Howells William Dean

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Содержание

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I.
EARLIEST EXPERIENCES

I call it a Boy's Town because I wish it to appear to the reader as a town appears to a boy from his third to his eleventh year, when he seldom, if ever, catches a glimpse of life much higher than the middle of a man, and has the most distorted and mistaken views of most things. He may then indeed look up to the sky, and see heaven open, and angels ascending and descending; but he can only grope about on the earth, and he knows nothing aright that goes on there beyond his small boy's world. Some people remain in this condition as long as they live, and keep the ignorance of childhood, after they have lost its innocence; heaven has been shut, but the earth is still a prison to them. These will not know what I mean by much that I shall have to say; but I hope that the ungrown-up children will, and that the boys who read *Harper's Young People* will like to know what a boy of forty years ago was like, even if he had no very exciting adventures or thread-bare escapes; perhaps I mean hair-breadth escapes; but it is the same thing – they have been used so often. I shall try to

describe him very minutely in his daily doings and dreamings, and it may amuse them to compare these doings and dreamings with their own. For convenience, I shall call this boy, my boy; but I hope he might have been almost anybody's boy; and I mean him sometimes for a boy in general, as well as a boy in particular.

It seems to me that my Boy's Town was a town peculiarly adapted for a boy to be a boy in. It had a river, the great Miami River, which was as blue as the sky when it was not as yellow as gold; and it had another river, called the Old River, which was the Miami's former channel, and which held an island in its sluggish loop; the boys called it The Island; and it must have been about the size of Australia; perhaps it was not so large. Then this town had a Canal, and a Canal-Basin, and a First Lock and a Second Lock; you could walk out to the First Lock, but the Second Lock was at the edge of the known world, and, when my boy was very little, the biggest boy had never been beyond it. Then it had a Hydraulic, which brought the waters of Old River for mill power through the heart of the town, from a Big Reservoir and a Little Reservoir; the Big Reservoir was as far off as the Second Lock, and the Hydraulic ran under mysterious culverts at every street-crossing. All these streams and courses had fish in them at all seasons, and all summer long they had boys in them, and now and then a boy in winter, when the thin ice of the mild Southern Ohio winter let him through with his skates. Then there were the Commons; a wide expanse of open fields, where the cows were pastured, and the boys flew their kites, and

ran races, and practised for their circuses in the tan-bark rings of the real circuses.

There were flocks of wild ducks on the Reservoirs and on Old River, and flocks of kildees on the Commons; and there were squirrels in the woods, where there was abundant mast for the pigs that ran wild in them, and battened on the nuts under the hickory-trees. There were no other nuts except walnuts, white and black; but there was no end to the small, sweetish acorns, which the boys called chinquepins; they ate them, but I doubt if they liked them, except as boys like anything to eat. In the vast corn-fields stretching everywhere along the river levels there were quails; and rabbits in the sumac thickets and turnip patches. There were places to swim, to fish, to hunt, to skate; if there were no hills for coasting, that was not so much loss, for there was very little snow, and it melted in a day or two after it fell. But besides these natural advantages for boys, there were artificial opportunities which the boys treated as if they had been made for them; grist-mills on the river and canal, cotton-factories and saw-mills on the Hydraulic, iron-founderies by the Commons, breweries on the river-bank, and not too many school-houses. I must not forget the market-house, with its public market twice a week, and its long rows of market-wagons, stretching on either side of High Street in the dim light of the summer dawn or the cold sun of the winter noon.

The place had its brief history running back to the beginning of the century. Mad Anthony Wayne encamped on its site when

he went north to avenge St. Clair's defeat on the Indians; it was at first a fort, and it remained a military post until the tribes about were reduced, and a fort was no longer needed. To this time belonged a tragedy, which my boy knew of vaguely when he was a child. Two of the soldiers were sentenced to be hanged for desertion, and the officer in command hurried forward the execution, although an express had been sent to lay the case before the general at another post. The offence was only a desertion in name, and the reprieve was promptly granted, but it came fifteen minutes too late.

I believe nothing more memorable ever happened in my Boy's Town, as the grown-up world counts events; but for the boys there, every day was full of wonderful occurrence and thrilling excitement. It was really a very simple little town of some three thousand people, living for the most part in small one-story wooden houses, with here and there a brick house of two stories, and here and there a lingering log-cabin, when my boy's father came to take charge of its Whig newspaper in 1840. It stretched eastward from the river to the Canal-Basin, with the market-house, the county buildings, and the stores and hotels on one street, and a few other stores and taverns scattering off on streets that branched from it to the southward; but all this was a vast metropolis to my boy's fancy, where he might get lost – the sum of all disaster – if he ventured away from the neighborhood of the house where he first lived, on its southwestern border. It was the great political year of "Tippecanoe and Tyler too," when

the grandfather of our President Harrison was elected President; but the wild hard-cider campaign roared by my boy's little life without leaving a trace in it, except the recollection of his father wearing a linsey-woolsey hunting-shirt, belted at the waist and fringed at the skirt, as a Whig who loved his cause and honored the good old pioneer times was bound to do. I dare say he did not wear it often, and I fancy he wore it then in rather an ironical spirit, for he was a man who had slight esteem for outward shows and semblances; but it remained in my boy's mind, as clear a vision as the long cloak of blue broadcloth in which he must have seen his father habitually. This cloak was such a garment as people still drape about them in Italy, and men wore it in America then instead of an overcoat. To get under its border, and hold by his father's hand in the warmth and dark it made around him was something that the boy thought a great privilege, and that brought him a sense of mystery and security at once that nothing else could ever give. He used to be allowed to go as far as the street corner, to enjoy it, when his father came home from the printing-office in the evening; and one evening, never to be forgotten, after he had long been teasing for a little axe he wanted, he divined that his father had something hidden under his cloak. Perhaps he asked him as usual whether he had brought him the little axe, but his father said, "Feel, feel!" and he found his treasure. He ran home and fell upon the woodpile with it, in a zeal that proposed to leave nothing but chips; before he had gone far he learned that this is a world in which you can sate but never satisfy yourself

with anything, even hard work. Some of my readers may have found that out, too; at any rate, my boy did not keep the family in firewood with his axe, and his abiding association with it in after-life was a feeling of weariness and disgust; so I fancy that he must have been laughed at for it. Besides the surfeit of this little axe, he could recall, when he grew up, the glory of wearing his Philadelphia suit, which one of his grandmothers had brought him Over the Mountains, as people said in those days, after a visit to her Pennsylvania German kindred beyond the Alleghanies. It was of some beatified plaid in gay colors, and when once it was put on it never was laid aside for any other suit till it was worn out. It testified unmistakably to the boy's advance in years beyond the shameful period of skirts; and no doubt it commended him to the shadowy little girl who lived so far away as to be even beyond the street-corner, and who used to look for him, as he passed, through the palings of a garden among hollyhocks and four-o'clocks.

The Young People may have heard it said that a savage is a grown-up child, but it seems to me even more true that a child is a savage. Like the savage, he dwells on an earth round which the whole solar system revolves, and he is himself the centre of all life on the earth. It has no meaning but as it relates to him; it is for his pleasure, his use; it is for his pain and his abuse. It is full of sights, sounds, sensations, for his delight alone, for his suffering alone. He lives under a law of favor or of fear, but never of justice, and the savage does not make a crueller idol than

the child makes of the Power ruling over his world and having him for its chief concern. What remained to my boy of that faint childish consciousness was the idea of some sort of supernal Being who abode in the skies for his advantage and disadvantage, and made winter and summer, wet weather and dry, with an eye single to him; of a family of which he was necessarily the centre, and of that far, vast, unknown Town, lurking all round him, and existing on account of him if not because of him. So, unless I manage to treat my Boy's Town as a part of his own being, I shall not make others know it just as he knew it.

Some of his memories reach a time earlier than his third year, and relate to the little Ohio River hamlet where he was born, and where his mother's people, who were river-faring folk, all lived. Every two or three years the river rose and flooded the village; and his grandmother's household was taken out of the second-story window in a skiff; but no one minded a trivial inconvenience like that, any more than the Romans have minded the annual freshet of the Tiber for the last three or four thousand years. When the waters went down the family returned and scrubbed out the five or six inches of rich mud they had left. In the meantime, it was a godsend to all boys of an age to enjoy it; but it was nothing out of the order of Providence. So, if my boy ever saw a freshet, it naturally made no impression upon him. What he remembered was something much more important, and that was waking up one morning and seeing a peach-tree in bloom through the window beside his bed; and he was always

glad that this vision of beauty was his very earliest memory. All his life he has never seen a peach-tree in bloom without a swelling of the heart, without some fleeting sense that

> "Heaven lies about us in our infancy."

Over the spot where the little house once stood, a railroad has drawn its erasing lines, and the house itself was long since taken down and built up brick by brick in quite another place; but the blooming peach-tree glows before his childish eyes untouched by time or change. The tender, pathetic pink of its flowers repeated itself many long years afterwards in the paler tints of the almond blossoms in Italy, but always with a reminiscence of that dim past, and the little coal-smoky town on the banks of the Ohio.

Perversely blended with that vision of the blooming peach is a glimpse of a pet deer in the kitchen of the same little house, with his head up and his antlers erect, as if he meditated offence. My boy might never have seen him so; he may have had the vision at second hand; but it is certain that there was a pet deer in the family, and that he was as likely to have come into the kitchen by the window as by the door. One of the boy's uncles had seen this deer swimming the Mississippi, far to the southward, and had sent out a yawl and captured him, and brought him home. He began a checkered career of uselessness when they were ferrying him over from Wheeling in a skiff, by trying to help wear the pantaloons of the boy who was holding him; he put one of his

fore-legs in at the watch-pocket; but it was disagreeable to the boy and ruinous to the trousers. He grew very tame, and butted children over, right and left, in the village streets; and he behaved like one of the family whenever he got into a house; he ate the sugar out of the bowl on the table, and plundered the pantry of its sweet cakes. One day a dog got after him, and he jumped over the river-bank and broke his leg, and had to be shot.

Besides the peach-tree and the pet deer there was only one other thing that my boy could remember, or seem to remember, of the few years before he came to the Boy's Town. He is on the steamboat which is carrying the family down the Ohio River to Cincinnati, on their way to the Boy's Town, and he is kneeling on the window-seat in the ladies' cabin at the stern of the boat, watching the rain fall into the swirling yellow river and make the little men jump up from the water with its pelting drops. He knows that the boat is standing still, and they are bringing off a passenger to it in a yawl, as they used to do on the Western rivers when they were hailed from some place where there was no wharf-boat. If they were going down stream, they turned the boat and headed up the river, and then with a great deal of scurrying about among the deck-hands, and swearing among the mates, they sent the yawl ashore, and bustled the passenger on board. In the case which my boy seemed to remember, the passenger is a one-legged man, and he is standing in the yawl, with his crutch under his arm, and his cane in his other hand; his family must be watching him from the house. When the yawl comes alongside he

tries to step aboard the steamboat, but he misses his footing and slips into the yellow river, and vanishes softly. It is all so smooth and easy, and it is as curious as the little men jumping up from the rain-drops. What made my boy think when he grew a man that this was truly a memory was that he remembered nothing else of the incident, nothing whatever after the man went down in the water, though there must have been a great and painful tumult, and a vain search for him. His drowning had exactly the value in the child's mind that the jumping up of the little men had, neither more nor less.

II.
HOME AND KINDRED

As the Boy's Town was, in one sense, merely a part of the boy, I think I had better tell something about my boy's family first, and the influences that formed his character, so that the reader can be a boy with him there on the intimate terms which are the only terms of true friendship. His great-grandfather was a prosperous manufacturer of Welsh flannels, who had founded his industry in a pretty town called The Hay, on the river Wye, in South Wales, where the boy saw one of his mills, still making Welsh flannels, when he visited his father's birthplace a few years ago. This great-grandfather was a Friend by Convincement, as the Quakers say; that is, he was a convert, and not a born Friend, and he had the zeal of a convert. He loved equality and fraternity, and he came out to America towards the close of the last century to prospect for these as well as for a good location to manufacture Welsh flannels; but after being presented to Washington, then President, at Philadelphia, and buying a tract of land somewhere near the District of Columbia, his phantom rolls a shadowy barrel of dollars on board ship at Baltimore, and sails back in the *Flying Dutchman* to South Wales. I fancy, from the tradition of the dollars, that he had made good affairs here with the stock of flannels he brought over with him; but all is rather uncertain

about him, especially the land he bought, though the story of it is pretty sure to fire some descendant of his in each new generation with the wish to go down to Washington, and oust the people there who have unrightfully squatted on the ancestral property. What is unquestionable is that this old gentleman went home and never came out here again; but his son, who had inherited all his radicalism, sailed with his family for Boston in 1808, when my boy's father was a year old. From Boston he passed to one Quaker neighborhood after another, in New York, Virginia, and Ohio, setting up the machinery of woollen mills, and finally, after much disastrous experiment in farming, paused at the Boy's Town, and established himself in the drug and book business: drugs and books are still sold together, I believe, in small places. He had long ceased to be a Quaker, but he remained a Friend to every righteous cause; and brought shame to his grandson's soul by being an abolitionist in days when it was infamy to wish the slaves set free. My boy's father restored his self-respect in a measure by being a Henry Clay Whig, or a constitutional anti-slavery man. The grandfather was a fervent Methodist, but the father, after many years of scepticism, had become a receiver of the doctrines of Emanuel Swedenborg; and in this faith the children were brought up. It was not only their faith, but their life, and I may say that in this sense they were a very religious household, though they never went to church, because it was the Old Church. They had no service of the New Church, the Swedenborgians were so few in the place, except when some of

its ministers stopped with us on their travels. My boy regarded these good men as all personally sacred, and while one of them was in the house he had some relief from the fear in which his days seem mostly to have been passed; as if he were for the time being under the protection of a spiritual lightning-rod. Their religion was not much understood by their neighbors of the Old Church, who thought them a kind of Universalists. But the boy once heard his father explain to one of them that the New Church people believed in a hell, which each cast himself into if he loved the evil rather than the good, and that no mercy could keep him out of without destroying him, for a man's love was his very self. It made his blood run cold, and he resolved that rather than cast himself into hell, he would do his poor best to love the good. The children were taught when they teased one another that there was nothing the fiends so much delighted in as teasing. When they were angry and revengeful, they were told that now they were calling evil spirits about them, and that the good angels could not come near them if they wished while they were in that state. My boy preferred the company of good angels after dark, and especially about bedtime, and he usually made the effort to get himself into an accessible frame of mind before he slept; by day he felt that he could look out for himself, and gave way to the natural man like other boys. I suppose the children had their unwholesome spiritual pride in being different from their fellows in religion; but, on the other hand, it taught them not to fear being different from others if they believed themselves right. Perhaps

it made my boy rather like it.

The grandfather was of a gloomy spirit, but of a tender and loving heart, whose usual word with a child, when he caressed it, was "Poor thing, poor thing!" as if he could only pity it; and I have no doubt the father's religion was a true affliction to him. The children were taken to visit their grandmother every Sunday noon, and then the father and grandfather never failed to have it out about the New Church and the Old. I am afraid that the father would sometimes forget his own precepts, and tease a little; when the mother went with him she was sometimes troubled at the warmth with which the controversy raged. The grandmother seemed to be bored by it, and the boys, who cared nothing for salvation in the abstract, no matter how anxious they were about the main chance, certainly shared this feeling with her. She was a pale, little, large-eyed lady, who always wore a dress of Quakerish plainness, with a white kerchief crossed upon her breast; and her aquiline nose and jutting chin almost met. She was very good to the children and at these times she usually gave them some sugar-cakes, and sent them out in the yard, where there was a young Newfoundland dog, of loose morals and no religious ideas, who joined them in having fun, till the father came out and led them home. He would not have allowed them to play where it could have aggrieved any one, for a prime article of his religion was to respect the religious feelings of others, even when he thought them wrong. But he would not suffer the children to get the notion that they were guilty of any

deadly crime if they happened to come short of the conventional standard of piety. Once, when their grandfather reported to him that the boys had been seen throwing stones on Sunday at the body of a dog lodged on some drift in the river, he rebuked them for the indecorum, and then ended the matter, as he often did, by saying, "Boys, consider yourselves soundly thrashed."

I should be sorry if anything I have said should give the idea that their behavior was either fantastic or arrogant through their religion. It was simply a pervading influence; and I am sure that in the father and mother it dignified life, and freighted motive and action here with the significance of eternal fate. When the children were taught that in every thought and in every deed they were choosing their portion with the devils or the angels, and that God himself could not save them against themselves, it often went in and out of their minds, as such things must with children; but some impression remained and helped them to realize the serious responsibility they were under to their own after-selves. At the same time, the father, who loved a joke almost as much as he loved a truth, and who despised austerity as something owlish, set them the example of getting all the harmless fun they could out of experience. They had their laugh about nearly everything that was not essentially sacred; they were made to feel the ludicrous as an alleviation of existence; and the father and mother were with them on the same level in all this enjoyment.

The house was pretty full of children, big and little. There were seven of them in the Boy's Town, and eight afterwards in all;

so that if there had been no Boy's Town about them, they would still have had a Boy's World indoors. They lived in three different houses – the Thomas house, the Smith house, and the Falconer house – severally called after the names of their owners, for they never had a house of their own. Of the first my boy remembered nothing, except the woodpile on which he tried his axe, and a closet near the front door, which he entered into one day, with his mother's leave, to pray, as the Scripture bade. It was very dark, and hung full of clothes, and his literal application of the text was not edifying; he fancied, with a child's vague suspicion, that it amused his father and mother; I dare say it also touched them. Of the Smith house, he could remember much more: the little upper room where the boys slept, and the narrow stairs which he often rolled down in the morning; the front room where he lay sick with a fever, and was bled by the doctor, as people used to be in those days; the woodshed where, one dreadful afternoon, when he had somehow been left alone in the house, he took it into his head that the family dog Tip was going mad; the window where he traced the figure of a bull on greased paper from an engraving held up against the light: none of them important facts, but such as stick in the mind by the capricious action of memory, while far greater events drop out of it. My boy's elder brother at once accused him of tracing that bull, which he pretended to have copied; but their father insisted upon taking the child's word for it, though he must have known he was lying; and this gave my boy a far worse conscience than if his father had whipped him.

The father's theory was that people are more apt to be true if you trust them than if you doubt them; I do not think he always found it work perfectly; but I believe he was right.

My boy was for a long time very miserable about that bull, and the experience taught him to desire the truth and honor it, even when he could not attain it. Five or six years after, when his brother and he had begun to read stories, they found one in the old *New York Mirror* which had a great influence upon their daily conduct. It was called "The Trippings of Tom Pepper; or, the Effects of Romancing," and it showed how at many important moments the hero had been baulked of fortune by his habit of fibbing. They took counsel together, and pledged themselves not to tell the smallest lie, upon any occasion whatever. It was a frightful slavery, for there are a great many times in a boy's life when it seems as if the truth really could not serve him. Their great trial was having to take a younger brother with them whenever they wanted to go off with other boys; and it had been their habit to get away from him by many little deceits which they could not practise now: to tell him that their mother wanted him; or to send him home upon some errand to his pretended advantage that had really no object but his absence. I suppose there is now no boy living who would do this. My boy and his brother groaned under their good resolution, I do not know how long; but the day came when they could bear it no longer, though I cannot give just the time or the terms of their backsliding. That elder brother had been hard enough on my boy before the

period of this awful reform: his uprightness, his unselfishness, his truthfulness were a daily reproach to him, and it did not need this season of absolute sincerity to complete his wretchedness. Yet it was an experience which afterwards he would not willingly have missed: for once in his little confused life he had tried to practise a virtue because the opposite vice had been made to appear foolish and mischievous to him; and not from any superstitious fear or hope.

As far as I can make out, he had far more fears than hopes; and perhaps every boy has. It was in the Smith house that he began to be afraid of ghosts, though he never saw one, or anything like one. He never saw even the good genius who came down the chimney and filled the children's stockings at Christmas. He wished to see him; but he understood that St. Nicholas was a shy spirit, and was apt to pass by the stockings of boys who lay in wait for him. His mother had told him how the Peltsnickel used to come with a bundle of rods for the bad children when the Chriskingle brought the presents of the good ones, among his grandmother's Pennsylvania German kindred; and he had got them all somehow mixed up together. Then St. Nicholas, though he was so pleasant and friendly in the poem about the night before Christmas, was known to some of the neighbor boys as Santa Claus; they called it Centre Claws, and my boy imagined him with large talons radiating from the pit of his stomach. But this was all nothing to the notion of Dowd's spectacles, which his father sometimes joked him about, and which were represented

by a pair of hollow, glassless iron rims which he had found in the street. They may or may not have belonged to Dowd, and Dowd may have been an Irishman in the neighborhood, or he may not; he may have died, or he may not; but there was something in the mere gruesome mention of his spectacles which related itself to all the boy had conceived of the ghostly and ghastly, and all that was alarming in the supernatural; he could never say in the least how or why. I fancy no child can ever explain just why it is affected in this way or that way by the things that are or are not in the world about it; it is not easy to do this for one's self in after-life. At any rate, it is certain that my boy dwelt most of his time amid shadows that were, perhaps, projected over his narrow outlook from some former state of being, or from the gloomy minds of long-dead ancestors. His home was cheerful and most happy, but he peopled all its nooks and corners with shapes of doom and horror. The other boys were not slow to find this out, and their invention supplied with ready suggestion of officers and prisons any little lack of misery his spectres and goblins left. He often narrowly escaped arrest, or thought so, when they built a fire in the street at night, and suddenly kicked it to pieces, and shouted, "Run, run! The constable will catch you!" Nothing but flight saved my boy, in these cases, when he was small. He grew bolder, after a while, concerning constables, but never concerning ghosts; they shivered in the autumnal evenings among the tall stalks of the corn-field that stretched, a vast wilderness, behind the house to the next street, and they walked the night

everywhere.

Yet nothing more tragical, that he could remember, really happened while he lived in the Smith house than something he saw one bright sunny morning, while all the boys were hanging on the fence of the next house, and watching the martins flying down to the ground from their box in the gable. The birds sent out sharp cries of terror or anger, and presently he saw a black cat crouching in the grass, with half-shut eyes and an air of dreamy indifference. The birds swept down in longer and lower loops towards the cat, drawn by some fatal charm, or by fear of the danger that threatened their colony from the mere presence of the cat; but she did not stir. Suddenly she sprang into the air, and then darted away with a martin in her mouth, while my boy's heart leaped into his own, and the other boys rushed after the cat.

As when something dreadful happens, this seemed not to have happened; but a lovely experience leaves a sense of enduring fact behind, and remains a rich possession no matter how slight and simple it was. My boy's mother has been dead almost a quarter of a century, but as one of the elder children he knew her when she was young and gay; and his last distinct association with the Smith house is of coming home with her after a visit to her mother's far up the Ohio River. In their absence the June grass, which the children's feet always kept trampled down so low, had flourished up in purple blossom, and now stood rank and tall; and the mother threw herself on her knees in it, and tossed and frolicked with her little ones like a girl. The picture remains, and

the wonder of the world in which it was true once, while all the phantasmagory of spectres has long vanished away.

The boy could not recall the family's removal to the Falconer house. They were not there, and then they were there. It was a brick house, at a corner of the principal street, and in the gable there were places for mock-windows where there had never been blinds put, but where the swallows had thickly built their nests. I dare say my boy might have been willing to stone these nests, but he was not allowed, either he or his mates, who must have panted with him to improve such an opportunity of havoc. There was a real window in the gable from which he could look out of the garret; such a garret as every boy should once have the use of some time in his life. It was dim and low, though it seemed high, and the naked brown rafters were studded with wasps' nests; and the rain beat on the shingles overhead. The house had been occupied by a physician, and under the eaves the children found heaps of phials full of doctor's stuff; the garret abounded in their own family boxes and barrels, but there was always room for a swing, which the boys used in training for their circuses. Below the garret there were two unimportant stories with chambers, dining-room, parlor, and so on; then you came to the brick-paved kitchen in the basement, and a perfectly glorious cellar, with rats in it. Outside there was a large yard, with five or six huge old cherry-trees, and a garden plot, where every spring my boy tried to make a garden, with never-failing failure.

The house gave even to him a sense of space unknown before,

and he could recall his mother's satisfaction in it. He has often been back there in dreams, and found it on the old scale of grandeur; but no doubt it was a very simple affair. The fortunes of a Whig editor in a place so overwhelmingly democratic as the Boy's Town were not such as could have warranted his living in a palace; and he must have been poor, as the world goes now. But the family always lived in abundance, and in their way they belonged to the employing class; that is, the father had men to work for him. On the other hand, he worked with them; and the boys, as they grew old enough, were taught to work with them, too. My boy grew old enough very young; and was put to use in the printing-office before he was ten years of age. This was not altogether because he was needed there, I dare say, but because it was part of his father's Swedenborgian philosophy that every one should fulfil a use; I do not know that when the boy wanted to go swimming, or hunting, or skating, it consoled him much to reflect that the angels in the highest heaven delighted in uses; nevertheless, it was good for him to be of use, though maybe not so much use.

If his mother did her own work, with help only now and then from a hired girl, that was the custom of the time and country; and her memory was always the more reverend to him, because whenever he looked back at her in those dim years, he saw her about some of those household offices which are so beautiful to a child. She was always the best and tenderest mother, and her love had the heavenly art of making each child feel itself the most

important, while she was partial to none. In spite of her busy days she followed their father in his religion and literature, and at night, when her long toil was over, she sat with the children and listened while he read aloud. The first book my boy remembered to have heard him read was Moore's "Lalla Rookh," of which he formed but a vague notion, though while he struggled after its meaning he took all its music in, and began at once to make rhymes of his own. He had no conception of literature except the pleasure there was in making it; and he had no outlook into the world of it, which must have been pretty open to his father. The father read aloud some of Dickens's Christmas stories, then new; and the boy had a good deal of trouble with the "Haunted Man." One rarest night of all, the family sat up till two o'clock, listening to a novel that my boy long ago forgot the name of, if he ever knew its name. It was all about a will, forged or lost, and there was a great scene in court, and after that the mother declared that she could not go to bed till she heard the end. His own first reading was in history. At nine years of age he read the history of Greece, and the history of Rome, and he knew that Goldsmith wrote them. One night his father told the boys all about Don Quixote; and a little while after he gave my boy the book. He read it over and over again; but he did not suppose it was a novel. It was his elder brother who read novels, and a novel was like "Handy Andy," or "Harry Lorrequer," or the "Bride of Lammermoor." His brother had another novel which they preferred to either; it was in Harper's old "Library of Select Novels," and was called

"Alamance; or, the Great and Final Experiment," and it was about the life of some sort of community in North Carolina. It bewitched them, and though my boy could not afterwards recall a single fact or figure in it, he could bring before his mind's eye every trait of its outward aspect. It was at this time that his father bought an English-Spanish grammar from a returned volunteer, who had picked it up in the city of Mexico, and gave it to the boy. He must have expected him to learn Spanish from it; but the boy did not know even the parts of speech in English. As the father had once taught English grammar in six lessons, from a broadside of his own authorship, he may have expected the principle of heredity to help the boy; and certainly he did dig the English grammar out of that blessed book, and the Spanish language with it, but after many long years, and much despair over the difference between a preposition and a substantive.

All this went along with great and continued political excitement, and with some glimpses of the social problem. It was very simple then; nobody was very rich, and nobody was in want; but somehow, as the boy grew older, he began to discover that there were differences, even in the little world about him; some were higher and some were lower. From the first he was taught by precept and example to take the side of the lower. As the children were denied oftener than they were indulged, the margin of their own abundance must have been narrower than they ever knew then; but if they had been of the most prosperous, their bent in this matter would have been the same. Once there was a church

festival, or something of that sort, and there was a good deal of the provision left over, which it was decided should be given to the poor. This was very easy, but it was not so easy to find the poor whom it should be given to. At last a hard-working widow was chosen to receive it; the ladies carried it to her front door and gave it her, and she carried it to her back door and threw it into the alley. No doubt she had enough without it, but there were circumstances of indignity or patronage attending the gift which were recognized in my boy's home, and which helped afterwards to make him doubtful of all giving, except the humblest, and restive with a world in which there need be any giving at all.

III.
THE RIVER

It seems to me that the best way to get at the heart of any boy's town is to take its different watercourses and follow them into it.

The house where my boy first lived was not far from the river, and he must have seen it often before he noticed it. But he was not aware of it till he found it under the bridge. Without the river there could not have been a bridge; the fact of the bridge may have made him look for the river; but the bridge is foremost in his mind. It is a long wooden tunnel, with two roadways, and a foot-path on either side of these; there is a toll-house at each end, and from one to the other it is about as far as from the Earth to the planet Mars. On the western shore of the river is a smaller town than the Boy's Town, and in the perspective the entrance of the bridge on that side is like a dim little doorway. The timbers are of a hugeness to strike fear into the heart of the boldest little boy; and there is something awful even about the dust in the roadways; soft and thrillingly cool to the boy's bare feet, it lies thick in a perpetual twilight, streaked at intervals by the sun that slants in at the high, narrow windows under the roof; it has a certain potent, musty smell. The bridge has three piers, and at low water hardier adventurers than he wade out to the middle pier; some heroes even fish there, standing all day on the loose rocks about the base

of the pier. He shudders to see them, and aches with wonder how they will get ashore. Once he is there when a big boy wades back from the middle pier, where he has been to rob a goose's nest; he has some loose silver change in his wet hand, and my boy understands that it has come out of one of the goose eggs. This fact, which he never thought of questioning, gets mixed up in his mind with an idea of riches, of treasure-trove, in the cellar of an old house that has been torn down near the end of the bridge.

On the bridge he first saw the crazy man who belongs in every boy's town. In this one he was a hapless, harmless creature, whom the boys knew as Solomon Whistler, perhaps because his name was Whistler, perhaps because he whistled; though when my boy met him midway of the bridge, he marched swiftly and silently by, with his head high and looking neither to the right nor to the left, with an insensibility to the boy's presence that froze his blood and shrivelled him up with terror. As his fancy early became the sport of playfellows not endowed with one so vivid, he was taught to expect that Solomon Whistler would get him some day, though what he would do with him when he had got him his anguish must have been too great even to let him guess. Some of the boys said Solomon had gone crazy from fear of being drafted in the war of 1812; others that he had been crossed in love; but my boy did not quite know then what either meant. He only knew that Solomon Whistler lived at the poor-house beyond the eastern border of the town, and that he ranged between this sojourn and the illimitable wilderness north of the town on the

western shore of the river. The crazy man was often in the boy's dreams, the memories of which blend so with the memories of real occurrences: he could not tell later whether he once crossed the bridge when the footway had been partly taken up, and he had to walk on the girders, or whether he only dreamed of that awful passage. It was quite fearful enough to cross when the footway was all down, and he could see the blue gleam of the river far underneath through the cracks between the boards. It made his brain reel; and he felt that he took his life in his hand whenever he entered the bridge, even when he had grown old enough to be making an excursion with some of his playmates to the farm of an uncle of theirs who lived two miles up the river. The farmer gave them all the watermelons they wanted to eat, and on the way home, when they lay resting under the sycamores on the river-bank, Solomon Whistler passed by in the middle of the road, silent, swift, straight onward. I do not know why the sight of this afflicted soul did not slay my boy on the spot, he was so afraid of him; but the crazy man never really hurt any one, though the boys followed and mocked him as soon as he got by.

The boys knew little or nothing of the river south of the bridge, and frequented mainly that mile-long stretch of it between the bridge and the dam, beyond which there was practically nothing for many years; afterwards they came to know that this strange region was inhabited. Just above the bridge the Hydraulic emptied into the river with a heart-shaking plunge over an immense mill-wheel; and there was a cluster of mills at this

point, which were useful in accumulating the waters into fishing-holes before they rushed through the gates upon the wheel. The boys used to play inside the big mill-wheel before the water was let into the Hydraulic, and my boy caught his first fish in the pool below the wheel. The mills had some secondary use in making flour and the like, but this could not concern a small boy. They were as simply a part of his natural circumstance as the large cottonwood-tree which hung over the river from a point near by, and which seemed to have always an oriole singing in it. All along there the banks were rather steep, and to him they looked very high. The blue clay that formed them was full of springs, which the boys dammed up in little ponds and let loose in glassy falls upon their flutter-mills. As with everything that boys do, these mills were mostly failures; the pins which supported the wheels were always giving way; and though there were instances of boys who started their wheels at recess and found them still fluttering away at noon when they came out of school, none ever carried his enterprise so far as to spin the cotton blowing from the balls of the cottonwood-tree by the shore, as they all meant to do. They met such disappointments with dauntless cheerfulness, and lightly turned from some bursting bubble to some other where the glory of the universe was still mirrored. The river shore was strewn not only with waste cotton, but with drift which the water had made porous, and which they called smoke-wood. They made cigars for their own use out of it, and it seemed to them that it might be generally introduced as a cheap and simple substitute

for tobacco; but they never got any of it into the market, not even the market of that world where the currency was pins.

The river had its own climate, and this climate was of course much such a climate as the boys, for whom nature intended the river, would have chosen. I do not believe it was ever winter there, though it was sometimes late autumn, so that the boys could have some use for the caves they dug at the top of the bank, with a hole coming through the turf, to let out the smoke of the fires they built inside. They had the joy of choking and blackening over these flues, and they intended to live on corn and potatoes borrowed from the household stores of the boy whose house was nearest. They never got so far as to parch the corn or to bake the potatoes in their caves, but there was the fire, and the draft was magnificent. The light of the red flames painted the little, happy, foolish faces, so long since wrinkled and grizzled with age, or mouldered away to dust, as the boys huddled before them under the bank, and fed them with the drift, or stood patient of the heat and cold in the afternoon light of some vast Saturday waning to nightfall.

The river-climate, with these autumnal intervals, was made up of a quick, eventful springtime, followed by the calm of a cloudless summer that seemed never to end. But the spring, short as it was, had its great attractions, and chief of these was the freshet which it brought to the river. They would hear somehow that the river was rising, and then the boys, who had never connected its rise with the rains they must have been having,

would all go down to its banks and watch the swelling waters. These would be yellow and thick, and the boiling current would have smooth, oily eddies, where pieces of drift would whirl round and round, and then escape and slip down the stream. There were saw-logs and whole trees with their branching tops, lengths of fence and hen-coops and pig-pens; once there was a stable; and if the flood continued, there began to come swollen bodies of horses and cattle. This must have meant serious loss to the people living on the river-bottoms above, but the boys counted it all gain. They cheered the objects as they floated by, and they were breathless with the excitement of seeing the men who caught fence-rails and cord-wood, and even saw-logs, with iron prongs at the points of long poles, as they stood on some jutting point of shore and stretched far out over the flood. The boys exulted in the turbid spread of the stream, which filled its low western banks and stole over their tops, and washed into all the hollow places along its shores, and shone among the trunks of the sycamores on Delorac's Island, which was almost of the geographical importance of The Island in Old River. When the water began to go down their hearts sank with it; and they gave up the hope of seeing the bridge carried away. Once the river rose to within a few feet of it, so that if the right piece of drift had been there to do its duty, the bridge might have been torn from its piers and swept down the raging tide into those unknown gulfs to the southward. Many a time they went to bed full of hope that it would at least happen in the night, and woke to learn with

shame and grief in the morning that the bridge was still there, and the river was falling. It was a little comfort to know that some of the big boys had almost seen it go, watching as far into the night as nine o'clock with the men who sat up near the bridge till daylight: men of leisure and public spirit, but not perhaps the leading citizens.

There must have been a tedious time between the going down of the flood and the first days when the water was warm enough for swimming; but it left no trace. The boys are standing on the shore while the freshet rushes by, and then they are in the water, splashing, diving, ducking; it is like that; so that I do not know just how to get in that period of fishing which must always have come between. There were not many fish in that part of the Miami; my boy's experience was full of the ignominy of catching shiners and suckers, or, at the best, mudcats, as they called the yellow catfish; but there were boys, of those who cursed and swore, who caught sunfish, as they called the bream; and there were men who were reputed to catch at will, as it were, silvercats and river-bass. They fished with minnows, which they kept in battered tin buckets that they did not allow you even to touch, or hardly to look at; my boy scarcely breathed in their presence; when one of them got up to cast his line in a new place, the boys all ran, and then came slowly back. These men often carried a flask of liquid that had the property, when taken inwardly, of keeping the damp out. The boys respected them for their ability to drink whiskey, and thought it a fit and honorable thing that

they should now and then fall into the river over the brinks where they had set their poles.

But they disappear like persons in a dream, and their fishing-time vanishes with them, and the swimming-time is in full possession of the river, and of all the other waters of the Boy's Town. The river, the Canal Basin, the Hydraulic and its Reservoirs, seemed all full of boys at the same moment; but perhaps it was not the same, for my boy was always in each place, and so he must have been there at different times. Each place had its delights and advantages, but the swimming-holes in the river were the greatest favorites. He could not remember when he began to go into them, though it certainly was before he could swim. There was a time when he was afraid of getting in over his head; but he did not know just when he learned to swim, any more than he knew when he learned to read; he could not swim, and then he could swim; he could not read, and then he could read; but I dare say the reading came somewhat before the swimming. Yet the swimming must have come very early, and certainly it was kept up with continual practice; he swam quite as much as he read; perhaps more. The boys had deep swimming-holes and shallow ones; and over the deep ones there was always a spring-board, from which they threw somersaults, or dived straight down into the depths, where there were warm and cold currents mysteriously interwoven. They believed that these deep holes were infested by water-snakes, though they never saw any, and they expected to be bitten by snapping-turtles, though this

never happened. Fiery dragons could not have kept them out; gallynippers, whatever they were, certainly did not; they were believed to abound at the bottom of the deep holes; but the boys never stayed long in the deep holes, and they preferred the shallow places, where the river broke into a long ripple (they called it riffle) on its gravelly bed, and where they could at once soak and bask in the musical rush of the sunlit waters. I have heard people in New England blame all the Western rivers for being yellow and turbid; but I know that after the spring floods, when the Miami had settled down to its summer business with the boys, it was as clear and as blue as if it were spilled out of the summer sky. The boys liked the riffle because they could stay in so long there, and there were little landlocked pools and shallows, where the water was even warmer, and they could stay in longer. At most places under the banks there was clay of different colors, which they used for war-paint in their Indian fights; and after they had their Indian fights they could rush screaming and clattering into the riffle. When the stream had washed them clean down to their red sunburn or their leathern tan, they could paint up again and have more Indian fights.

I do not know why my boy's associations with Delorac's Island were especially wild in their character, for nothing more like outlawry than the game of mumble-the-peg ever occurred there. Perhaps it was because the boys had to get to it by water that it seemed beyond the bounds of civilization. They might have reached it by the bridge, but the temper of the boys on the

western shore was uncertain; they would have had to run the gauntlet of their river-guard on the way up to it; and they might have been friendly or they might not; it would have depended a good deal on the size and number of the interlopers. Besides, it was more glorious to wade across to the island from their side of the river. They undressed and gathered their clothes up into a bundle, which they put on their heads and held there with one hand, while they used the other for swimming, when they came to a place beyond their depth. Then they dressed again, and stretched themselves under the cottonwood-trees and sycamores, and played games and told stories, and longed for a gun to kill the blackbirds which nested in the high tops, and at nightfall made such a clamor in getting to roost that it almost deafened you.

My boy never distinctly knew what formed that island, but as there was a mill there, it must have been made by the mill-race leaving and rejoining the river. It was enough for him to know that the island was there, and that a parrot – a screaming, whistling, and laughing parrot, which was a Pretty Poll, and always Wanted a Cracker – dwelt in a pretty cottage, almost hidden in trees, just below the end of the island. This parrot had the old Creole gentleman living with it who owned the island, and whom it had brought from New Orleans. The boys met him now and then as he walked abroad, with a stick, and his large stomach bowed in front of him. For no reason under the sun they were afraid of him; perhaps they thought he resented their parleys with the parrot. But he and the parrot existed solely

to amuse and to frighten them; and on their own side of the river, just opposite the island, there were established some small industries for their entertainment and advantage, on a branch of the Hydraulic. I do not know just what it was they did with a mustard-mill that was there, but the turning-shop supplied them with a deep bed of elastic shavings just under the bank, which they turned somersaults into, when they were not turning them into the river.

I wonder what sign the boys who read this have for challenging or inviting one another to go in swimming. The boys in the Boy's Town used to make the motion of swimming with both arms; or they held up the forefinger and middle-finger in the form of a swallow-tail; they did this when it was necessary to be secret about it, as in school, and when they did not want the whole crowd of boys to come along; and often when they just pretended they did not want some one to know. They really had to be secret at times, for some of the boys were not allowed to go in at all; others were forbidden to go in more than once or twice a day; and as they all *had* to go in at least three or four times a day, some sort of sign had to be used that was understood among themselves alone. Since this is a true history, I had better own that they nearly all, at one time or other, must have told lies about it, either before or after the fact, some habitually, some only in great extremity. Here and there a boy, like my boy's elder brother, would not tell lies at all, even about going in swimming; but by far the greater number bowed to their hard fate, and told them. They promised

that they would not go in, and then they said that they had not been in; but Sin, for which they had made this sacrifice, was apt to betray them. Either they got their shirts on wrong side out in dressing, or else, while they were in, some enemy came upon them and tied their shirts. There are few cruelties which public opinion in the boys' world condemns, but I am glad to remember, to their honor, that there were not many in that Boy's Town who would tie shirts; and I fervently hope that there is no boy now living who would do it. As the crime is probably extinct, I will say that in those wicked days, if you were such a miscreant, and there was some boy you hated, you stole up and tied the hardest kind of a knot in one arm or both arms of his shirt. Then, if the Evil One put it into your heart, you soaked the knot in water, and pounded it with a stone.

I am glad to know that in the days when he was thoughtless and senseless enough, my boy never was guilty of any degree of this meanness. It was his brother, I suppose, who taught him to abhor it; and perhaps it was his own suffering from it in part; for he, too, sometimes shed bitter tears over such a knot, as I have seen hapless little wretches do, tearing at it with their nails and gnawing at it with their teeth, knowing that the time was passing when they could hope to hide the fact that they had been in swimming, and foreseeing no remedy but to cut off the sleeve above the knot, or else put on their clothes without the shirt, and trust to untying the knot when it got dry.

There must have been a lurking anxiety in all the boys' hearts

when they went in without leave, or, as my boy was apt to do, when explicitly forbidden. He was not apt at lying, I dare say, and so he took the course of open disobedience. He could not see the danger that filled the home hearts with fear for him, and he must have often broken the law and been forgiven, before Justice one day appeared for him on the river-bank and called him away from his stolen joys. It was an awful moment, and it covered him with shame before his mates, who heartlessly rejoiced, as children do, in the doom which they are escaping. That sin, at least, he fully expiated; and I will whisper to the Young People here at the end of the chapter, that somehow, soon or late, our sins do overtake us, and insist upon being paid for. That is not the best reason for not sinning, but it is well to know it, and to believe it in our acts as well as our thoughts. You will find people to tell you that things only happen so and so. It may be; only, I know that no good thing ever happened to happen to me when I had done wrong.

IV.
THE CANAL AND ITS BASIN

The canal came from Lake Erie, two hundred miles to the northward, and joined the Ohio River twenty miles south of the Boy's Town. For a time my boy's father was collector of tolls on it, but even when he was old enough to understand that his father held this State office (the canal belonged to the State) because he had been such a good Whig, and published the Whig newspaper, he could not grasp the notion of the distance which the canal-boats came out of and went into. He saw them come and he saw them go; he did not ask whence or whither; his wonder, if he had any about them, did not go beyond the second lock. It was hard enough to get it to the head of the Basin, which left the canal half a mile or so to the eastward, and stretched down into the town, a sheet of smooth water, fifteen or twenty feet deep, and a hundred wide; his sense ached with, the effort of conceiving of the other side of it. The Basin was bordered on either side near the end by pork-houses, where the pork was cut up and packed, and then lay in long rows of barrels on the banks, with other long rows of salt-barrels, and yet other long rows of whiskey-barrels; cooper-shops, where the barrels were made, alternated with the pork-houses. The boats brought the salt and carried away the pork and whiskey; but the boy's practical knowledge of them was that they

lay there for the boys to dive off of when they went in swimming, and to fish under. The water made a soft tuck-tucking at the sterns of the boat, and you could catch sunfish, if you were the right kind of a boy, or the wrong kind; the luck seemed to go a good deal with boys who were not good for much else. Some of the boats were open their whole length, with a little cabin at the stern, and these pretended to be for carrying wood and stone, but really again were for the use of the boys after a hard rain, when they held a good deal of water, and you could pole yourself up and down on the loose planks in them. The boys formed the notion at times that some of these boats were abandoned by their owners, and they were apt to be surprised by their sudden return. A feeling of transgression was mixed up with the joys of this kind of navigation; perhaps some of the boys were forbidden it. No limit was placed on their swimming in the Basin, except that of the law which prohibited it in the daytime, as the Basin was quite in the heart of the town. In the warm summer nights of that southerly latitude, the water swarmed with laughing, shouting, screaming boys, who plunged from the banks and rioted in the delicious water, diving and ducking, flying and following, safe in the art of swimming which all of them knew. They turned somersaults from the decks of the canal-boats; some of the boys could turn double somersaults, and one boy got so far as to turn a somersault and a half; it was long before the time of electric lighting, but when he struck the water there came a flash that seemed to illumine the universe.

I am afraid that the Young People will think I am telling them too much about swimming. But in the Boy's Town the boys really led a kind of amphibious life, and as long as the long summer lasted they were almost as much in the water as on the land. The Basin, however, unlike the river, had a winter as well as a summer climate, and one of the very first things that my boy could remember was being on the ice there, when a young man caught him up into his arms, and skated off with him almost as far away as the canal. He remembered the fearful joy of the adventure, and the pride, too; for he had somehow the notion that this young fellow was handsome and fine, and did him an honor by his notice – so soon does some dim notion of worldly splendor turn us into snobs! The next thing was his own attempt at skating, when he was set down from the bank by his brother, full of a vainglorious confidence in his powers, and appeared instantly to strike on the top of his head. Afterwards he learned to skate, but he did not know when, any more than he knew just the moment of learning to read or to swim. He became passionately fond of skating, and kept at it all day long when there was ice for it, which was not often in those soft winters. They made a very little ice go a long way in the Boy's Town; and began to use it for skating as soon as there was a glazing of it on the Basin. None of them ever got drowned there; though a boy would often start from one bank and go flying to the other, trusting his speed to save him, while the thin sheet sank and swayed, but never actually broke under him. Usually the ice was not thick enough to have a fire

built on it; and it must have been on ice which was just strong enough to bear that my boy skated all one bitter afternoon at Old River, without a fire to warm by. At first his feet were very cold, and then they gradually felt less cold, and at last he did not feel them at all. He thought this very nice, and he told one of the big boys. "Why, your feet are frozen!" said the big boy, and he dragged off my boy's skates, and the little one ran all the long mile home, crazed with terror, and not knowing what moment his feet might drop off there in the road. His mother plunged them in a bowl of ice-cold water, and then rubbed them with flannel, and so thawed them out; but that could not save him from the pain of their coming to: it was intense, and there must have been a time afterwards when he did not use his feet.

His skates themselves were of a sort that I am afraid boys would smile at nowadays. When you went to get a pair of skates forty or fifty years ago, you did not make your choice between a Barney & Berry and an Acme, which fastened on with the turn of a screw or the twist of a clamp. You found an assortment of big and little sizes of solid wood bodies with guttered blades turning up in front with a sharp point, or perhaps curling over above the toe. In this case they sometimes ended in an acorn; if this acorn was of brass, it transfigured the boy who wore that skate; he might have been otherwise all rags and patches, but the brass acorn made him splendid from head to foot. When you had bought your skates, you took them to a carpenter, and stood awe-strickenly about while he pierced the wood with strap-holes; or

else you managed to bore them through with a hot iron yourself. Then you took them to a saddler, and got him to make straps for them; that is, if you were rich, and your father let you have a quarter to pay for the job. If not, you put strings through, and tied your skates on. They were always coming off, or getting crosswise of your foot, or feeble-mindedly slumping down on one side of the wood; but it did not matter, if you had a fire on the ice, fed with old barrels and boards and cooper's shavings, and could sit round it with your skates on, and talk and tell stories, between your flights and races afar; and come whizzing back to it from the frozen distance, and glide, with one foot lifted, almost among the embers.

Beyond the pork-houses, and up farther towards the canal, there were some houses under the Basin banks. They were good places for the fever-and-ague which people had in those days without knowing it was malaria, or suffering it to interfere much with the pleasure and business of life; but they seemed to my boy bowers of delight, especially one where there was a bear, chained to a weeping-willow, and another where there was a fishpond with gold-fish in it. He expected this bear to get loose and eat him, but that could not spoil his pleasure in seeing the bear stand on his hind-legs and open his red mouth, as I have seen bears do when you wound them up by a keyhole in the side. In fact, a toy bear is very much like a real bear, and safer to have round. The boys were always wanting to go and look at this bear, but he was not so exciting as the daily arrival of the Dayton packet. To my

boy's young vision this craft was of such incomparable lightness and grace as no yacht of Mr. Burgess's could rival. When she came in of a summer evening her deck was thronged with people, and the captain stood with his right foot on the spring-catch that held the tow-rope. The water curled away on either side of her sharp prow, that cut its way onward at the full rate of five miles an hour, and the team came swinging down the tow-path at a gallant trot, the driver sitting the hindmost horse of three, and cracking his long-lashed whip with loud explosions, as he whirled its snaky spirals in the air. All the boys in town were there, meekly proud to be ordered out of his way, to break and fly before his volleyed oaths and far before his horses' feet; and suddenly the captain pressed his foot on the spring and released the tow-rope. The driver kept on to the stable with unslackened speed, and the line followed him, swishing and skating over the water, while the steersman put his helm hard aport, and the packet rounded to, and swam softly and slowly up to her moorings. No steamer arrives from Europe now with such thrilling majesty.

The canal-boatmen were all an heroic race, and the boys humbly hoped that some day, if they proved worthy, they might grow up to be drivers; not indeed packet-drivers; they were not so conceited as that; but freight-boat drivers, of two horses, perhaps, but gladly of one. High or low, the drivers had a great deal of leisure, which commended their calling to the boyish fancy; and my boy saw them, with a longing to speak to them, even to approach them, never satisfied, while they amused the long

summer afternoon in the shade of the tavern by a game of skill peculiar to them. They put a tack into a whiplash, and then, whirling it round and round, drove it to the head in a target marked out on the weather-boarding. Some of them had a perfect aim; and in fact it was a very pretty feat, and well worth seeing.

Another feat, which the pioneers of the region had probably learned from the Indians, was throwing the axe. The thrower caught the axe by the end of the helve, and with a dextrous twirl sent it flying through the air, and struck its edge into whatever object he aimed at – usually a tree. Two of the Basin loafers were brothers, and they were always quarrelling and often fighting. One was of the unhappy fraternity of town-drunkards, and somehow the boys thought him a finer fellow than the other, whom somehow they considered "mean," and they were always of his side in their controversies. One afternoon these brothers quarrelled a long time, and then the sober brother retired to the doorway of a pork-house, where he stood, probably brooding upon his injuries, when the drunkard, who had remained near the tavern, suddenly caught up an axe and flung it; the boys saw it sail across the corner of the Basin, and strike in the door just above his brother's head. This one did not lose an instant; while the axe still quivered in the wood, he hurled himself upon the drunkard, and did that justice on him which he would not ask from the law, perhaps because it was a family affair; perhaps because those wretched men were no more under the law than the boys were.

I do not mean that there was no law for the boys, for it

was manifest to their terror in two officers whom they knew as constables, and who may have reigned one after another, or together, with full power of life and death over them, as they felt; but who in a community mainly so peaceful acted upon Dogberry's advice, and made and meddled with rogues as little as they could. From time to time it was known among the boys that you would be taken up if you went in swimming inside of the corporation line, and for a while they would be careful to keep beyond it; but this could not last; they were soon back in the old places, and I suppose no arrests were ever really made. They did, indeed, hear once that Old Griffin, as they called him, caught a certain boy in the river before dark, and carried him up through the town to his own home naked. Of course no such thing ever happened; but the boys believed it, and it froze my boy's soul with fear; all the more because this constable was a cabinet-maker and made coffins; from his father's printing-office the boy could hear the long slide of his plane over the wood, and he could smell the varnish on the boards.

I dare say Old Griffin was a kindly man enough, and not very old; and I suppose that the other constable, as known to his family and friends, was not at all the gloomy headsman he appeared to the boys. When he became constable (they had not the least notion how a man became constable) they heard that his rule was to be marked by unwonted severity against the crime of going in swimming inside the corporation line, and so they kept strictly to the letter of the law. But one day some of them found themselves

in the water beyond the First Lock, when the constable appeared on the tow-path, suddenly, as if he and his horse had come up out of the ground. He told them that he had got them now, and he ordered them to come along with him; he remained there amusing himself with their tears, their prayers, and then vanished again. Heaven knows how they lived through it; but they must have got safely home in the usual way, and life must have gone on as before. No doubt the man did not realize the torture he put them to; but it was a cruel thing; and I never have any patience with people who exaggerate a child's offence to it, and make it feel itself a wicked criminal for some little act of scarcely any consequence. If we elders stand here in the place of the Heavenly Father towards those younger children of His, He will not hold us guiltless when we obscure for them the important difference between a great and a small misdeed, or wring their souls, fear-clouded as they always are, with a sense of perdition for no real sin.

V.
THE HYDRAULIC AND ITS RESERVOIRS. – OLD RIVER

There were two branches of the Hydraulic: one followed the course of the Miami, from some unknown point to the northward, on the level of its high bank, and joined the other where it emptied into the river just above the bridge. This last came down what had been a street, and it must have been very pretty to have these two swift streams of clear water rushing through the little town, under the culverts, and between the stone walls of its banks. But what a boy mainly cares for in a thing is *use*, and the boys tried to make some use of the Hydraulic, since it was there to find what they could do with it. Of course they were aware of the mills dotted along its course, and they knew that it ran them; but I do not believe any of them thought that it was built merely to run flour-mills and saw-mills and cotton-mills. They did what they could to find out its real use, but they could make very little of it. The current was so rapid that it would not freeze in winter, and in summer they could not go in swimming in it by day, because it was so public, and at night the Basin had more attractions. There was danger of cutting your feet on the broken glass and crockery which people threw into the Hydraulic, and though the edges of the culverts were good

for jumping off of, the boys did not find them of much practical value. Sometimes you could catch sunfish in the Hydraulic, but it was generally too swift, and the only thing you could depend upon was catching crawfish. These abounded so that if you dropped a string with a bit of meat on it into the water anywhere, you could pull it up again with two or three crawfish hanging to it. The boys could not begin to use them all for bait, which was the only use their Creator seemed to have designed them for; but they had vaguely understood that people somewhere ate them, or something like them, though they had never known even the name of lobsters; and they always intended to get their mothers to have them cooked for them. None of them ever did.

They could sometimes, under high favor of fortune, push a dog into the Hydraulic, or get him to jump in after a stick; and then have the excitement of following him from one culvert to another, till he found a foothold and scrambled out. Once my boy saw a chicken cock sailing serenely down the currant; he was told that he had been given brandy, and that brandy would enable a chicken to swim; but probably this was not true. Another time, a tremendous time, a boy was standing at the brink of a culvert, when one of his mates dared another to push him in. In those days the boys attached peculiar ideas of dishonor to taking a dare. They said, and in some sort they believed, that a boy who would take a dare would steal sheep. I do not now see why this should follow. In this case, the high spirit who was challenged felt nothing base in running up behind his unsuspecting friend

and popping him into the water, and I have no doubt the victim considered the affair in the right light when he found that it was a dare. He drifted under the culvert, and when he came out he swiftly scaled the wall below, and took after the boy who had pushed him in; of course this one had the start. No great harm was done; everybody could swim, and a boy's summer costume in that hot climate was made up of a shirt and trousers and a straw hat; no boy who had any regard for his social standing wore shoes or stockings, and as they were all pretty proud, they all went barefoot from April till October.

The custom of going barefoot must have come from the South, where it used to be so common, and also from the primitive pioneer times which were so near my boy's time, fifty years ago. The South characterized the thinking and feeling of the Boy's Town, far more than the North. Most of the people were of Southern extraction, from Kentucky or Virginia, when they were not from Pennsylvania or New Jersey. There might have been other New England families, but the boys only knew of one – that of the blacksmith whose shop they liked to haunt. His children were heard to dispute about an animal they had seen, and one of them said, "Tell ye 'twa'n't a squeerrel; 'twas a maouse;" and the boys had that for a by-word. They despised Yankees as a mean-spirited race, who were stingy and would cheat; and would not hit you if you told them they lied. A person must always hit a person who told him he lied; but even if you called a Yankee a *fighting* liar (the worst form of this insult), he would not hit you,

but just call you a liar back. My boy long accepted these ideas of New England as truly representative of the sectional character. Perhaps they were as fair as some ideas of the West which he afterwards found entertained in New England; but they were false and stupid all the same.

If the boys could do little with the Hydraulic, they were at no loss in regard to the Reservoirs, into which its feeding waters were gathered and held in reserve, I suppose, against a time of drought. There was the Little Reservoir first, and then a mile beyond it the Big Reservoir, and there was nearly always a large flat boat on each which was used for repairing the banks, but which the boys employed as a pleasure-barge. It seemed in some natural way to belong to them, and yet they had a feeling of something clandestine in pushing out on the Reservoir in it. Once they filled its broad, shallow hold with straw from a neighboring oatfield, and spent a long golden afternoon in simply lying under the hot September sun, in the middle of the Reservoir, and telling stories. My boy then learned, for the first time, that there was such a book as the "Arabian Nights;" one of the other boys told stories out of it, and he inferred that the sole copy in existence belonged to this boy. He knew that they all had school-books alike, but it did not occur to him that a book which was not a Reader or a Speller was ever duplicated. They did nothing with their boat except loll in it and tell stories, and as there was no current in the Reservoir, they must have remained pretty much in the same place; but they had a sense of the wildest

adventure, which mounted to frenzy, when some men rose out of the earth on the shore, and shouted at them, "Hello, there! What are you doing with that boat?" They must have had an oar; at any rate, they got to the opposite bank, and, springing to land, fled somewhere into the vaguest past.

The boys went in swimming in the Little Reservoir when they were not in the River or the Basin; and they fished in the Big Reservoir, where the sunfish bit eagerly. There were large trees standing in the hollow which became the bed of the Reservoir, and these died when the water was let in around them, and gave the stretch of quiet waters a strange, weird look; about their bases was the best kind of place for sunfish, and even for bass. Of course the boys never caught any bass; that honor was reserved for men of the kind I have mentioned. It was several years before the catfish got in, and then they were mud-cats; but the boys had great luck with sunfish there and in the pools about the flood-gates, where there was always some leakage, and where my boy once caught a whole string of live fish which had got away from some other boy, perhaps weeks before; they were all swimming about, in a lively way, and the largest hungrily took his bait. The great pleasure of fishing in these pools was that the waters were so clear you could see the fat, gleaming fellows at the bottom, nosing round your hook, and going off and coming back several times before they made up their minds to bite. It seems now impossible that my boy could ever have taken pleasure in the capture of these poor creatures. I know that there

are grown people, and very good, kind men, too, who defend and celebrate the sport, and value themselves on their skill in it; but I think it tolerable only in boys, who are cruel because they are thoughtless. It is not probable that any lower organism but still, I believe that even a fish knows a dumb agony from the barbs of the hook which would take somewhat from the captor's joy if he could but realize it.

> "In corporal sufferance feels a pang as great
> As when a giant dies,"

There was, of course, a time when the Hydraulic and the Reservoirs were not where they afterwards appeared always to have been. My boy could dimly recall the day when the water was first let into the Hydraulic, and the little fellows ran along its sides to keep abreast of the current, as they easily could; and he could see more vividly the tumult which a break in the embankment of the Little Reservoir caused. The whole town rushed to the spot, or at least all the boys in it did, and a great force of men besides, with shovels and wheelbarrows, and bundles of brush and straw, and heavy logs, and heaped them into the crevasse, and piled earth on them. The men threw off their coats and all joined in the work; a great local politician led off in his shirt-sleeves; and it was as if my boy should now see the Emperor of Germany in his shirt-sleeves pushing a wheelbarrow, so high above all other men had that exalted Whig always been to him. But the Hydraulic, I

believe, was a town work, and everybody felt himself an owner in it, and hoped to share in the prosperity which it should bring to all. It made the people so far one family, as every public work which they own in common always does; it made them brothers and equals, as private property never does.

Of course the boys rose to no such conception of the fact before their eyes. I suspect that in their secret hearts they would have been glad to have seen that whole embankment washed away, for the excitement's sake, and for the hope of catching the fish that would be left flopping at the bottom of the Reservoir when the waters were drained out, I think that these waters were brought somehow from Old River, but I am not sure how. Old River was very far away, and my boy was never there much, and knew little of the weird region it bounded. Once he went in swimming in it, but the still, clear waters were strangely cold, and not like those of the friendly Miami. Once, also, when the boys had gone into the vast woods of that measureless continent which they called the Island, for pawpaws or for hickory-nuts, or maybe buckeyes, they got lost; and while they ran about in terror, they heard the distant lowing and bellowing of cattle. They knew somehow, as boys know everything, that the leader of the herd, which ranged those woods in a half-savage freedom, was a vicious bull, and as the lowing and bellowing sounded nearer, they huddled together in the wildest dismay. Some were for running, some for getting over a fence near by; but they could not tell which side of the fence the herd was on. In the primitive piety

of childhood my boy suggested prayer as something that had served people in extremity, and he believed that it was the only hope left. Another boy laughed, and began to climb a tree; the rest, who had received my boy's suggestion favorably, instantly followed his example; in fact, he climbed a tree himself. The herd came slowly up, and when they reached the boys' refuge they behaved with all the fury that could have been expected – they trampled and tossed the bags that held the pawpaws or buckeyes or hickory-nuts; they gored the trees where the boys hung trembling; they pawed and tossed the soft earth below; and then they must have gone away, and given them up as hopeless. My boy never had the least notion how he got home; and I dare say he was very young when he began these excursions to the woods.

In some places Old River was a stagnant pool, covered with thick green scum, and filled with frogs. The son of one of the tavern-keepers was skilled in catching them, and I fancy supplied them to his father's table; the important fact was his taking them, which he did by baiting a cluster of three hooks with red flannel, and dropping them at the end of a fish-line before a frog. The fated croaker plunged at the brilliant bait, and was caught in the breast; even as a small boy, my boy thought it a cruel sight. The boys pretended that the old frogs said, whenever this frog-catching boy came in sight, "Here comes Hawkins! – here comes Hawkins! Look out! – look out!" and a row of boys, perched on a log in the water, would sound this warning in mockery of the

frogs or their foe, and plump one after another in the depths, as frogs follow their leader in swift succession. They had nothing against Hawkins. They all liked him, for he was a droll, good-natured fellow, always up to some pleasantry. One day he laughed out in school. "Was that you laughed, Henry?" asked the teacher, with unerring suspicion. "I was only smiling, Mr. Slack." "The next time, see that you don't smile so loud," said Mr. Slack, and forgave him, as any one who saw his honest face must have wished to do. They called him Old Hawkins, for fondness; and while my boy shuddered at him for his way of catching frogs, he was in love with him for his laughing eyes and the kindly ways he had, especially with the little boys.

VI.
SCHOOLS AND TEACHERS

My boy had not a great deal to do with schools after his docile childhood. When he began to run wild with the other boys he preferred their savage freedom; and he got out of going to school by most of the devices they used. He had never quite the hardihood to play truant, but he was subject to sudden attacks of sickness, which came on about school-time and went off towards the middle of the forenoon or afternoon in a very strange manner. I suppose that such complaints are unknown at the present time, but the Young People's fathers can tell them how much suffering they used to cause among boys. At the age when my boy was beginning to outgrow them he was taken into his father's printing-office, and he completed his recovery and his education there. But all through the years when he lived in the Boy's Town he had intervals of schooling, which broke in upon the swimming and the skating, of course, but were not altogether unpleasant or unprofitable.

They began, as they are apt to do, with lessons in a private house, where a lady taught several other children, and where he possibly learned to read; though he could only remember being set on a platform in punishment for some forgotten offence. After that he went to school in the basement of a church, where a

number of boys and girls were taught by a master who knew how to endear study at least to my boy. There was a garden outside of the schoolroom; hollyhocks grew in it, and the boys gathered the little cheeses, as they called the seed-buttons which form when the flowers drop off, and ate them, because boys will eat anything, and not because they liked them. With the fact of this garden is mixed a sense of drowsy heat and summer light, and that is all, except the blackboard at the end of the room and a big girl doing sums at it; and the wonder why the teacher smiled when he read in one of the girls' compositions a phrase about forging puddings and pies; my boy did not know what forging meant, so he must have been very young. But he had a zeal for learning, and somehow he took a prize in geography – a science in which he was never afterwards remarkable. The prize was a little history of Lexington, Mass., which the teacher gave him, perhaps because Lexington may have been his native town; but the history must have been very dryly told, for not a fact of it remained in the boy's mind. He was vaguely disappointed in the book, but he valued it for the teacher's sake whom he was secretly very fond of, and who had no doubt won the child's heart by some flattering notice. He thought it a great happiness to follow him, when the teacher gave up this school, and took charge of one of the public schools; but it was not the same there; the teacher could not distinguish him in that multitude of boys and girls. He did himself a little honor in spelling, but he won no praise, and he disgraced himself then as always in arithmetic. He sank into the

common herd of mediocrities; and then, when his family went to live in another part of the town, he began to go to another school. He had felt that the teacher belonged to him, and it must have been a pang to find him so estranged. But he was a kind man, and long afterwards he had a friendly smile and word for the boy when they met; and then all at once he ceased to be, as men and things do in a boy's world.

The other school was another private school; and it was doubtless a school of high grade in some things, for it was called the Academy. But there was provision for the youngest beginners in a lower room, and for a while my boy went there. Before school opened in the afternoon, the children tried to roast apples on the stove, but there never was time, and they had to eat them half raw. In the singing-class there was a boy who wore his hair so enviably long that he could toss it on his neck as he wheeled in the march of the class round the room; his father kept a store and he brought candy to school. They sang "Scotland's burning! Pour on water" and "Home, home! Dearest and happiest home!" No doubt they did other things, but none of them remained in my boy's mind; and when he was promoted to the upper room very little more was added. He studied Philosophy, as it was called, and he learned, as much from the picture as the text, that you could not make a boat go by filling her sail from bellows on board; he did not see why. But he was chiefly concerned with his fears about the Chemical Room, where I suppose some chemical apparatus must have been kept, but where the big boys were

taken to be whipped. It was a place of dreadful execution to him, and when he was once sent to the Chemical Boom, and shut up there, because he was crying, and because, as he explained, he could not stop crying without a handkerchief, and he had none with him, he never expected to come out alive.

In fact, as I have said, he dwelt in a world of terrors; and I doubt if some of the big boys who were taken there to be whipped underwent so much as he in being merely taken to the place where they had been whipped. At the same time, while he cowered along in the shadow of unreal dangers, he had a boy's boldness with most of the real ones, and he knew how to resent an indignity even at the hands of the teacher who could send him to the Chemical Room at pleasure. He knew what belonged to him as a small boy of honor, and one thing was, not to be tamely put back from a higher to a lower place in his studies. I dare say that boys do not mind this now; they must have grown ever so much wiser since my boy went to school; but in his time, when you were put back, say from the Third Reader to the Second Reader, you took your books and left school. That was what the other boys expected of you, and it was the only thing for you to do if you had the least self-respect, for you were put back to the Second Reader after having failed to read the Third, and it was a public shame which nothing but leaving that school could wipe out. The other boys would have a right to mock you if you did not do it; and as soon as the class was dismissed you went to your desk as haughtily as you could, and began putting your books and

your slate and your inkstand together, with defiant glances at the teacher; and then when twelve o'clock came, or four o'clock, and the school was let out, you tucked the bundle under your arm and marched out of the room, with as much majesty as could be made to comport with a chip hat and bare feet; and as you passed the teacher you gave a twist of the head that was meant to carry dismay to the heart of your enemy. I note all these particulars carefully, so as to show the boys of the present day what fools the boys of the past were; though I think they will hardly believe it. My boy was once that kind of fool; but not twice. He left school with all his things at twelve o'clock, and he returned with them at one; for his father and mother did not agree with him about the teacher's behavior in putting him back. No boy's father and mother agreed with him on this point; every boy returned in just the same way; but somehow the insult had been wiped out by the mere act of self-assertion, and a boy kept his standing in the world as he could never have done if he had not left school when he was put back.

The Hydraulic ran alongside of the Academy, and at recess the boys had a good deal of fun with it, one way and another, sailing shingles with stones on them, and watching them go under one end of the culvert and come out of the other, or simply throwing rocks into the water. It does not seem very exciting when you tell of it, but it really was exciting; though it was not so exciting as to go down to the mills, where the Hydraulic plunged over that great wheel into the Miami. A foot-bridge crossed it that you could

jump up and down on and almost make touch the water, and there were happier boys, who did not go to school, fishing there with men who had never gone. Sometimes the schoolboys ventured inside of the flour-mill and the iron-foundry, but I do not think this was often permitted; and, after all, the great thing was to rush over to the river-bank, all the boys and girls together, and play with the flutter-mills till the bell rang. The market-house was not far off, and they went there sometimes when it was not market-day, and played among the stalls; and once a girl caught her hand on a meat-hook. My boy had a vision of her hanging from it; but this was probably one of those grisly fancies that were always haunting him, and no fact at all. The bridge was close by the market-house, but for some reason or no reason the children never played in the bridge. Perhaps the toll-house man would not let them; my boy stood in dread of the toll-house man; he seemed to have such a severe way of taking the money from the teamsters.

Some of the boys were said to be the beaux of some of the girls. My boy did not know what that meant; in his own mind he could not disentangle the idea of bows from the idea of arrows; but he was in love with the girl who caught her hand on the meat-hook, and secretly suffered much on account of her. She had black eyes, and her name long seemed to him the most beautiful name for a girl; he said it to himself with flushes from his ridiculous little heart. While he was still a boy of ten he heard that she was married; and she must have been a great deal older

than he. In fact he was too small a boy when he went to the Academy to remember how long he went there, and whether it was months or years; but probably it was not more than a year. He stopped going there because the teacher gave up the school to become a New Church minister; and as my boy's father and mother were New Church people, there must have been some intimacy between them and the teacher, which he did not know of. But he only stood in awe, not terror, of him; and he was not surprised when he met him many long years after, to find him a man peculiarly wise, gentle, and kind. Between the young and the old there is a vast gulf, seldom if ever bridged. The old can look backward over it, but they cannot cross it, any more than the young, who can see no thither side.

The next school my boy went to was a district school, as they called a public school in the Boy's Town. He did not begin going there without something more than his usual fear and trembling; for he had heard free schools and pay schools talked over among the boys, and sharply distinguished: in a pay school the teacher had only such powers of whipping as were given him by the parents, and they were always strictly limited; in a free school the teacher whipped as much and as often as he liked. For this reason it was much better to go to a pay school; but you had more fun at a free school, because there were more fellows; you must balance one thing against another. The boy who philosophized the matter in this way was a merry, unlucky fellow, who fully tested the advantages and disadvantages of the free-

school system. He was one of the best-hearted boys in the world, and the kindest to little boys; he was always gay and always in trouble, and forever laughing, when he was not crying under that cruel rod. Sometimes he would not cry; but when he was caught in one of his frequent offences and called up before the teacher's desk in the face of the whole school, and whipped over his thinly jacketed shoulders, he would take it without wincing, and go smiling to his seat, and perhaps be called back and whipped more for smiling. He was a sort of hero with the boys on this account, but he was too kind-hearted to be proud, and mingled with the rest on equal terms. One awful day, just before school took up in the afternoon, he and another boy went for a bucket of drinking-water; it always took two boys. They were gone till long after school began, and when they came back the teacher called them up, and waited for them to arrive slowly at his desk while he drew his long, lithe rod through his left hand. They had to own that they had done wrong, and they had no excuse but the one a boy always has – they forgot. He said he must teach them not to forget, and their punishment began; surely the most hideous and depraving sight, except a hanging, that could be offered to children's eyes. One of them howled and shrieked, and leaped and danced, catching his back, his arms, his legs, as the strokes rained upon him, imploring, promising, and getting away at last with a wild effort to rub himself all over all at once. When it came the hero's turn, he bore it without a murmur, and as if his fortitude exasperated him, the teacher showered the blows more

swiftly and fiercely upon him than before, till a tear or two did steal down the boy's cheek. Then he was sent to his seat, and in a few minutes he was happy with a trap for catching flies which he had contrived in his desk.

Конец ознакомительного фрагмента.