Moreover, Mallinson was giving them a taste of his abnormal powers of hitting, and the batsman appeals to the spectacular, more than the bowler.

I ran down hurriedly to meet Stott.

"Only a split finger, sir," he said carelessly, in answer to my question; "but Mr. Findlater says I must see to it."

I examined the finger, and it certainly did not seem to call for surgical aid. Evidently it had been caught by the seam of the new ball; there was a fairly clean cut about half an inch long on the fleshy underside of the second joint of the middle finger.

"Better have it seen to," I said. "We can't afford to lose you, you know, Stott."

Stott gave a laugh that was more nearly a snarl. "Ain't the first time I've 'ad a cut finger," he said scornfully.

He had the finger bound up when I saw him again, but it had been done by an amateur. I learnt afterwards that no antiseptic had been used. That was at lunch time, and Notts had made a hundred and sixty-eight for one wicket; Mallinson was not out, a hundred and three. I saw that the Notts Eleven were in magnificent spirits.

But after lunch Stott came out and took the first over. I don't know what had passed between him and Findlater, but the captain had evidently been over-persuaded.

We must not blame Findlater. The cut certainly appeared

trifling, it was not bad enough to prevent Stott from bowling, and Hampdenshire seemed powerless on that wicket without him. It is very easy to distribute blame after the event, but most people would have done what Findlater did in those circumstances.

The cut did not appear to inconvenience Stott in the least degree. He bowled Mallinson with his second ball, and the innings was finished up in another fifty-seven minutes for the addition of thirty-eight runs.

Hampdenshire made two hundred and thirty-seven for three wickets before the drawing of stumps, and that was the end of the match, for the weather changed during the night and rain prevented any further play.

I, of course, stayed on in Nottingham to await results. I saw Stott on the next day, Friday, and asked him about his finger. He made light of it, but that evening Findlater told me over the bridge-table that he was not happy about it. He had seen the finger, and thought it showed a tendency to inflammation. "I shall take him to Gregory in the morning if it's not all right," he said. Gregory was a well-known surgeon in Nottingham.

Again one sees, now, that the visit to Gregory should not have been postponed, but at the time one does not take extraordinary precautions in such a case as this. A split finger is such an everyday thing, and one is guided by the average of experience. After all, if one were constantly to make preparation for the abnormal; ordinary life could not go on....

I heard that Gregory pursed his lips over that finger when

he had learned the name of his famous patient. "You'll have to be very careful of this, young man," was Findlater's report of Gregory's advice. It was not sufficient. I often wonder now whether Gregory might not have saved the finger. If he had performed some small operation at once, cut away the poison, it seems to me that the tragedy might have been averted. I am, I admit, a mere layman in these matters, but it seems to me that something might have been done.

I left Nottingham on Saturday after lunch—the weather was hopeless—and I did not make use of the information I had for the purposes of my paper. I was never a good journalist. But I went down to Ailesworth on Monday morning, and found that Findlater and Stott had already gone to Harley Street to see Graves, the King's surgeon.

I followed them, and arrived at Graves's house while Stott was in the consulting-room. I hounded the butler and waited with the patients. Among the papers, I came upon the famous caricature of Stott in the current number of *Punch*—the "Stand-and-Deliver" caricature, in which Stott is represented with an arm about ten feet long, and the batsman is looking wildly over his shoulder to square leg, bewildered, with no conception from what direction the ball is coming. Underneath is written "Stott's New Theory—the Ricochet. Real Ginger." While I was laughing over the cartoon, the butler came in and nodded to me. I followed him out of the room and met Findlater and Stott in the hall.

Findlater was in a state of profanity. I could not get a sensible

word out of him. He was in a white heat of pure rage. The butler, who seemed as anxious as I to learn the verdict, was positively frightened.

"Well, for God's sake tell me what Graves said," I protested.

Findlater's answer is unprintable, and told me nothing.

Stott, however, quite calm and self-possessed, volunteered the information. "Finger's got to come off, sir," he said quietly. "Doctor says if it ain't off to-day or to-morrer, he won't answer for my 'and."

This was the news I had to give to England. It was a great coup from the journalistic point of view, but I made up my three columns with a heavy heart, and the congratulations of my editor only sickened me. I had some luck, but I should never have become a good journalist.

The operation was performed successfully that evening, and Stott's career was closed.

VII

I did not see Stott again till August, and then I had a long talk with him on the Ailesworth County Ground, as together we watched the progress of Hampdenshire's defeat by Lancashire.

"Oh! I can't learn him *nothing*," he broke out, as Flower was hit to the four corners of the ground, "'alf vollies and long 'ops and then a full pitch—'e's a disgrace."

"They've knocked him off his length," I protested. "On a

wicket like this ..."

Stott shook his head. "I've been trying to learn 'im," he said, "but he can't never learn. 'E's got 'abits what you can't break 'im of."

"I suppose it *is* difficult," I said vaguely.

"Same with me," went on Stott, "I've been trying to learn myself to bowl without my finger"—he held up his mutilated hand—"or left-'anded; but I can't. If I'd started that way ... No! I'm always feeling for that finger as is gone. A second-class bowler I might be in time, not better nor that."

"It's early days yet," I ventured, intending encouragement, but Stott frowned and shook his head.

"I'm not going to kid myself," he said, "I know. But I'm going to find a youngster and learn 'im. On'y he must be young.

"No 'abits, you know," he explained.

The next time I met Stott was in November. I ran up against him, literally, one Friday afternoon in Ailesworth.

When he recognised me he asked me if I would care to walk out to Stoke-Underhill with him. "I've took a cottage there," he explained, "I'm to be married in a fortnight's time."

His circumstances certainly warranted such a venture. The proceeds of *matinée* and benefit, invested for him by the Committee of the County Club, produced an income of nearly two pounds a week, and in addition to this he had his salary as groundsman. I tendered my congratulations.

"Oh! well, as to that, better wait a bit," said Stott.

He walked with his hands in his pockets and his eyes on the ground. He had the air of a man brooding over some project.

"It *is* a lottery, of course ..." I began, but he interrupted me.

"Oh that!" he said, and kicked a stone into the ditch; "take my chances of that. It's the kid I'm thinking on."

"The kid?" I repeated, doubtful whether he spoke of his fiancée, or whether his nuptials pointed an act of reparation.

"What, else 'ud I tie myself up for?" asked Stott. "I must 'ave a kid of my own and learn 'im from his cradle. It's come to that."

"Oh! I understand," I said; "teach him to bowl."

"Ah!" replied Stott as an affirmative. "Learn 'im from his cradle; before 'e's got 'abits. When I started I'd never bowled a ball in my life, and by good luck I started right. But I can't find another kid over seven years old in England as ain't never bowled a ball o' some sort and started 'abits. I've tried ..."

"And you hope with your own boys...?" I said.

"Not 'ope, it's a cert," said Stott. "I'll see no boy of mine touches a ball afore he's fourteen, and then 'e'll learn from me; and learn right. From the first go off." He was silent for a few seconds, and then he broke out in a kind of ecstasy. "My Gawd, 'e'll be a bowler such as 'as never been, never in this world. He'll start where I left orf. He'll ..." Words failed him, he fell back on the expletive he had used, repeating it with an awed fervour. "My Gawd!"

I had never seen Stott in this mood before. It was a revelation to me of the latent potentialities of the man, the remarkable depth

and quality of his ambitions....

VIII

I intended to be present at Stott's wedding, but I was not in England when it took place; indeed, for the next two years and a half I was never in England for more than a few days at a time. I sent him a wedding-present, an inkstand in the guise of a cricket ball, with a pen-rack that was built of little silver wickets. They were still advertised that Christmas as "Stott inkstands."

Two years and a half of American life broke up many of my old habits of thought. When I first returned to London I found that the cricket news no longer held the same interest for me, and this may account for the fact that I did not trouble for some time to look up my old friend Stott.

In July, however, affairs took me to Ailesworth, and the associations of the place naturally led me to wonder how Stott's marriage had turned out, and whether the much-desired son had been born to him. When my business in Ailesworth was done, I decided to walk out to Stoke-Underhill.

The road passes the County Ground, and a match was in progress, but I walked by without stopping. I was wool-gathering. I was not thinking of the man I was going to see, or I should have turned in at the County Ground, where he would inevitably have been found. Instead, I was thinking of the abnormal child I had seen in the train that day; uselessly speculating and wondering.

When I reached Stoke-Underhill I found the cottage which Stott had shown me. I had by then so far recovered my wits as to know that I should not find Stott himself there, but from the look of the cottage I judged that it was untenanted, so I made inquiries at the post-office.

"No; he don't live here, now, sir," said the postmistress; "he lives at Pym, now, sir, and rides into Ailesworth on his bike." She was evidently about to furnish me with other particulars, but I did not care to hear them. I was moody and distrait. I was wondering why I should bother my head about so insignificant a person as this Stott.

"You'll be sure to find Mr. Stott at the cricket ground," the postmistress called after me.

Another two months of English life induced a return to my old habits of thought. I found myself reverting to old tastes and interests. The reversion was a pleasant one. In the States I had been forced out of my groove, compelled to work, to strive, to think desperately if I would maintain any standing among my contemporaries. But when the perpetual stimulus was removed, I soon fell back to the less strenuous methods of my own country. I had time, once more, for the calm reflection that is so unlike the urgent, forced, inventive thought of the American journalist. I was braced by that thirty months' experience, perhaps hardened a little, but by September my American life was fading into the background; I had begun to take an interest in cricket again.

With the revival of my old interests, revived also my curiosity

as to Ginger Stott, and one Sunday in late September I decided to go down to Pym.

It was a perfect day, and I thoroughly enjoyed my four-mile walk from Great Hittenden Station.

Pym is a tiny hamlet made up of three farms and a dozen scattered cottages. Perched on one of the highest summits of the Hampden Hills and lost in the thick cover of beech woods, without a post-office or a shop, Pym is the most perfectly isolated village within a reasonable distance of London. As I sauntered up the mile-long lane that climbs the steep hill, and is the only connection between Pym and anything approaching a decent road, I thought that this was the place to which I should like to retire for a year, in order to write the book I had so often contemplated, and never found time to begin. This, I reflected, was a place of peace, of freedom from all distraction, the place for calm, contemplative meditation.

I met no one in the lane, and there was no sign of life when I reached what I must call the village, though the word conveys a wrong idea, for there is no street, merely a cottage here and there, dropped haphazard, and situated without regard to its aspect. These cottages lie all on one's left hand; to the right a stretch of grass soon merges into bracken and bush, and then the beech woods enclose both, and surge down into the valley and rise up again beyond, a great wave of green; as I saw it then, not yet touched with the first flame of autumn.

I inquired at the first cottage and received my direction to

Stott's dwelling. It lay up a little lane, the further of two cottages joined together.

The door stood open, and after a moment's hesitation and a light knock, I peered in.

Sitting in a rocking-chair was a woman with black, untidy eyebrows, and on her knee, held with rigid attention, was the remarkable baby I had seen in the train two months before. As I stood, doubtful and, I will confess it, intimidated, suddenly cold and nervous, the child opened his eyes and honoured me with a cold stare. Then he nodded, a reflective, recognisable nod.

"'E remembers seein' you in the train, sir," said the woman, "'e never forgets any one. Did you want to see my 'usband? 'E's upstairs."

So *this* was the boy who was designed by Stott to become the greatest bowler the world had ever seen....

FOOTNOTES:

CHAPTER III

THE DISILLUSIONMENT OF GINGER STOTT

I

Stott maintained an obstinate silence as we walked together up to the Common, a stretch of comparatively open ground on the plateau of the hill. He walked with his hands in his pockets and his head down, as he had walked out from Ailesworth with me nearly three years before, but his mood was changed. I was conscious that he was gloomy, depressed, perhaps a little unstrung. I was burning with curiosity. Now that I was released from the thrall of the child's presence, I was eager to hear all there was to tell of its history.

Presently we sat down under an ash-tree, one of three that guarded a shallow, muddy pond skimmed with weed. Stott accepted my offer of a cigarette, but seemed disinclined to break the silence.

I found nothing better to say than a repetition of the old phrase. "That's a very remarkable baby of yours, Stott," I said.

"Ah!" he replied, his usual substitute for "yes," and he picked up a piece of dead wood and threw it into the little pond.

"How old is he?" I asked.

"Nearly two year."

"Can he ..." I paused; my imagination was reconstructing the scene of the railway carriage, and I felt a reflex of the hesitation shown by the rubicund man when he had asked the same question. "Can he ... can he talk?" It seemed so absurd a question to ask, yet it was essentially a natural question in the circumstances.

"He can, but he won't."

This was startling enough, and I pressed my enquiry.

"How do you know? Are you sure he can?"

"Ah!" Only that irritating, monosyllabic assent.

"Look here, Stott," I said, "don't you want to talk about the child?"

He shrugged his shoulders and threw more wood into the pond with a strained attentiveness as though he were peculiarly anxious to hit some particular wafer of the vivid, floating weed. For a full five minutes we maintained silence. I was trying to subdue my impatience and my temper. I knew Stott well enough to know that if I displayed signs of either, I should get no information from him. My self-control was rewarded at last.

"I've 'eard 'im speak," he said, "speak proper, too, not like a baby."

He paused, and I grunted to show that I was listening, but as he volunteered no further remark, I said: "What did you hear him say?"

"I dunno," replied Stott, "somethin' about learnin' and talkin'. I didn't get the rights of it, but the missus near fainted—*she* thinks 'e's Gawd A'mighty or suthing."

"But why don't you make him speak?" I asked deliberately.

"Make 'im!" said Stott, with a curl of his lip, "*make* 'im! You try it on!"

I knew I was acting a part, but I wanted to provoke more information. "Well! Why not?" I said.

"'Cos 'e'd look at you—that's why not," replied Stott, "and you can't no more face 'im than a dog can face a man. I shan't stand it much longer."

"Curious," I said, "very curious."

"Oh! he's a blarsted freak, that's what 'e is," said Stott, getting to his feet and beginning to pace moodily up and down.

I did not interrupt him. I was thinking of this man who had drawn huge crowds from every part of England, who had been a national hero, and who, now, was unable to face his own child. Presently Stott broke out again.

"To think of all the trouble I took when 'e was comin'," he said, stopping in front of me. "There was nothin' the missus fancied as I wouldn't get. We was livin' in Stoke then." He made a movement of his head in the direction of Ailesworth. "Not as she was difficult," he went on thoughtfully. "She used to say 'I mussent get 'abits, George.' Caught that from me; I was always on about that—then. You know, thinkin' of learnin' 'im bowlin'. Things was different then; afore 'e came." He paused again,

evidently thinking of his troubles.

Sympathetically, I was wondering how far the child had separated husband and wife. There was the making of a tragedy here, I thought; but when Stott, after another period of pacing up and down, began to speak again I found that his tragedy was of another kind.

"Learn 'im bowling!" he said, and laughed a mirthless laugh. "My Gawd! it 'ud take something. No fear; that little game's off. And I could a' done it if he'd been a decent or'nery child, 'stead of a blarsted freak. There won't never be another, neither. This one pretty near killed the missus. Doctor said it'd be 'er last.... With an 'ead like that, whacher expect?"

"Can he walk?" I asked.

"Ah! Gets about easy enough for all 'is body and legs is so small. When the missus tries to stop 'im—she's afraid 'e'll go over—'e just looks at 'er and she 'as to let 'im 'ave 'is own way."

II

Later, I reverted to that speech of the child's, that intelligent, illuminating speech that seemed to prove that there was indeed a powerful, thoughtful mind behind those profoundly speculative eyes.

"That time he spoke, Stott," I said, "was he alone?"

"Ah!" assented Stott. "In the garden, practisin' walkin' all by 'imself."

"Was that the only time?"

"Only time *I've* 'eard 'im."

"Was it lately?"

"'Bout six weeks ago."

"And he has never made a sound otherwise, cried, laughed?"

"'Ardly. 'E gives a sort o' grunt sometimes, when 'e wants anything—and points."

"He's very intelligent."

"Worse than that, 'e's a freak, I tell you."

With the repetition of this damning description, Stott fell back into his moody pacing, and this time I failed to rouse him from his gloom. "Oh! forget it," he broke out once, when I asked him another question, and I saw that he was not likely to give me any more information that day.

We walked back together, and I said good-bye to him at the end of the lane which led up to his cottage.

"Not comin' up?" he asked, with a nod of his head towards his home.

"Well! I have to catch that train ..." I prevaricated, looking at my watch. I did not wish to see that child again; my distaste was even stronger than my curiosity.

Stott grinned. "We don't 'ave many visitors," he said. "Well, I'll come a bit farther with you."

He came to the bottom of the hill, and after he left me he took the road that goes over the hill to Wenderby. It would be about seven miles back to Pym by that road....

III

I spent the next afternoon in the Reading Room of the British Museum. I was searching for a precedent, and at last I found one in the story of Christian Heinrich Heinecken,² who was born at Lubeck on February 6, 1721. There were marked points of difference between the development of Heinecken and that of Stott's child. Heinecken was physically feeble; at the age of three he was still being fed at the breast. The Stott precocity appeared to be physically strong; his body looked small and undeveloped, it is true, but this was partly an illusion produced by the abnormal size of the head. Again Heinecken learned to speak very early; at ten months old he was asking intelligent questions, at eighteen months he was studying history, geography, Latin and anatomy; whereas the Stott child had only once been heard to speak at the age of two years, and had not, apparently, begun any study at all.

From this comparison it might seem at first that the balance of precocity lay in the Heinecken scale. I drew another inference. I argued that the genius of the Stott child far outweighed the genius of Christian Heinecken.

Little Heinecken in his four years of life suffered the mental experience—with certain necessary limitations—of a developed brain. He gathered knowledge as an ordinary child gathers knowledge, the only difference being that his rate of assimilation

² See the Teutsche Bibliothek and Schoneich's account of the child of Lubeck.

was as ten to one.

But little Stott had gathered no knowledge from books. He had been born of ignorant parents, he was being brought up among uneducated people. Yet he had wonderful intellectual gifts; surely he must have one above all others—the gift of reason. His brain must be constructive, logical; he must have the power of deduction. He must even at an extraordinarily early age, say six months, have developed some theory of life. He must be withholding his energy, deliberately; declining to exhibit his powers, holding his marvellous faculties in reserve. Here was surely a case of genius which, comparable in some respects to the genius of Heineken, yet far exceeded it.

As I developed my theory, my eagerness grew. And then suddenly an inspiration came to me. In my excitement I spoke aloud and smacked the desk in front of me with my open hand. "Why, of course!" I said. "That is the key."

An old man in the next seat scowled fiercely. The attendants in the central circular desk all looked up. Other readers turned round and stared at me. I had violated the sacred laws of the Reading Room. I saw one of the librarians make a sign to an attendant and point to me.

I gathered up my books quickly and returned them at the central desk. My self-consciousness had returned, and I was anxious to be away from the observation of the many dilettante readers who found my appearance more engrossing than the books with which they were dallying on some pretext or another.

Yet, curiously, when I reached the street, the theory which had come to me in the Museum with the force and vividness of an illuminating dream had lost some of its glamour. Nevertheless, I set it out as it then shaped itself in my mind.

The great restraining force in the evolution of man, so I thought, has been the restriction imposed by habit. What we call instinct is a hereditary habit. This is the first guiding principle in the life of the human infant. Upon this instinct we immediately superimpose the habits of reason, all the bodily and intellectual conventions that have been handed down from generation to generation. We learn everything we know as children by the hereditary, simian habit of imitation. The child of intellectual, cultured parents, born into savage surroundings, becomes the slave of this inherited habit—call it tendency, if you will, the intention is the same. I elaborated the theory by instance and introspection, and found no flaw in it....

And here, by some freak of nature, was a child born without these habits. During the period of gestation, one thought had dominated the minds of both parents—the desire to have a son born without habits. It does not seriously affect the theory that the desire had a peculiar end in view; the wish, the urgent, controlling, omnipotent will had been there, and the result included far more than the specific intention.

Already some of my distaste for the Stott child had vanished. It was accountable, and therefore no longer fearful. The child was supernormal, a cause of fear to the normal man, as all truly

supernormal things are to our primitive, animal instincts. This is the fear of the wild thing; when we can explain and give reasons, the horror vanishes. We are men again.

I did not quite recover the glow of my first inspiration, but the theory remained with me; I decided to make a study of the child, to submit knowledge to his reason. I would stand between him and the delimiting training of the pedagogue, I thought.

Then I reached home, and my life was changed.

This story is not of my own life, and I have no wish to enter into the curious and saddening experiences which stood between me and the child of Ginger Stott for nearly six years. In that time my thoughts strayed now and again to that cottage in the little hamlet on those wooded hills. Often I thought "When I have time I will go and see that child again if he is alive." But as the years passed, the memory of him grew dim, even the memory of his father was blurred over by a thousand new impressions. So it chanced that for nearly six years I heard no word of Stott and his supernormal infant, and then chance again intervened. My long period of sorrow came to an end almost as suddenly as it had begun, and by a coincidence I was once more entangled in the strange web of the abnormal.

In this story of Victor Stott I have bridged these six years in the pages that follow. In doing this I have been compelled to draw to a certain extent on my imagination, but the main facts are true. They have been gathered from first-hand authority only, from Henry Challis, from Mrs. Stott, and from her husband; though

none, I must confess, has been checked by that soundest of all authorities, Victor Stott himself, who might have given me every particular in accurate detail, had it not been for those peculiarities of his which will be explained fully in the proper place.

PART TWO

THE CHILDHOOD OF THE WONDER

CHAPTER IV

THE MANNER OF HIS BIRTH

I

Stoke-Underhill lies in the flat of the valley that separates the Hampden from the Quainton Hills. The main road from London to Aylesworth does not pass through Stoke, but from the highway you can see the ascent of the bridge over the railway, down the vista of a straight mile of side road; and, beyond, a glimpse of scattered cottages. That is all, and as a matter of fact, no one who is not keeping a sharp look-out would ever notice the village, for the eye is drawn to admire the bluff of Deane Hill, the highest point of the Hampdens, which lowers over the little hamlet of Stoke and gives it a second name; and to the church tower of Chilborough Beacon, away to the right, another landmark.

The attraction which Stoke-Underhill held for Stott, lay not

in its seclusion or its picturesqueness but in its nearness to the County Ground. Stott could ride the two flat miles which separated him from the scene of his work in ten minutes, and Ailesworth station is only a mile beyond. So when he found that there was a suitable cottage to let in Stoke, he looked no farther for a home; he was completely satisfied.

Stott's absorption in any matter that was occupying his mind made him exceedingly careless about the detail of his affairs. He took the first cottage that offered when he looked for a home, he took the first woman who offered when he looked for a wife.

Stott was not an attractive man to women. He was short and plain, and he had an appearance of being slightly deformed, a "monkeyish" look, due to his build and his long arms. Still, he was famous, and might, doubtless, have been accepted by a dozen comely young women for that reason, even after his accident. But if Stott was unattractive to women, women were even more unattractive to Stott. "No opinion of women?" he used to say. "Ever seen a gel try to throw a cricket ball? You 'ave? Well, ain't that enough to put you off women?" That was Stott's intellectual standard; physically, he had never felt drawn to women.

Ellen Mary Jakes exhibited no superiority over her sisters in the matter of throwing a cricket ball. She was a friend of Ginger's mother, and she was a woman of forty-two, who had long since been relegated to some remote shelf of the matrimonial exchange. But her physical disadvantages were outbalanced by her mental qualities. Ellen Mary was not a book-worm, she

read nothing but the evening and Sunday papers, but she had a reasoning and intelligent mind.

She had often contemplated the state of matrimony, and had made more than one tentative essay in that direction. She had walked out with three or four sprigs of the Ailesworth bourgeoisie in her time, and the shadow of middle-age had crept upon her before she realised that however pliant her disposition, her lack of physical charm put her at the mercy of the first bright-eyed rival. At thirty-five Ellen had decided, with admirable philosophy, that marriage was not for her, and had assumed, with apparent complacency, the outward evidences of a dignified spinsterhood. She had discarded gay hats and ribbons, imitation jewellery, unreliable cheap shoes, and chill diaphanous stockings, and had found some solace for her singleness in more comfortable and suitable apparel.

When Ellen, a declared spinster of seven years' standing, was first taken into the confidence of Ginger Stott's mother, the scheme which she afterwards elaborated immediately presented itself to her mind. This fact is a curious instance of Ellen Mary's mobility of intellect, and the student of heredity may here find matter for careful thought.³

³ A study of genius shows that in a percentage of cases so large as to exclude the possibility of coincidence, the exceptional man, whether in the world of action, of art, or of letters, seems to inherit his magnificent powers through the female line. Sir Francis Galton, it is true, did not make a great point of this curious observation, but the tendency of more recent analyses is all in the direction of confirming the hypothesis; and it would seem to hold good in the converse proposition, namely, that

The confidence in question was Ginger's declared intention of becoming the father of the world's greatest bowler. Mrs. Stott was a dark, garrulous, rather deaf little woman, with a keen eye for the main chance; she might have become a successful woman of business if she had not been by nature both stingy and a cheat. When her son presented his determination, her first thought was to find some woman who would not dissipate her son's substance, and in her opinion—not expressed to Ginger—the advertised purpose of the contemplated marriage evidenced a wasteful disposition.

Mrs. Stott did not think of Ellen Mary as a possible daughter-in-law, but she did hold forth for an hour and three-quarters on the contemptible qualities of the young maidens, first of Ailesworth, and then with a wider swoop that was not justified by her limited experience, of the girls of England, Scotland, and Ireland at large.

It required the flexible reasoning powers of Ellen Mary to find a solution of the problem. Any ordinary, average woman of forty-two, a declared spinster of seven years' standing, who had lived all her life in a provincial town, would have been mentally unable to realise the possibilities of the situation. Such a representative of the decaying sexual instinct would have needed the stimulus of courtship, at the least of some hint of preference displayed by the suitor. Ruled by the conventions which hold her sex in bondage, she would have deemed it unwomanly to make advances by any

the exceptional woman inherits her qualities from her father.

means other than innuendo, the subtle suggestions which are the instruments of her sex, but which are often too delicate to pierce the understanding of the obtuse and slow-witted male.

Ellen Mary stood outside the ruck that determines the destinies of all such typical representatives. She considered the idea presented to her by Mrs. Stott with an open and mobile intelligence. She weighed the character of Ginger, the possibilities of rejection, and the influence of Mrs. Stott; and she gave no thought to the conventions, nor to the criticisms of Ailesworth society. When she had decided that such chances as she could calculate were in her favour, Ellen made up her mind, walked out to the County Ground one windy October forenoon, and discovered Ginger experimenting with grass seed in a shed off the pavilion.

In this shed she offered herself, while Ginger worked on, attentive but unresponsive. Perhaps she did not make an offer so much as state a case. A masterly case, without question; for who can doubt that Stott, however procrastinating and unwilling to make a definite overture, must already have had some type of womanhood in his mind; some conception, the seed of an ideal.

I find a quality of romance in this courageous and unusual wooing of Ellen Mary's; but more, I find evidences of the remarkable quality of her intelligence. In other circumstances the name of Ellen Mary Jakes might have stood for individual achievement; instead of that, she is remembered as a common woman who *happened* to be the mother of Victor Stott. But when

the facts are examined, can we say that chance entered? If ever the birth of a child was deliberately designed by both parents, it was in the case under consideration. And in what a strange setting was the inception first displayed.

Ellen Mary, a gaunt, tall, somewhat untidy woman, stood at the narrow door of the little shed off the Ailesworth pavilion; with one hand, shoulder-high, she steadied herself against the door frame, with the other she continually pushed forward the rusty bonnet which had been loosened during her walk by the equinoctial gale that now tore at the door of the shed, and necessitated the employment of a wary foot to keep the door from slamming. With all these distractions she still made good her case, though she had to raise her voice above the multitudinous sounds of the wind, and though she had to address the unresponsive shoulders of a man who bent over shallow trays of earth set on a trestle table under the small and dirty window. It is heroic, but she had her reward in full measure. Presently her voice ceased, and she waited in silence for the answer that should decide her destiny. There was an interval broken only by the tireless passion of the wind, and then Ginger Stott, the best-known man in England, looked up and stared through the incrustated pane of glass before him at the dim vision of stooping grass and swaying hedge. Unconsciously his hand strayed to his pockets, and then he said in a low, thoughtful voice: "Well! I dunno why not."

II

Dr. O'Connell's face was white and drawn, and the redness of his eyelids more pronounced than ever as he faced Stott in the pale October dawn. He clutched at his beard with a nervous, combing movement, as he shook his head decidedly in answer to the question put to him.

"If it's not dead, now, 'twill be in very few hours," he said.

Stott was shaken by the feeble passion of a man who has spent many weary hours of suspense. His anger thrilled out in a feeble stream of hackneyed profanities.

O'Connell looked down on him with contempt. At sunrise, after a sleepless night, a man is a creature of unrealised emotions.

"Damn it, control yourself, man!" growled O'Connell, himself uncontrolled, "your wife'll pull through with care, though she'll never have another child." O'Connell did not understand; he was an Irishman, and no cricketer; he had been called in because he had a reputation for his skill in obstetrics.

Stott stared at him fiercely. The two men seemed as if about to grapple desperately for life in the windy, grey twilight.

O'Connell recovered his self-control first, and began again to claw nervously at his beard. "Don't be a fool," he said, "it's only what you could expect. Her first child, and her a woman of near fifty." He returned to the upstairs room; Stott seized his cap and went out into the chill world of sunrise.

"She'll do, if there are no complications," said O'Connell to the nurse, as he bent over the still, exhausted figure of Mrs. Stott. "She's a wonderful woman to have delivered such a child alive."

The nurse shivered, and avoiding any glance at the huddle that lay on an improvised sofa-bed, she said: "It can't live, can it?"

O'Connell, still intent on his first patient, shook his head. "Never cried after delivery," he muttered—"the worst sign." He was silent for a moment and then he added: "But, to be sure, it's a freak of some kind." His scientific curiosity led him to make a further investigation. He left the bed and began to examine the huddle on the sofa-couch. Victor Stott owed his life, in the first instance, to this scientific curiosity of O'Connell's.

The nurse, a capable, but sentimental woman, turned to the window and looked out at the watery trickle of feeble sunlight that now illumined the wilderness of Stott's garden.

"Nurse!" The imperative call startled her; she turned nervously.

"Yes, doctor?" she said, making no movement towards him.

"Come here!" O'Connell was kneeling by the sofa. "There seems to be complete paralysis of all the motor centres," he went on; "but the child's not dead. We'll try artificial respiration."

The nurse overcame her repugnance by a visible effort. "Is it ... is it worth while?" she asked, regarding the flaccid, tumbled, wax-like thing, with its bloated, white globe of a skull. Every muscle of it was relaxed and limp, its eyes shut, its tiny jaw hanging. "Wouldn't it be better to let it die...?"

O'Connell did not seem to hear her. He waved an impatient hand for her assistance. "Outside my experience," he muttered, "no heart-beat discernible, no breath ... yet it is indubitably alive." He depressed the soft, plastic ribs and gave the feeble heart a gentle squeeze.

"It's beating," he ejaculated, after a pause, with an ear close to the little chest, "but still no breath! Come!"

The diminutive lungs were as readily open to suggestion as the wee heart: a few movements of the twigs they called arms, and the breath came. O'Connell closed the mouth and it remained closed, adjusted the limbs, and they stayed in the positions in which they were placed. At last he gently lifted the lids of the eyes.

The nurse shivered and drew back. Even O'Connell was startled, for the eyes that stared into his own seemed to be heavy with a brooding intelligence....

Stott came back at ten o'clock, after a morose trudge through the misty rain. He found the nurse in the sitting-room.

"Doctor gone?" he asked.

The nurse nodded.

"Dead, I suppose?" Stott gave an upward twist of his head towards the room above.

The nurse shook her head.

"Can't live though?" There was a note of faint hope in his voice.

The nurse drew herself together and sighed deeply. "Yes!

we believe it'll live, Mr. Stott," she said. "But ... it's a very remarkable baby."

How that phrase always recurred!

III

There were no complications, but Mrs. Stott's recovery was not rapid. It was considered advisable that she should not see the child. She thought that they were lying to her, that the child was dead and, so, resigned herself. But her husband saw it.

He had never seen so young an infant before, and, just for one moment, he believed that it was a normal child.

"What an 'ead!" was his first ejaculation, and then he realised the significance of that sign. Fear came into his eyes, and his mouth fell open. "'Ere, I say, nurse, it's ... it's a wrong 'un, ain't it?" he gasped.

"I'm *sure* I can't tell you, Mr. Stott," broke out the nurse hysterically. She had been tending that curious baby for three hours, and she was on the verge of a break-down. There was no wet-nurse to be had, but a woman from the village had been sent for. She was expected every moment.

"More like a tadpole than anything," mused the unhappy father.

"Oh! Mr. Stott, for goodness' sake, *don't*," cried the nurse. "If you only knew...."

"Knew what?" questioned Stott, still staring at the motionless

figure of his son, who lay with closed eyes, apparently unconscious.

"There's something—I don't know," began the nurse, and then after a pause, during which she seemed to struggle for some means of expression, she continued with a sigh of utter weariness, "You'll know when it opens its eyes. Oh! Why doesn't that woman come, the woman you sent for?"

"She'll be 'ere directly," replied Stott. "What d'you mean about there bein' something ... something what?"

"Uncanny," said the nurse without conviction. "I do wish that woman would come. I've been up the best part of the night, and now ..."

"Uncanny? As how?" persisted Stott.

"Not normal," explained the nurse. "I can't tell you more than that."

"But 'ow? What way?"

He did not receive an answer then, for the long expected relief came at last, a great hulk of a woman, who became voluble when she saw the child she had come to nurse.

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