

Meade L. T.

A London Baby: The Story of King Roy



L. Meade

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Prologue

I first saw King Roy on a lovely summer's evening near Hyde Park. It was a Sunday evening, and I recollect there was a light pleasant breeze, which just tempered the heat, and once in a playful moment caught King Roy's small velvet cap and tossed it off his curly head. Then ensued a race, a scuffle, and a laugh, in which I, although a stranger to his Majesty, joined. This induced me to consider him more attentively, and thus to study well one of the bonniest baby faces it has ever been my lot to behold. For – yes, it is true – King Roy was only a king in right of his babyhood, being no higher up in this world's social scale than a carpenter's son.

A brawny, large, and handsome man was the father, on whose shoulder the little fellow was riding, while a demure, pale-faced sister of about ten, walked by the side of the two. Father and little sister might have been met with anywhere, any day, but the baby once in a lifetime.

He was a rounded and curved creature – not an angle anywhere about him; his chin was a dimple, his lips rose-buds, his eyes sapphires; his little head was a mass of tangled golden curls; sunshine seemed to kiss him all over – hair, eyes, lips, even to the small pink toes – for he had pulled off his shoes and stockings, which were held tightly in two fat hands. He was full of heart-sunshine too, for his gay voice babbled continually, saying words, to our deaf ears meaningless, but which, doubtless, the angels understood very well.

“Ah boo!” was his remark to me, and he pointed with his small finger. Following the direction of the tiny finger, I saw a fly sailing slowly through space. Between King Roy and that fly there was doubtless some untold sympathy. As though attracted by his admiration it came nearer. Yes, he must have been giving it some message, for he babbled more sweetly than before. The fly sailed away; it looked important with big tidings, as it went higher into the blue, and the little group of three turning Hyde Park Corner disappeared from my sight.

I never saw King Roy again, but afterwards I heard a story about him – a story which so moved me that it may some others; so I tell it here.

Chapter One

John Henry Warden was a carpenter by trade; he was a well-to-do workman, employed constantly in a profitable and moneymaking business. God had also endowed him with excellent mental and physical powers. Sickness was unknown to this man, and as to the many heart-aches which come into the daily measure of most other lives, they were strangers to his nature. He did not understand moping; he had no sympathy with gloom. He considered himself a successful man, he was also ambitious; he meant, if he lived, to leave this world in a much higher position than when he had entered it. He was very much respected by his neighbours, for he was a strictly honourable, upright, and honest man. But though respected he was not loved. It was his misfortune that never yet in all his life had he either awakened or given love. And yet he was not without those closest ties which knit hearts to hearts. He had been a husband; he was now a widower and a father. He had married a young and beautiful girl, a sensitive creature who needed love as the plants need sunshine. She lived with him for a little over ten years, all the time, year after year, fading slowly but surely. Then she died; no one said she died of a broken heart – Warden least of all suspected it. He regretted her loss, for he considered a mother the right person to bring up her children, and he felt it a pity that she should have left all the good things of this life, which by-and-by he might have provided for her. He had even expressed this regret to her as she lay on her death-bed, and her answer had surprised him.

“But there’ll be love up in heaven. I’m so *hungry* for love.”

The wife and mother died, and Warden did not fret. It would have been very sinful to fret, for although he scarcely considered himself religious, yet he had a respect for God’s dispensations. Yes, he was outwardly a model character: he worked early and late; he saved money; he was never in debt; he defrauded no man; his evenings were spent either in attending lectures of working men like himself or studying the subjects he loved at home; he never drank; he never swore; he was looked up to, and brought forward as an example to follow for many a poor drunken wretch. But yet in God’s sight that poor drunkard, struggling, though struggling feebly, to repent, was far nearer, far dearer than this Pharisee, who had never yet known love, human or divine.

Warden’s wife died, leaving to his care two children. Faith, the elder, nine years of age at the time, was a pale, silent child. She knew enough of her father’s character to suppress all her real self before him. Roy, the younger, aged three months when his mother left him, showed from his earliest moments a disposition differing widely from either father or mother. By-and-by that sweet soul would develop the love of the one parent without her weakness, the strength of the other without his hardness. Warden, in reality loving no one, having never in all his existence experienced either the joy or the pain of true love, yet believed that he had this feeling for his boy. He was undoubtedly very proud of the little child; he was his son, he was beautiful. Warden, when he looked at him, dreamed dreams, in which he saw himself the founder of a house and a name. He would make his boy a gentleman; he worked ever harder and harder as this thought grew and gathered strength within him. As to Faith, she was useful in helping and training Roy. For her own individual existence he had no special thought. She was but a girl; she would grow up another weak, good, loving creature like her mother. She might or might not marry. It did not greatly matter. Of course he would do his duty by her – for whenever had John Warden, in his own opinion, neglected that? She should be educated; she should have her chance in life. But he had no high opinion of women, and, though he thought he loved his son, he did not even pretend to his own heart that he cared for little Faith.

It was to this man – this hard, hard man – who lived so uprightly in the eyes of his fellow men, but so far from his God, that the same God of love and pity and infinite compassion would yet reveal Himself. He must hear the voice of God; but, alas! for his hardness of heart, it must be in the whirlwind and the storm; not in the still small accents.

Chapter Two

It was a Sunday morning – nearly a year after my first and last sight of King Roy. He was nearly two years old at the time, and his little sister Faith was laboriously and with infinite care dressing him to accompany her for a walk. Warden was out, and the two children had the pleasant and cheerful sitting-room to themselves. The moments of Warden’s absence were the moments of Faith’s sunshine. Her object now was to get out before he returned, and take Roy with her. She thought her father a very good and wonderful man; but it was quite impossible for her to feel absolutely at home with him. She had a keen perception of his real indifference to her; she was not surprised, for Faith thought very humbly of herself. But his absence took away a sense of restraint which she could not shake off, and now the glorious sunshine of this autumn morning seemed to beckon her out, to beckon and lure her into the fulness of its own beautiful life. No summer’s day that ever came was too hot for little Faith; she would get into the full power of the sun herself, and Roy should have the shelter of the trees. Yes, it was Sunday morning; there was nothing whatever to keep them at home; they would go into Regent’s Park, and sit under the trees, and be very, very happy. “’Tis *such* a lovely day, Roy,” she said to her little brother. Roy, seated on the floor, was rebelling at his shoes and stockings being put on, and Faith had to use all her powers of imagination in describing the outside world, to induce him to submit to the process. At last, however, he was ready, and taking his hand, they went down together into the street. Roy was such a lovely child that people turned to look at him as he trotted along. Those who often saw him have told me that he had by no means perfect features, but the brightness and sweetness of the little face were simply indescribable. He babbled as much as of old; but his babbling was now intelligible to other creatures besides the flies. Faith looked nearly as happy as he did as they walked together. In process of time, as fast as the little legs would permit they arrived at Regent’s Park, and Faith, choosing a sheltering tree, placed her little brother in a shady corner, and came close to his side. Roy picked bits of grass, which he flung into Faith’s lap. Faith laughed and caressed him. They were both in a most blissful child-world, and thought of no darker days at hand.

“Please, I *should* like to kiss the baby,” said a voice suddenly quite close to Faith’s ear.

It was a thin, high-pitched voice, and raising her head at the sound, Faith saw a very white-faced, very ragged girl, a little older than herself, standing near.

“I’m so afraid as you mayn’t be clean enough,” she answered anxiously.

“Oh, but I’ll run to mother, and she’ll wash my lips. Just wait, and I’ll be back in a jiffy.”

The ragged girl flew across the grass, came to a woman who was seated with some other children round her, stayed away for a very short time, and quickly returned.

“Now, ain’t I h’all right?” she said, showing a pair of pretty rosy lips enough, in the midst of an otherwise black and dirty little face. “You’ll kiss me now, pretty, dear little boy?” she said.

“I tiss ’oo once,” replied King Roy solemnly, and allowing his little rose-bud mouth to meet hers.

“Oh, but ain’t he a real duck?” said the girl. “We ’ad a little ’un somethink like him wid us once. Yes, he wor *werry* like him.”

“Ain’t he with you now?” asked Faith.

“No, no; you mustn’t speak o’ it to mother, but he died; he tuk the ’fecti’n, and he died.”

“Wor it fever?” asked Faith.

“Yes, perhaps that wor the name. There’s a many kinds o’ ’fecti’n, and folks dies from they h’all. I don’t see the use o’ naming ’em. They’re h’all certain sure to kill yer.” Here the ragged girl seated herself on the grass quite close to Faith. “You’ll never guess where I’m a going this afternoon,” she said.

“No; how could I guess?” replied Faith.

“Well, now, you’re *werry* neat dressed, and folks like you have a kinder right to be there. But for h’all that, though I’m desperate ragged, I’m goin’. You’re sure you can’t guess, can you?”

“No, I can’t guess,” answered Faith. “I ain’t going nowhere particular myself, and I never wor good at guessing.”

“Well, now, ain’t it queer? – I thought h’all the ’spectable folks went. Why, I’m going to Sunday-school – ’tis to Ragged Sunday-school, to be sure; but I like it. I ha’ gone twice now, and I like it wonderful well.”

“I know now what you mean,” replied Faith. “I often wished to go to Sunday-school, but father don’t like it; he’d rayther I stayed to take care o’ Roy.”

“I guess as my father wouldn’t wish it neither. But, Lor’ bless yer! I don’t trouble to obey him. ’Tis werry nice in Sunday-school. Would you like to hear wot they telled us last Sunday?”

“Yes, please,” answered Faith, opening her eyes with some curiosity.

“Well, it wor a real pretty tale – it wor ’bout a man called Jesus. A lot o’ women brought their babies to Jesus and axed Him to fondle of ’em, and take ’em in His arms; and there wor some men about – ugh! I guess as *they* wor some’ut like father – and they said to the women, ‘Take the babies away as fast as possible; Jesus is a great, great man, and He can’t no way be troubled.’ And the mothers o’ the babies wor going off, when Jesus said – I remember the exact words, for we was got to larn ’em off book – ‘Suffer the little children to come unto Me, and don’t forbid ’em;’ and He tuk them ’ere little babies in His arms and kissed ’em. I guess as some of ’em worn’t too clean neither.”

“I wish ever so as I could take Roy to him,” answered Faith. “That’s a real lovely story. Mother, afore she died, telled me ’bout Jesus; but I don’t remember ’bout Him and the babies. Now I must be going home. Thank you, little ragged girl. If you like you may kiss Roy once again, and me too.”

Chapter Three

Faith and Roy were late, and their father was waiting for them. He was very particular about his meals, which were never entrusted to Faith's young efforts at cooking, but were sent from a cook-shop close by. Now the potatoes and a little piece of roast beef smoked on the table, and Warden, considerably put out, walked up and down. When the children entered, Roy ran up to his father confidently – he had never been afraid of any one in his life – and wanted a ride now on the tall, strong shoulder.

“Up, up,” said the little fellow, raising his arms and pointing to his favourite perch.

Warden endeavoured to get out of his way, but Roy clasped his little arms round his knees.

“Fader, up, up,” he said.

“No; I can't, Roy. Don't be troublesome. Faith, that child is in every one's way. Take him and put him in the bedroom until his dinner is ready.”

Little Roy was very hungry, and there was that in his father's hard tone which caused him to raise his baby-blue eyes in wonder and some shadowy alarm. Faith took him, sobbing, into the bedroom, from which she returned with a very sad heart to her own dinner. Warden helped her sullenly; but to eat while her little brother was alone seemed to choke her. She found she could not swallow her nice Sunday dinner. She was always terrified of her stern father, but now for Roy's sake she must brave his anger.

“Please, father, may little Roy have his dinner first? He's se'ch a baby, and he's so hungry.”

“No, Faith; I make a rule, and I won't break it. 'Tis a very proper punishment for you for being so late.”

Roy's little sobbing voice at the other side of the door, for the bedroom was inside the sitting-room, saying “Open, open,” made it almost impossible for Faith to sit quiet, and she was much relieved when her father rose from the table and went out. Then what petting followed for little Roy! what feeding him with the choicest bits! until at last the little fellow, worn out from his walk and fit of crying, fell asleep in his sister's arms.

Faith laid him tenderly on the horse-hair sofa, covered him over, and sat down by his side. She sat on a low seat, and, folding her hands on her lap, gazed straight before her. Faith was nearly eleven years old now, but she was small for her age – small, thin, and very sad-looking. Only when playing with Roy, or tending Roy, did her little sallow face grow childish and happy in expression. Faith possessed her mother's sensitive temperament. Love alone could make this child bright and happy; without love she must pine and die, perhaps as her mother died. Tears gathered slowly in her eyes as she recalled the little scene between her father and Roy. After a time, hearing steps in the street, she rose and went to the window. Some children, with their parents, were walking up the street – happy children in their Sunday best, and happy parents, caring for and loving them. Faith watched one little group with special interest. There were four in this group – a father and mother, and boy and girl. The girl held her father's hand, and danced as she walked. The boy, a very little child, was led most tenderly by his mother. Faith turned away with a great sigh, and the tears now rolled slowly down her cheeks.

“Ain't it a hard, hard thing when a little child loses of his mother?” she said to herself. “Oh! my little darlin' Roy, if mother had been there he wouldn't a been kep' waiting fur his dinner.”

She went over, knelt down by her little brother, and kissed his soft cheek. Then a further thought occurred to her. That was a pretty story the ragged girl in Regent's Park had told her to-day. She had never heard it before, though her mother, when alive, had often spoken to her about Jesus, but somehow this story, the sweetest of all, had never reached her ears before to-day.

“I wish as Jesus wor alive now, and I could take Roy to him,” she said to herself. She felt that if Jesus took Roy in his arms and blessed him, that then he might not miss his mother so much; that the great fact of his having received the blessing of Jesus would make up to him for the loss of his mother.

“But wot’s the use,” continued Faith very sadly to herself, “when Jesus be dead years ago?”

At this juncture in the little girl’s thoughts, the room-door was opened, and a neighbour, who had often been kind to both the children, came in. She had come to borrow a saucepan, and was in a hurry; but seeing the tears on Faith’s cheeks, she stopped to inquire the cause.

“There be nothink wrong wid the little ’un, I ’ope, Faith,” she said.

“Oh, no,” answered Faith. “Roy’s well enough. ’Tis only as I’m so sorry as Jesus is dead.”

Mrs Mason, the neighbour, stepped back a pace or so in some astonishment.

“Bless us and save us!” she exclaimed. “Wot a queer child! But it ain’t true, Faith, fur Jesus ain’t dead. He’s as alive as possible!”

“Do the Bible say that?” asked Faith.

“Yes, the Bible says it h’over and h’over.”

“And could I go to him, and take Roy? Could I, Mrs Mason?”

“Bless us, child, you’re a queer ’un; but the Bible sartin’ do say as He’ll receive all as come to Him. Yes, in course you can go; but I can’t tell you the exact way. There, Faith, child, why don’t you go to Sunday-school, same as the other little lads and lasses about? They teach everythink about coming to Jesus in Sunday-school.”

“I wish with h’all my heart I could go,” answered Faith.

“Well, child, I see nothink agen it. There’s one jest round the corner, and the bell’s a-ringing now; but there, I can’t stay another moment.”

Mrs Mason hurried away, and Faith still sat still; but a devouring wish was now possessing her. If she only could just once go to Sunday-school and hear about Jesus, and learn that He was really alive, and that she could take Roy to Him! Oh! if only it were possible that Roy might receive this great and wonderful blessing, why it would be worth even her father’s great anger, should he learn that she had disobeyed him. Faith trembled and hesitated, and finally rose to her feet. If only Roy would awake, she could take him with her. But no; Roy was very tired and very sound asleep. By the time little Roy awoke, Sunday-school would be over, and she would have lost all hope of hearing of Jesus for another week.

Suppose she left Roy just for once – just for the first and last time in all her life – she would only be an hour away, and in that hour what possible harm could happen to the little child? and she would learn so much, oh! so much, which could help him by-and-by.

Yes; she thought she might venture. She would have returned long before her father came back, most likely long before Roy awoke. It was worth the little risk for the sake of the great gain. She placed the fireguard carefully before the fire, kissed her little brother, and with a beating heart slipped out.

No; there was no possible fear for little Roy.

Chapter Four

Before Faith had been gone quite half an hour her father returned. This was an unusual proceeding, for generally he spent his Sunday afternoons in a working men's club round the corner. He was one of the most influential members of this club – its most active and stirring representative. He organised meetings, got up debates, and did, in short, those thousand and one things which an energetic, clever man can do to put fire and life into such proceedings. He had come home now to draw up the minutes of a new organisation which he and a few other kindred spirits were about to form.

It was to be a society in every way based on the laws of justice and reason. Religious, and yet allowing all harmless and innocent amusements both for Sundays and weekdays; temperate, but permitting the use of beer and wine in moderation.

Warden felt very virtuous and very useful as he sat down with pen and paper before him. No one could say of him that he spent his time for nought. How blameless and good and excellent was his life! Never, never would it be necessary for those lips to cry to his Maker, "God be merciful to me a sinner!"

A little restless movement, and faint, satisfied baby sigh from the sofa, interrupted these self-satisfied meditations. He looked round and saw little Roy. "Bless us! is the child there? and wherever is Faith?" he said to himself.

He got up and approached his little boy. The child was looking as beautiful as such a lovely creature would look in his sleep. Warden went on his knees to watch him more earnestly. Yes; the golden-brown eyelashes, the tangled mass of bright hair, the full pouting lips, the rounded limbs, made up a picture which might well cause any father's heart to beat with love and pride; and doubtless there was much of both in Warden's soul just then. He gazed long and earnestly. Before he rose to his feet he even bent and kissed the little flushed cheek.

"Yes," he said to himself; "he's a very, very lovely boy. If ever a man had cause for ambition I have. With God's help, that boy shall take his place with any gentleman in the land before I die."

He sat down again by his table, but instead of continuing his work he remained for a time, one hand partly shading his eyes, while he indulged in a meditation. Yes; he must save as much money as possible; for Roy's education must begin early. Roy must have this, Roy must have that. He did not think of Faith at all. Faith was but a girl. He began to consider by what means he could add to his earnings, by what means he could retrench his present expenses. The rooms they now lived in were comfortable, but far from cheap. Ought they not to go into poorer lodgings? for now they spent all he earned, and where, if that was so, would be the money to put little Roy to school by-and-by?

In the midst of these thoughts, the door was pushed softly open, and a man's face appeared. It just appeared above the frame of the door, and looked in with timid, bloodshot eyes.

"I cannot assist you, Peter Davis," called out Warden in his full, loud tones. "There's no manner of use in your waiting here. You know my opinion of such conduct as yours."

"Yes; but I means to reform – I do indeed," replied Davis. He had so far gathered courage now as to advance a step or two into the room. "'Tis h'all so 'ard on a feller. When he's down h'every one throws a stone at him. I'm h'ever so sorry fur givin' way to the drink, and I'm goin' to take the pledge – I am indeed."

"It is disgusting, any man drinking himself into the condition of a beast – lower, far lower than a beast," answered Warden, in his most bitter tones. "There now, Davis, you know my opinion. I am pleased, however, to hear you mean to change your ways."

"Yes, indeed, indeed I do – Mr – Mr Warden; and wot I made bold to come yere fur were to axe ef you'd may be help me. I don't mean fur myself, but fur the poor wife. The wife, her 'ad a little 'un last night, and we h'an't never a sup nor a bite in the house. I thought, may be, Mr – Mr Warden,

as seeing we belonged to the werry same club, as you'd may be let me have the loan of five shillings, or even harf-a-crown, jest one harf-crown, and returned most faithful, Mr Warden."

Warden laughed loudly.

"No; not a shilling, nor a sixpence," he said. "I never encourage drunkards; and as to your belonging to our club, you won't have that to say long unless you mend yer ways."

"But 'tis fur the wife," continued Davis. "The wife, as honest a body as h'ever breathed, and she's starving. No, no, it h'aint, h'indeed it ain't, to spend on drink. I'm none so low as that comes to. I won't spend a penny of it on drink. Oh! Mr Warden, the wife and the new-born babe is a dying of hunger. Lend us jest one shilling, h'even one shilling, for the love of h'Almighty God! How 'ud you like ef yer h'own little lad there were starving?"

"Look here," said Warden, rising to his feet. "I'm busy, and I can't be interrupted. If you don't leave the room at once I must just put you out I may as well tell you plainly that I *don't believe a word you say*, and not one farthing will you ever get from me."

"Then God furgive yer fur the werry 'ardest man I h'ever met," said poor Davis. "I think," he added, "as I'd as lief 'ave my chance wid the h'Almighty as yourn, when h'all is reckoned up. I never, never heerd as you did a real kind thing in yer life, and I pity them children as h'is to be brought h'up by you."

Warden laughed again disagreeably, and, shutting the door on Davis, returned to his work; but the little incident and the burning, angry words of the despairing man shook him unpleasantly, and his temper, never one of the best, was in such a ruffled condition, that it only wanted the faintest provocation to kindle it into a blaze. This provocation (not a very slight one) came in the shape of his little son. Roy had awakened, and after looking round in vain for Faith, had slid down off the horse-hair sofa. He was thoroughly refreshed by his sleep, and was just in the mood when a very little child, in its eager desire for occupation, may do incalculable mischief.

Warden did not know that the little fellow had awakened. He sat with his back to the sofa, and was now thoroughly absorbed in his work. He was drawing up a prospectus for the new society, and his head was bent low over the paper. By his side lay, in a neat and complete form, a prize essay, which he had taken some three months of hard work and hard thought to put together. The subject was one of the popular subjects of the day. The prize was only open to working men. Warden had every hope of gaining the prize. If so, he would win 50 pounds. His essay was complete. He had sat up late the night before, finishing it, and it was to be posted to its destination that very evening. Now, with an unconscious jerk of his elbow, he tossed the neatly pinned together pages on to the floor. He knew nothing of this fact; but as they lay wide open from their fall on the floor, they presented a very tempting spectacle to the eager eyes of little Roy. He approached the precious manuscript softly, sat down on the carpet, and began the delicious work of tearing it into pieces. For a quarter of an hour there was perfect stillness, at the end of which time nothing whatever remained of Warden's prize essay but a pile of scattered fragments which surrounded little Roy. When the deed of mischief was fully done, and not before, the little fellow gave utterance to a deep sigh of satisfaction, and, raising his clear, baby voice, exclaimed, in a tone of triumph:

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