Benson Edward Frederic

# Across the Stream

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# Benson E. F. Edward Frederic
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## INTRODUCTION

There is a very large class of persons alive to-day who believe that not only is communication with the dead possible, but that they themselves have had actual experience of it. Many of these are eminent in scientific research, and on any other subject the world in general would accept their evidence.

There is possibly a larger class of persons who hold that all such communications, if genuine, come not from the dead but from the devil. This is the taught opinion of the Roman Catholic Church.

A third class, far more numerous than both of these, is sure that any one who holds either of these beliefs is a dupe of conjurers, or the victim of his own disordered brain. This type of robust intellect has, during the last ten decades, affirmed that hypnotism, aviation in machines heavier than air, telepathy, wireless telegraphy, and other non-proved phenomena, are superstitious and unscientific balderdash. In an earlier century it was equally certain that the earth did not go round the sun. It is, happily, never disconcerted by the frequency with which the superstitions and impossibilities of one generation become the science of the next.

The first part of this book may be accepted by the first of these three classes, the second by the second, and none of it by the third. Its aim is to state rather than solve the subject with which it deals, and to suggest that the dead and the devil alike may be able to communicate with the living.

**E. F. BENSON.**

# BOOK I

## CHAPTER I

Certain scenes, certain pictures of his very early years of childhood, stood out for Archie like clear sunlit peaks above the dim clouds that shrouded the time when the power of memory was only beginning to germinate. He had no doubt (and was probably right about it) as to which the earliest of those was: it was the face of his nurse Blessington, leaning over his crib. She held a candle in her hand which a little dazzled him, but the sight of her face, tender and anxious, and divinely reassuring, was the point of that memory. He had been asleep, and had awoke with a start, and, finding himself alone in the midst of the immense desolation of the dark that pressed on him like an invader from all sides, he had lifted up his voice and yelled. Then, as by a conjuring-trick, Blessington had appeared with her comforting presence that quite robbed the dark of its terrors. It must still have been early in the night, for she had not yet gone to bed, and had on above her smooth grey hair her cap with its adorable blue ribands in it. At her throat was the brooch made of the same stuff as the shining shillings with which a year or two later she bought the buns and sponge-cakes for tea. He remembered no more than that; he knew nothing of what she had said: the whole of that memory consisted in the fact of the secure comfort and relief which her face brought. It was just a vignette of memory, the earliest of all; there was nothing whatever before it, and nothing for some time after.

Gradually the horizon widened; scenes and situations in which Archie was still a detached observer, as if looking through a telescope, made themselves visible. He remembered gazing through the bars of the high nursery fire-guard at the joyful glow of the fuel. At the corner of the grate (he remembered this with extreme distinctness), there was a black coal, the edge of which was soft and bubbly. A thin streamer of smoke blew out of it, and from time to time this smoke caught light and flared very satisfactorily. But all that, the joyfulness and the satisfaction, was external to him; it was the coals and the streams of burning gas that were in themselves joyful and satisfactory. That must have been in the winter, and it was in the same winter perhaps that he came home with Blessington and two other children – girls, and larger than himself – whom he grew to believe were his sisters, through a wood of fir-trees between the trunks of which shone a round red ball that resembled the coals in the nursery-grate. He knew – perhaps Blessington, perhaps a sister, perhaps his mother had told him – that it was Christmas Eve, and he saw that when Blessington spoke to him she steamed delightfully at the mouth, as if there had been a hot bath just inside her lips. At her suggestion he found he could do it, too, and his sisters also; whereafter they played hot-baths all the way home. But of the Christmas Day that followed he had no recollection whatever.

His observation became a little less detached; he began to form in his mind an explorer's map of the places where these phenomena occurred, to be dimly aware that he was taking some sort of part in them, and was not a mere spectator, and one summer evening he definitely knew that the day-nursery and the night-nursery and the room beyond where his sisters slept were all part of the red-brick house which he and others inhabited, just as, according to Blessington, the rabbit which he had seen pop into its hole in the wood beyond the lawn, had a home within it. He had already had his bath, on a patch of sunlight that lay across the nursery-floor, and escaping, slippery as a trout, from Blessington's towelling hands, had run with a squeal of delight across to the window. Outside was the lawn, which hitherto he had thought of as a thing apart, a picture by itself, and beyond was the wood where the rabbit had a house. On the lawn was his mother, playing croquet with his two sisters, and of a sudden it flashed upon him that the wood and the rabbit, the lawn and the croquet-players, the night-nursery, Blessington, the shine of the sun low in the west, and his own wet self were all in some

queer manner part of the same thing, and made up that to which he and Blessington went back when, at the limit of their walk, she said it was time to go home.

"Oh, there's mummy," he cried. "Mummy!" And he danced naked at the window.

Blessington caught him in the towel again.

"Well, I never!" she said. "That's not the way for a young gentleman to behave. There, let me dry you, dear, and put your night-shirt on, and you shall say good-night to your mamma out of the window."

This was duly done, and it struck Archie as a very novel and delightful discovery that he could say good-night to his mother when she was on the croquet-lawn and he up in the night-nursery. It shed a new light on existence generally, and coloured with a new interest the few drowsy moments which intervened between his being put into bed and falling asleep. Blessington still moved quietly about the room, emptying his bath, and putting his clothes tidy, and he just remembered her kissing him when she had finished. He was already too suffused with drowsiness to make any response, and he slid softly out over the tides of sleep.

That night he became acquainted with a new sort of experience, something hitherto quite foreign to him. Once again he woke in the night and found himself surrounded by the vast dark, save where, in a corner of the nursery, there burned the shaded night-light. But now there was no sense of terror; he did not want to call for Blessington, but lay open-eyed and absorbed in the amazing thing that was happening. The night-nursery (where he knew he was), and he with it, were expanding and extending, till they comprised the lawn and the wood beyond the lawn, and all else that he had ever known. His sisters and his mother and father were all there, though he could not see them; Blessington was there, and Graves the butler, and Walter and William, the two footmen. He could not see them, any more than he could see the moon and the sun, which were there also, but they were there as part of an unusual presence that filled the place. He could not see that unusual presence either, but it was tremendously real and filled him not in the least with awe, but with the feeling with which Blessington's face and his mother's face inspired him… And the next thing that he was aware of was the rattle of the blind, and Blessington's voice saying, "Eh, what a time of morning to have slept to. I know a sleepy-head!"

He recounted this remarkable experience to Blessington at breakfast, who was quite sure that it was all a dream; a nice dream, but a dream.

"Wasn't a dream," said Archie firmly.

"And where did Mr. Contradiction go?" asked Blessington.

Archie knew where Mr. Contradiction went, for Mr. Contradiction lived in a very dull corner of the nursery with his face to the wall for five minutes.

"Well, it didn't seem like a dream," he said. "May I get down?"

"Yes, and say your grace."

"Thank God for my good dinner," said Archie, who was not attending.

"Say it again, dear," said Blessington; "and think."

"I meant breakfast," said Archie. "Amen."

The discovery of the connection, made last night, between himself in the night-nursery and his mother on the lawn, which proved that the lawn and the house were part of the same thing, produced further results that day. Instead of memory consisting of different and severed pictures, it began to flow into one coherent whole. He knew, of course, already that at the end of the nursery passage was a wooden wicket-gate, and that outside that was the long gallery that skirted round three sides of the hall, while on the fourth ran a broad staircase each step of which had to be surmounted and descended either by a series of jumps, or, if the feet were tired, by the extension of one foot on to the next stair where it was joined by the other; but he began now to put these isolated facts together, and form them into the conception of a house. When the staircase was negotiated you found yourself in a large oak-floored hall, where you were not allowed to slide on purpose, though both Blessington

and his mother had the sense to distinguish between deliberate and unintentional slidings. There were bright rugs spread here and there over the hall, forming islands in a glassy sea. Archie knew it was not made of glass really, but he chose to think that it was, for it had the qualities of a looking-glass in that it reflected his own bare-legged form above it, and the slipperiness of glass as exhibited in the window-panes of the nursery, and he chose also to think that it was to the hall-floor that the hymn alluded which was sung last Sunday morning in a dazzling and populous place to which his mother had taken him. The people who sang loudest were two rows of boys dressed in crinkly white night-shirts, in company with some grown-up men who were attired in the same curious manner. But none of them went to bed, and at a pause in the proceedings Archie had suddenly asked his mother, in a piercing voice, why they didn't go to bed. Evidently that had puzzled her too, for she had no reply to give him except "Hush, darling!" which wasn't an answer at all. Then another man had begun talking all by himself. He had a quantity of hair on his chin which wagged in so delightful a manner when he spoke that Archie watched him entranced for a little, and then, afraid that his mother was missing this lovely sight, said:

"O mummy, *isn't* that a funny man?"

Upon which Blessington, magically communicated with, appeared by his side and whispered that they were going for a walk, and towed him down the aisle, still rapturously looking back at the funny man. Archie had thought it all very entertaining, but he was told afterwards by his father that he had disgraced himself and should not go to church again for many Sundays to come.

Archie was frightened of his father, and always went warily by the door of the room at the dark corner of the hall where this tremendous person lived. There were other dangers about that corner, for on the floor were two tiger-skins which looked as if the animal in question had, with the exception of its head, been squashed out flat, like as when he and Blessington sometimes put a flower they had gathered on their walks between two sheets of blotting-paper, and piled books on the top, so that it ceased to be a flower, and became the map of a flower. Archie wished the tigers' heads had been pressed in the same way; as it was, they were disconcertingly solid and life-like, with long teeth and snarling mouths and glaring eyes. He had always made Blessington come right up to his father's door with him when he went in to say good-night, so that she should pilot him safely past the tigers on his entry and escort him by them again on his return. But one night his father had come out with him, and, finding Blessington waiting there, had divined, as by some awful black magic, why the nurse was waiting, and had decreed that Archie should in future make his way across the danger zone unattended. But, next evening, the trembling Archie, hurrying away in the dusk, had fallen down on the glassy sea between the awful Scylla and Charybdis, and, convinced that his last hour had come, when these two cruel heads beheld him prostrate on the floor, had cried himself to sleep from terror of that awful ending. But next day his mother, who understood about things in general better than anybody, had caused the tigers to make friends with him, and in token of their amity they had each of them presented him with a whisker-hair. That assured their friendship, and they wished it to be understood that their snarlings and glarings were directed, not at Archie, but at Archie's enemies. This naturally changed their whole aspect, and Archie, after he had wished his father good-night, kissed the hairy heads that had once been so terrifying, and thanked them for successfully keeping his enemies from molesting him.

But though now the presence of the tigers, ceasing to be a terror by night, had become a protection to Archie, their corner of the hall still constituted a danger zone to be gone by swiftly and silently, lest a raised voice or an incautious noise should cause him to be called from within the closed door of his father's room. There were risks in that room; you never quite knew whether you were not going to be blamed for doing something which you had no idea was blame-worthy. One day Archie had found a lovely wax match with a blue head to it on the floor, and had put it in his pocket, where he fingered it delightedly, for he knew it to be the sort which flamed when you rubbed it against your boot or the bricks of the house, as he had seen his father do. But then, when a little later he had

come to sit on his father's knee and be shown pictures in a book of natural history, it was detected that his small fingers smelled of phosphorus, and when the reason was discovered, he was told by his father that he had stolen that match. To Archie's mind there was something inexplicably unfair and unjust about this; he knew quite well that the match was not his, but he had no idea that it was stealing if you appropriated something that was dropped on the floor. A thing dropped on the floor was nobody's, and anybody, so he supposed, might take it. It had been quite another affair when he had taken eight lumps of sugar out of the basin on the tea-table in the drawing-room and hidden them in his domino-box. He had been perfectly well aware that he was stealing them, and had no sense of injustice when his mother had promptly and soundly smacked him for it. But he intensely resented being told by his father that he had stolen (even though he was not smacked) when he had not the least idea that a match dropped on the floor was a stealable article at all, and he felt it far more bitter to be unjustly blamed than justly punished.

"But I didn't know it was stealing, daddy," said he.

"But didn't you know it wasn't yours?"

"Yes."

"And didn't you know that to take what isn't yours is stealing?"

Archie couldn't explain, but he was still quite sure he had not been stealing…

His father's room then, at least when that potentate was in it, was a place where extreme caution was necessary, and, however cautious you were (he had not felt guilty of the smallest temerity in picking up that match), you could never be quite sure that Fate, like some great concealed cat, would not pounce upon you from the most unexpected quarter. But, considered in itself, the room had a tremendous attraction for him. There was a delicious smell about it, subtly compounded of the leather backs of books and the aroma of tobacco, which to Archie's dawning perception had something virile and masculine about it. He could understand the manliness of the place, it answered to something that was shared by him, and not shared by his mother or Blessington or his sisters, and belonged to a man. The furniture and the appurtenances of the room conveyed the same message; they were strong and solid, without frillings or frippery, and had a decisive air and a purpose about them which somehow concerned that mysterious difference between boys and girls and between men and women. His mother's sitting-room, it is true, seemed to Archie a fairy-palace of loveliness, with its spindle-legged tables, its lace-edged curtains, its soft, silky cushions, its china, its glittering silver toys on a particular black lacquer table, its nameless feminine fragrance. But this room, with its solid leather chairs, which held small limbs as in a tender male embrace, its gun-case in the corner, its whip-rack, its few solid, sober pictures which hung above the book-shelves, struck a different and more intimate and more intelligible note. Archie felt that he knew what it was all about… it was about a man, to which *genus* he himself belonged. This particular specimen, his father, might be unjust to him, and severe to him, but in some secret inexplicable manner Archie understood him, though fearing him, better than he understood either his mother or Blessington, both of whom he loved. His two sisters, in the same way, had a quality of enigma about them.

These floating impressions, the untranslatable instincts of early childhood, began to thicken, when Archie was getting on for six years old, into thoughts capable of being solidified into language. He could not have solidified them himself, but if any one capable of presenting them to him in actual words had asked him, "Is it this you mean?" he would have assented. And his solidified thoughts would have taken the following mould:

There was something odd about females, and it was a mystery into which he did not at all want to enquire. They wore skirts, which perhaps concealed some abnormality, which would be fearful to contemplate. They had soft faces and soft bodies; when his mother took him on her knee – she already said that he was getting too big a boy to sit on her knee, which to Archie sounded very grand and delightful – she was soft to his shoulder, and her cheek was soft to his. But when he sat on his father's knee he felt a hard, firm substance behind him, and the contrast was similar to the contrast between

his mother's soft cushions and his father's leather-clad chairs. And his father had a hard, bristly cheek on which to receive Archie's good-night kiss. Judged by the standards of pleasure and luxury, it was not nearly as nice as his mother's, but it gave him, however great need there was for caution, a sense of identity with himself. He was of that species… And this conception of abnormality in women was strongly confirmed when, one morning, he went as usual to his mother's bedroom to see her before she went down to breakfast. She had been late in getting up that day, and, not finding her in her bedroom, Archie's attention had been arrested by hearing sounds from her bathroom next door, and very naturally had turned the handle in order to enter. But a voice from inside had said:

"Is that you, darling? Wait just a minute."

"But I want to come in now," said Archie. "I'm coming in."

"Archie, I shall be very angry if you come in before I give you leave," said the voice. Then there were rustlings. "Come in now."

And there was his mother standing by her bath, which smelt deliciously fragrant, in a lovely blue bath-towel dressing-gown.

"Good-morning, darling," said she. "But you must never come into a lady's bathroom unless she gives you leave."

"Why not?" said Archie. "You come to see me in my bath without my saying

'Yes.'"

She gave that delicious bubble of laughter that reminded Archie of the sound of cool lemonade being poured out of the bottle.

"I shan't when you're as old as me," she said. "I shall always ask your leave. And probably you won't give it me."

"Why not? It's only me," said Archie.

"You'll know when you're older," said she.

Archie rather despised that argument: it seemed to apply to so many situations in life. But he had already formed the very excellent habit of crediting his mother with the gift of common sense, for was it not she who had discovered that the snarl of the tiger-heads was a snarl not at Archie, but at his enemies? But on this occasion it merely confirmed his conviction that women were somehow deformed. They wore skirts instead of breeches, and though, judging by his younger sister, they were normal up to about the level of the knee, it seemed likely that their legs extended no farther, but that they became like peg-tops, swelling out in one round piece till their bodies were reached. What confirmed this impression was that they seemed to run from their knees instead of striding with a swung leg. Blessington always ran like that: her feet twinkled in ridiculously short steps, and after a moment or two she said:

"Eh, I can't run any more. I've got a bone in my leg."

"And haven't I?" asked Archie.

"No, dear: you're just made of gristle and quicksilver," said Blessington, with a sudden lyrical spasm as she looked at the shining face of her most beloved.

"What's quicksilver?" asked Archie. "And why haven't I got a bone in my leg? O-o-oh!" and a sudden thought struck him. "Have women got bones in their legs and not boys? Is that why they can't run properly? Mummy can't run, nor can you; but William can, damn him."

"Master Archie!" said Blessington in her most severe voice.

"What for?" asked Archie.

"You must never say that, Master Archie," said Blessington, who only called him Master Archie on impressive occasions. "You must never say what you said after 'William can.'"

"But daddy said it to William this morning," said Archie.

Blessington still wore the iron mask on her face. It was lucky for her that Archie did not know how puzzled she was as to the correct answer.

"Your papa says what he thinks fit," she said, "and that is right for him. But young gentlemen never say it."

"How old shall I have to be – " began Archie.

"And look at your shoe-lace all untied," said Blessington with extreme promptitude. "Do it up at once, or you'll be treading on it. And then it will be time for you to go in, and you can write your letter to Miss Marjorie before your dinner."

Miss Marjorie was the elder of Archie's two sisters. She was ten years older than he, and at the present time was staying with her grandmother, whom Archie strongly suspected of being either a witch or a man. She was large and rustling, and had a bass voice and a small moustache and a small husband, who was an earl, to whom, when he came to stay with Archie's father, who appeared to be his son, every one paid a great deal of unnecessary attention. Both of them, Archie's father, and Archie's father's father, were lords, and Archie distinctly thought he ought to be a lord too, considering that both his father and his grandfather were. Blessington had hinted that he would be a lord too, some day, if he were good, but when pressed she couldn't say when. In fact, there was a ridiculous reticence about the whole matter, for when he had asked his mother, in the presence of his grandfather, when he was going to be a lord, his grandfather, quite inexplicably, had giggled with laughter, and said:

"I've got one foot in the grave already, Archie, and you want me to have both."

That was a very cryptic remark, and when Archie asked William the footman what grandpapa Tintagel had meant, William had said that he couldn't say, sir. On which Archie, looking hastily round, and feeling sure that Blessington was not present, had repeated "Damn you, William," as daddy said.

Then William, after endeavouring not to show two rows of jolly white teeth, had said:

"You must never say that to me, Master Archie."

In fact, there was clearly a league. Blessington and William, who didn't love each other, as Archie had ascertained by direct questions to each, were at one over the question of him not saying that. Under the stress of independent evidence, Archie decided not to say it any more, without further experiments as to the effect "it" would have on his mother. If William and Blessington were both agreed about it, it had clearly better not be done, any more than it was wise to walk about among the flowers of the big, herbaceous border. The gardener and the gardener's boy and his mother were all of one mind about that, and the gardener's boy had threatened to turn the hose on to him if he caught him at it. The gardener's boy was quite grown up, and so for Archie he had a weight of authority that befitted his years.

It was a lovely, disconnected life. There were all sorts of delightful and highly coloured strands that contributed to it, and others of a more sombre hue, and others again quite secret, which concerned Archie alone, and of which he never spoke to anybody. Of the delightful and highly coloured strands there were many. Waking in the morning, and knowing that there was going to be another day was one of them, and perhaps that was the most delightful of all except when, rarely, it was clouded with some trouble of the evening before, as when Archie had broken a window in his father's study in the laudable attempt to kill a wasp with a fire-shovel, and had been told by Blessington that his father wished to see him the moment he was dressed in the morning. But usually the wakings were ecstatic; and often he used to return to consciousness in those summer months long before Blessington came in to call him. The window was always open – all the windows in the night-nursery were opened as soon as he got into bed – and the blinds were up, and on the ceiling was the most delicious green light, for the early sun shone through the branches of the beeches outside, and painted Archie's ceiling with a pale, milky green which was adorable to contemplate. He would pull up his night-shirt, and with his bare arms clasp his bare knees, and, lying on his back, rather unsteadily anchored, would roll backwards and forwards looking at the green light, and rehearsing all the delightful probabilities of the day. Sometimes his mother had promised him that he should go out fishing on the lake when his lessons were done, and this implied the wonderful experience of seeing Walter or William come out on to the lawn, and pour out of a tin gardening can a mixture of mustard and water. When the footman

did that it was certain that in a short time the grass would be covered with worms, which William put in a tin box lined with moss. Then Archie and William, sometimes with a sister, whose presence, Archie thought, was not wholly desirable, since she impeded the free flow of talk between him and William, would go down to the lake, and William, who could do everything, put worms on hooks (they did not seem to mind, for they said no word of protest), and sculled across to the sluice above which was deep water, where the fish fed, and away from the reeds, where the line got entangled, so that it was impossible to know whether you were engaged with a fish or a vegetable. The fishing-rod came out of his father's study – that was another delightful male attribute about the room – and when Archie went in to ask for it, William came too, not in his livery, but in ordinary clothes, and his father said, "Take good care of Master Archie, William. Good sport, Archie." Sometimes again, if he was not busy, Lord Davidstow came out with Archie instead of William. That was somehow an honour, but Archie did not like it so much.

Once there was a great happening. William produced a curious object that looked like the bowl of a spoon with hooks set all round it. He said there were going to be no worms this time, and, instead of drifting about, he rowed up and down, while Archie, with his rod over the stern, saw the spoon flashing through the water. Then a great shadow came over it, and Archie felt the rod bend in his hands. He was so excited that he stepped on to the seat of the boat, in order to see better, and promptly fell overboard.

He was not the least frightened, and rather enjoyed the splash and the sense of soda-water round him. With both hands he held on to the fishing-rod, which seemed an absolutely essential thing to do, and sank down, down in the deep water, seeing it green and yellow above his head. And then instantly he knew he was going to be drowned, and a feeling precisely identical to that which he had experienced one night when he woke, of a universal presence round about him, took complete possession of him. Then, even before he was conscious of the least sense of choking or discomfort, but was still only aware of coolness and depth and greenness, a great dark splaying object came right down upon him from above, and he found himself tucked underneath a human arm, coatless and in shirt-sleeves which he took to be William's. But still Archie did not let go of the fishing-rod, and mistakenly trying to speak, bidding William take care of it, his mouth and apparently his whole interior filled with water, and drowning suddenly seemed to be a disagreeable process. Next moment, however, his head emerged from the water again, and William caught hold of the boat.

"Let go the rod, Master Archie," said he, "and catch hold of the boat."

"But there's a fish on it," spluttered Archie.

"Do as I tell you, sir," said William quite crossly.

Archie had been told that, when he went out in the boat with William, he had to do precisely as William told him. He was not, it is true, in the boat at the moment, but the injunction probably applied. So he let go of the rod, and the moment afterwards found himself violently propelled over the side of the boat, and tumbled all abroad on the floor of it. They were but a dozen yards from land, and William having once got Archie into the boat, grabbed hold of the rod with his spare hand, and swam, shoving the boat in front of him.

"Oh, well done, William. Oh, William, I love you," screamed Archie when, having righted himself, he observed this brilliant manoeuvre. "Is the fish there still?"

William scrambled up the bank, still holding the rod.

"Run indoors at once, Master Archie," he said. "Don't wait a moment."

"But William, is the fish – " began Archie.

"Do as I tell you, sir," said William again. "I'll bring the fish for you, if I get him."

Archie ran with backward glances across the lawn, where he was met by Blessington who had observed the accident out of the window, and, before he could explain half the thrilling things that had happened, was undressed and rubbed down and put between blankets. And then, after a few minutes, in came William, having also changed his clothes, with a great pike, and his father followed

and shook hands with William, and his mother did the same, saying things that made William blush and stand first on one foot and then on the other, murmuring: "It was nothing at all, my lady," and Archie asked if he and William might go out again that afternoon, and catch another pike. Then in came his younger sister, Jeannie, who was only two years his senior. She appeared to be on the point of crying, and she flung her arms round Archie's neck in an uncomfortable sort of way, and Archie told her she was messing him. After that, in reaction from those thrilling affairs, he felt suddenly tired, and, being encouraged to go to sleep, nestled down in the blankets and woke up to find that there was his fish stuffed for dinner, and for himself and William an era of unexampled popularity.

Archie did not understand at the time why he had suddenly blossomed into such favouritism, unless it was for having clung tight to his father's fishing-rod but he enjoyed it immensely. It was pleasant, too, not long afterwards, to be given a gold watch by his father, to present to William, with a gold chain provided by his mother. And William permitted him to put the gold watch into one waistcoat pocket, and the end of the gold chain into the other, and his father and mother and Jeannie all shook hands with William again (every one seemed to be spending their time in shaking hands with William). So Archie, since William was his friend more than anybody else's, kissed him, in order to mark the difference between himself and other people with regard to him. He was surprised to find that William had got a soft cheek like his mother's, and supposed that men's faces grew hard as they grew older. He instantly mentioned this surprising fact, and William appeared rather glad to leave the room. But in all Archie's life no event ever occurred which approached the splendour and public magnificence of this whole experience.

Every day the world widened, and, lying looking at the green light on the ceiling in the cool still mornings of that summer which seemed to last for years and years, Archie found himself not only speculating on what fresh joys the day would bring, but joining together in his mind the happenings that at the time seemed disconnected, but which proved to be part of a continuous thread of existence. Just as the nursery passage, and the steep stairs, and his father's room, and the lawn, and the lake passed from being isolated phenomena into pieces of a whole, so things that happened proved to be the experiences of the person who was known to others as Archie Morris, and to Archie as himself. Sometimes he so tingled with vigour when he woke that, contrary to orders, he stepped out of bed and leaned out of the window, to look at the bright dewy world, with one ear alert to hear Blessington's foot along the passage, in order to leap back into bed again, for now he had the night-nursery to himself, and Blessington slept next door. At that hour the lawn would be covered with a shimmering grey mantle, pearl-coloured, and here and there a few diamonds had got in by mistake which shone with just the brilliance of his mother's necklace. Perhaps these were the bed-clothes of the lawn, and when day came, they were covered over by the green bed-spread like that which lay on his own bed. The lake away to the right had different bed-clothes, thicker ones, but of the same colour. No doubt they were thicker because the lake was colder, for on some mornings he could not see through them at all. To the left, out of the window, rose the wood where the rabbits lived; sometimes one of them, an early riser like Archie, would have found a gap in the netting and was out on the lawn nibbling the grass. The gardener did not approve of that, for the lawn, it appeared, belonged to the people who lived in Archie's house, and not to the folk in the wood, and this was a trespass on the part of the rabbits, for which the punishment, rather a severe one, was death by shooting. This had added a new terror to the notice in another wood where he and Blessington sometimes walked, which announced that trespassers would be prosecuted. Blessington was foolhardy enough to disregard that notice altogether, saying that it was his daddy's notice, and didn't apply to them; but for some time Archie never chose that walk for fear that Blessington might be wrong about it, and that they would meet somebody in the wood who would instantly shoot them both for trespassing. But in childish fashion he kept those terrors to himself, sooner than enquire about them, till one day they actually did meet in that wood a man with a gun. Then in a sudden wild terror Archie clung to Blessington, crying out, "Oh, ask him not to shoot us this time!"

"Eh, darling," said Blessington. "Who's going to shoot us? It's only one of your daddy's keepers."

"No, but he will shoot us," screamed Archie. "We're trespassers, and he'll shoot us like the rabbits."

Matters being thereupon explained, and Archie convinced that he and Blessington were not going to be shot for trespassing, he found that he could make up for himself an entrancing story of how Master Rabbit and his nurse (who were good) never trespassed on the lawn, and that the rabbits he saw there corresponded to Grandmamma Tintagel, and so he did not care whether they were shot or not.

These stories which he told himself in the early morning, looking out on to the lawn, or lying curled up on his back in bed, looking at the green ceiling, were not vague, dream-like imaginings, but were endowed with a vividness that made Blessington's entry with his bath and his clothes seem less real than they. It became impossible indeed for him to disentangle reality (as judged by people like his father and the gardener) from imagination. He told himself so strongly that there was Grandmamma Tintagel sitting on the lawn, trespassing and nibbling grass for her breakfast, that her presence there, or her absence when there was no trespassing rabbit, became things as vivid as his subsequent dressing and breakfast. Had he been definitely asked if he believed it was Grandmamma Tintagel, he would have said "No"; but in his imaginative life, so hard for a child to dissociate from his real life, there was no question as to her identity. It happened also that at this time his mother was reading to him the realest of all books, namely, *Alice in Wonderland*. No imaginative boy of five could possibly doubt the actual existence of the White Rabbit in that convincing history, and Archie would not have been surprised if, one morning, there had proved to be a white rabbit sitting by the fence, who looked at his watch and put on his gloves. Yet he never spoke of this possibility even to Blessington or William; it did not belong to the sphere of things about which it was reasonable to converse to grown-up people, simply because they were stupid about certain matters and would not understand him. The fact that Grandmamma Tintagel sometimes sat on the lawn in the early morning was among the topics which he kept quite completely to himself.

There were other such topics. Sometimes, when he lay in bed, waiting for Blessington to call him, and did not choose to get up and look out of the window, it was because these other secret affairs engaged him. If he lay still, and stared at the green-hued ceiling, curious waves of shadow appeared to pass over it, and it seemed like that sunny floor of water that had closed above his head on the morning when he fell out of the boat. There was he lying in bed deep below some surface of liquid light that cut him off from the outer world, and he wondered if in a moment a splayed starfish of arms and legs which turned out to be William would dive down for him, and bring him up among the common things again. But William never made this impressive entry through the ceiling, and if he stared long enough, Archie only seemed to himself to slip down and down, gently and rapturously, through deep water, and another world, the world of hidden things that dwelt below the surface, came slowly into existence, like as when, on mounting a slope, fresh valleys and hillsides arise and unfurl themselves. Only, in this case, you had to go down somewhere inside yourself to become aware of them. And something, some inner consciousness, recognized and hailed them. It was not that he was getting sleepy, and sinking into the waters of dreams; rather the experience was the result of a more vivid life and awakened perceptions. But he never got further than that, and during the day he was far too busy with the affairs of normal life to trouble about those perceptions that dawned on him on still quiet mornings when he lay a-bed and stared at the ceiling with its flickering green lights and moving shadows.

# CHAPTER II

Archie's birthday was in November, and for a day or two before that tremendous annual event there was always a certain atmosphere of mystery abroad, which he was conscious of at odd minutes. He met Marjorie on the morning of the day before he would be six, walking down the nursery passage with a parcel in her hand, the contents of which she would not divulge. That afternoon, too, his mother drove into the neighbouring town in the motor, and would not take him with her, on the excuse that she had some shopping to do, though it was the commonest thing in the world for her to take him with her when she went shopping. This year he vaguely connected these odd happenings with his birthday, as he did also the fact that a week ago Blessington had brought a total stranger into the nursery, who had very politely asked him to take off his coat. The stranger had then knelt down on the floor in front of him, and had produced a tape, with which he proceeded to measure Archie all over, from his hip to his knee and his knee to his ankle, and round his waist, and round his chest, and all along his arms, making notes of those things in a book. Blessington had told him that Mr. Johnson wanted to see how much he had grown, which was certainly a very gratifying attention, especially since Archie had grown a good deal, and was extremely proud of the fact. Mr. Johnson congratulated him too, and said that he himself hadn't grown as much as that for many a year, and tried to account for his visit on general grounds of interest in Archie. But in spite of that Archie connected this call with his birthday, though he did not arrive at the deduction that it meant clothes.

His mother came up to tea in the nursery on her return from her mysterious drive, and said that she had just caught sight of the fairy Abracadabra as she drove down the High Street; she had not known that Abracadabra was in the neighbourhood. She asked Archie if Abracadabra had called while she was out, and Archie, after a moment's pause, said that he hadn't seen her… but in that pause something of the glory faded out of the bright trailing clouds. When he was asked that directly he did not feel sure whether he believed in Abracadabra in the same way in which he believed in Blessington or Jeannie. So short a time ago – last summer only – Alice in Wonderland and the identity of Grandmamma Tintagel had been so much realler than the paltry happenings that took place in the light of common day. Now, quite suddenly and unexpectedly, at the mere question as to whether he had seen Abracadabra they all began to fade; indeed, it was more than fading: it was as if they passed out of sight behind a corner.

Archie had been told that he must never, if he could help it, hurt people's feelings. The particular occasion when that had been brought home to him was when his sister Jeannie had to wear a rather delightful sort of band round her front teeth, which showed a tendency to grow crooked. She was shy about it and hoped nobody saw it, and when Archie called the attention of the public to it, she turned very red. He had not had the least intention of embarrassing her, for he thought the band rather nice himself, and would have liked to have had one had his teeth been sufficiently advanced for such a decoration. But on this occasion he saw instantly and clearly that he must not hurt his mother's feelings by expressing scepticism about Abracadabra. Perhaps his mother still believed in her herself (though there were difficulties about supposing that, seeing that if Abracadabra was not Abracadabra she was certainly his mother); but, in any case, she thought Archie believed in Abracadabra, which made quite sufficient reason for his appearing to do so. If Abracadabra was an invention designed to awe, delight, and mystify him, the most elementary obligation of not embarrassing other people enjoined on him that he must be awed, delighted, and mystified. Perhaps by next year something would have happened to Abracadabra, for nowadays she only made her appearance on his birthday, whereas he could remember when she paid Jeannie also a birthday visit. But this year she had not come on Jeannie's birthday, and the various members of the family had given her birthday presents themselves, which did not happen when Abracadabra came, for she was the chief dispenser of offerings.

So Archie replied that Abracadabra had not been during his mother's absence, and, in order to spare his mother the mortification of knowing that he had doubts about that benevolent fairy, laid himself out to ask intelligent questions.

"Why didn't you speak to her, mummy?" he said, "when you saw her in the

High Street?"

"Because she was in a hurry; she went by like a flash of lightning, in her pearl chariot."

"Was there any thunder?" asked he.

"Yes, just one clap; but that might have been the wheels of the chariot.

What do you think she'll bring you?"

Archie was holding his mother's hand, and slipping her rings up and down her fingers. As he held it, he suddenly became aware what one of these presents would be.

"A clock-work train," he said quickly.

He knew more than that about the clock-work train. He felt perfectly certain that it was in his mother's bedroom at this moment, reposing in the big cupboard where she kept her dresses.

"Do you want a clock-work train?" she asked.

"Yes, mummy, frightfully," said he, feeling that he was playing a part, for he knew his mother knew that he wanted a clock-work train.

"What else?"

"Oh, thousands of things. Particularly a pen that writes without your dipping it in the ink."

"Well, if I were you I should write down all the things you want, and leave the paper lying on your counterpane when you go to sleep."

"What'll that do?" asked Archie.

"It's the fairy-post. Instead of putting letters into boxes to be posted when you want them to reach the fairies, you have always to put them on your bed. Mind you address it to Her Fairy Majesty the Empress Abracadabra. Then, when the fairies come round to collect the post, they will find it there, and take it to Abracadabra. And perhaps if she comes to-morrow – let me see, it must be a year since she was here – she will bring a few things for your birthday. I can't tell; but I think that is the best chance of getting them."

Certainly this seemed a very pleasant sort of plan; Archie had never heard of it before, and the extremely matter-of-fact tone in which his mother spoke lit again a dawning hope in his mind that perhaps it was all true. Why shouldn't be a fairy Abracadabra, and a fairy-post, just as there had been, and now was no longer, a glassy sea between the rugs in the hall, and snarling tigers to keep off his enemies? If you believed a thing enough, it became real, with a few trifling exceptions – as, for instance, when, on one of the days last summer, a day crammed full of the most delightful events, Archie had found himself firmly believing that that particular day was never coming to an end. True, it had come to an end, but that perhaps was because he hadn't believed strongly enough… There was a lovely story which his mother had read him about a man called Joshua, who wanted a day to remain until he had killed all his enemies, and sure enough the sun stood still until he had accomplished that emphatic task. He never doubted that, because it came out of the Bible, and in the spirit of Joshua he set himself now to believe in Abracadabra and the fairy-post. And, with that in his mind, he kept his eyes firmly away from the cupboard where his mother kept her dresses that evening, when her maid opened it, lest he should see there the parcel which he felt secretly convinced was there, and contained the clock-work train which his mother had bought, and which Abracadabra would to-morrow assuredly bring out of the basket of pure gold with which she habitually travelled.

Archie put the letter for the fairy-post on his bed, and determined to keep awake so that he should see the fairy postman come for it. It was a very cold night, and a big fire burned in his grate, so that, though the windows as usual were all open, there was a clear, brisk warmth about the room and a frosty and soapy smell, for his bright brown hair had been washed that night – this was a special evening bath-night, for by now baths had been promoted to the morning – and stuck up all over his

head in a novel and independent manner. Blessington had dried it by the fire for him with hot towels, and a very extraordinary thing had happened, for when she brushed it afterwards it gave forth little cracklings, which she told him was electricity which was the thing that made the lamps burn. She had allowed him to take a brush to bed with him, and make more cracklings for five minutes until she returned to put his light out, and Archie made a wonderful story to himself as he looked at the fire, that he would get an electric lamp and paste it to his head, so that he should be able to read by the light of his hair. All at once this seemed so feasible, so easy of belief that he pictured to himself everybody walking about the house in the evening lit by themselves… And then William came round the corner (he did not know what corner), carrying an electric pike for a birthday present to himself, and when Blessington stole in five minutes afterwards, Archie's brush had slipped from his fingers and his breath came evenly between his parted lips. There was a gap in his front teeth because a tooth had come out only to-day, embedded in a piece of toffy he was eating, which had made Archie squeal with laughter, for here was a new substance called tooth-toffee… And Blessington softly lifted his arm and laid it under the bedclothes without awaking him, and looked at him a moment with her old face beaming with love, and put down on his chair out of sight at the bottom of his bed the new sailor-suit, and took away the note to her Fairy Majesty the Empress Abracadabra.

* * * * *

Archie woke next morning and instantly remembered that he had attained the magnificent age of six. Six had long seemed to him one of the most delightful ages to be. Eighteen was another, mainly because William was eighteen, but six was the best of all, for at eighteen you must inevitably feel that you have lived your life, and that there is nothing much left to live for; for the rest would be but a slow descent into the vale of years. But to-day he was six, and it was his birthday, and… and there was no sign of the letter he had written to Abracadabra on his counterpane. But it might have slipped on to the floor, and not have been taken away by fairies after all. Or it might have slipped over the bottom of the bed; and Archie got up to see. No: there was no note there, but on the chair at the foot of his bed was a suit of sailor-clothes…

Archie gave a gasp: certainly their presence there constituted a possibility that they were for him; but he hardly dared let himself contemplate so dazzling a prospect, for fear it should be whisked out of sight. Yet who could they be for, if not for him? They couldn't be Blessington's, for she was a female, and wore mystery-cloaking skirts. Sailor-suits were boys' clothes: Harry Travers, the son of a neighbouring squire, aged eight, had a sailor-suit – it was the thing that Archie most envied about that young man. Harry had taken the coat and trousers off one day in the summer when the two boys were playing in the copse by the lower end of the lake, and had let Archie put them on for three minutes. That had been a thrilling adventure; it implied undressing out of doors, which was a very unusual thing to do, and he loved the feeling of the rough serge down his bare calves. He had, of course, offered Harry the privilege of putting on his knickerbockers and jacket, if he could get into them without splitting them, but Harry, from that Pisgah-summit of eight years, had no desire to go back to the childish things of the land of bondage, but had danced about bare-legged while Archie enjoyed his three minutes in these voluminous and grown-up lendings. And now perhaps for him, too, not for three minutes only, but for every day… and he took a leap back into bed again as Blessington's tread sounded on the boards outside.

Archie pretended to be asleep, for he wanted to be awakened by Blessington and hear his birthday greetings. He loved the return of consciousness in the morning – when he had not already been awake, and speculating about Grandmamma Tintagel on the lawn – to find Blessington, with her hand on his shoulder, gently stirring him, and her face close to his, whispering to him, "Eh, it's time to get up." So this morning, not for the first time, he simulated sleep in order to recapture that lovely sense of being awakened by love. (You must understand that he did not put it to himself like that,

for Archie, just at the age of six, was not a mature and self-conscious prig, but he wanted to know what Blessington's greeting to him would be, when she thought she woke him up on the morning of his sixth birthday.)

From the narrow chink of his eyelids not quite closed, he could see some of her movements. She took the exciting suit of sailor-clothes from the bottom of his bed, and laid it on the chair where she always put his clothes with a flannel shirt of a quite unusual shape, and his socks on top. Already Archie had heart-burnings at the knowledge of his knowledge of the sailor-suit. Blessington meant it to be a surprise to him, and a surprise he determined it should be. In the interval there was another surprise: how would Blessington wake him? She would be sure to rise to the immense importance of the occasion. She moved quietly about; she shut the windows, and brought in his bath. And then she came close up to his bed. He felt her hand stealing underneath the bedclothes to his shoulder and she shook it gently – "Eh, Master Six," she said.

Oh, she had done exactly the right thing! She had divined Archie, as he had divined himself, knowing himself. That was just the only thing to think about this morning. He ceased to imagine: Blessington, out of her simplicity of love, had given the real birthday greeting.

He rolled a little sideways, and there was her face close to his, and her hand still underneath his bed-clothes. He put up both of his hands and caught it.

"Many happy returns," said Blessington. "Wake up, my darling: it's your birthday. Happy returns," she repeated.

Archie released her hand and flung his arm round her neck.

"Oh, Blessington, isn't it fun?" he said. "What did you do when you were six?"

"I got up directly," said Blessington, kissing him, "and had my bath and put my clothes on. Now, will you do the same, for I'm going downstairs for ten minutes, and then I shall be back."

"All right," said Archie.

She went out, and Archie again, as with the question of Abracadabra last night, felt he must make it a surprise that there were sailor-clothes on his chair. It was quite likely that he would not be supposed to notice them at once, and so he stripped off his night-shirt, and took his bath in the prescribed manner. He had to lie down on the floor first of all, and wave his legs about; then he had to stand upright, still with no clothes on, and put his hands each side of his waist, and wave his body about eight times in each direction. Then he was allowed to pour out the hot water into his bath, in order to encourage himself, but before he stepped into that delicious steamy warmth he had to bend down eight times with a long frosty expulsion of breath, and stand up eight times with a great draught of cold air in his lungs. All this had been explained to him by a stranger – not Mr. Johnson – who, a year ago, had come into his nursery and had been very much interested in his anatomy. Archie understood that this was a doctor, though he didn't give him any medicine, but had merely showed him how to do these things, after first putting a sort of plug on Archie's chest which communicated with two other plugs that the stranger put in his ears. Then Archie had to say "ninety-nine" several times, which seemed to be a sort of game, though it didn't lead any further (the doctor, for instance, didn't say "a hundred"), and then he had to promise to practise those contortions every morning.

All this was done, and Archie fled from the cold of the morning to his bath. The water was of that divinest temperature so that when he stopped still it was lovely, but when he moved he almost screamed with the rapturous heat of it. It cooled a little as he sat in it, and, still remembering that he was six, he poured a sponge-full down his spine. That over, he might wash his face and his neck, and well behind his ears with soap. Up till a few months ago Blessington had always superintended the bath, and done these things for him; but now he did them for himself as agent, with Blessington as inspector-general in the background, who might always make the strictest scrutiny into the place behind the ears and the toe-nails to see that the effects of the bath were perfectly satisfactory. If not, Blessington superintended again for the next three mornings; so Archie was very careful, since it was so much grander to wash oneself than to be washed by anybody else.

Then came the most exciting part of the bath, for close at the side of it was a big tin full of the coldest possible water. He had then to stand up in his bath, and, after washing his face in the cold water, to put cold water everywhere within reach of him on one arm and then the other, on a chest, on a stomach, on one leg and on another right down to the foot, and finally (a vocal piece) to squeeze a full sponge down his back. Archie squealed at this, and flew for a towel.

He flung himself into his new clothes and was already half-dressed when

Blessington returned.

"Oh, Blessington," he said, "look at me, and they're just as easy to manage as the old ones, and may I go to see Harry after breakfast and show him?"

"Master Harry will be here for tea," said Blessington.

"Yes, but I want him to know sooner than that. Did they come just ordinarily, like other clothes? Or are they a birthday present?"

"Well, I should say they were a birthday present," said Blessington.

"Who from?" demanded Archie.

And then suddenly he guessed.

"Oh, Blessington," he said. "I like them better than anything!" he said.

"Well, dear, and I wish you health to wear them and strength to tear them," she said. "Eh, but how you're disarranging my cap!"

Archie promptly handselled his clothes by spilling egg on the coat, and bread-and-butter upside down on the trousers, and, when the time came for him to make his public entry into the world, was seized with a sudden fit of shyness at the thought of anybody seeing him. The housemaid would stare, and William would laugh, and Marjorie would pretend not to know him, and for the moment of leaving the day-nursery (which from this morning was to be known as Archie's sitting-room) he would almost have wished himself back in his knickerbockers. But the remembered rough touch of the serge on his legs provided encouragement, and soon the new glories burst upon a sympathetic and not a mocking world. They were at breakfast downstairs, and Archie, though he had already had his, was bidden by his father to have a cup of coffee, which he poured out himself at the side-table, and to drink it slowly, and at the bottom of it, among the melted sugar, there came to his astonished eyes the gleam of silver, and there was a new half-crown with his father's happy returns. Thereafter came a hurried visit to Harry, a motor drive with his mother and Jeannie, Archie sitting on the box-seat and permitted to blow the bugle practically as often as he wanted, and the return to dinner, to find that the two things he liked best, namely boiled rabbit and spotted dog pudding, formed that memorable repast.

Up till now he had received only two birthday presents, the clothes and the half-crown, and he could not help feeling that a visit from Abracadabra was more than likely, since no one else had made the slightest allusion to clock-work trains or pens that wrote without being dipped. But in the afternoon, as he returned home from his walk with Blessington and Jeannie in the early dusk, he received an impression which was to be more inextricably connected with his sixth birthday than even the sailor suit. They were within a few yards of the front-door when there ran out of the bushes Cyrus, the great blue Persian cat. He held something in his mouth, which Archie saw to be a bird. There he stood for a moment with the gleaming eyes of the successful hunter, and twitching tail, and then trotted in front of them towards the porch. Simultaneously Jeannie called out:

"Oh, Blessington, Cyrus has caught a thrush. We must get it from him; it may be still alive."

Till then Archie had only thought about the cleverness of Cyrus in catching a bird, which was clearly a very remarkable feat, since Cyrus could only run and climb, and a bird could fly. But, as Jeannie spoke, he suddenly thought of himself in the jaws of a tiger, of the clutch of the long white teeth, of the fear, and the helplessness; and a queer tremor made him catch his breath, as there smote upon him an emotion that had never yet been awakened by the passage of his sunny days. Pity took

hold of him for the bright-eyed bird. It suffered; his imagination told him that, and never yet had the fact of suffering come home to him.

They hemmed Cyrus in, and Blessington took the thrush out of his mouth, while Cyrus growled and struck at her with his paws, and then, greatly incensed, bounded out into the garden again, so as not to lose the chance, at this cat-hour of dusk, of a further stalk and capture. They carried the bird into the hall, where they looked at it, but it lay quite still in Blessington's hand, with its helpless little claws relaxed, and with its eyes fast glazing in death. Its beak was open, and on its speckled breast were two oozing drops of blood, that stained the feathers.

"Eh, poor thing, it's dead," said Blessington.

Archie felt all the desolation of an unavailing pity.

"No, it can't be dead, Blessington," he said. "It'll get all right, won't it?" and his lip quivered.

"No, dear, it's quite dead," said Blessington; "but if you like we'll bury it. There'll be just time before tea. Shall I run upstairs and get a box to bury it in?"

Without doubt this was a consoling and attractive proposal, and while Blessington went to get a suitable coffin, Archie held the "small slain body" in reverent hands. It was warm and soft and still; by now the bright eyes had grown quite dull, and the blood on the speckled breast was beginning to coagulate, and once again, even with the novel prospect of a bird-funeral in front of him, Archie's heart melted in pity.

"Why did Cyrus kill it, Jeannie?" he said. "The thrush hadn't done any harm."

"Cats do kill birds," said Jeannie. "Same as birds kill worms, or you and William kill worms when you go out fishing."

"Yes, but worms aren't birds," said Archie. "Worms aren't nice; they don't fly and sing. It's an awful shame."

Blessington returned with a suitable cardboard box which had held chocolates, and into this fragrant coffin the little limp body was inserted. This certainly distracted Archie from his new-found emotion.

"Oh, that will be nice for it," he said. "It will smell the chocolate."

"It can't; it's dead," said hopeless Jeannie.

But Blessington understood better.

"Yes, dear, the chocolate will be nice for it," she said, "and then we'll cover it up with leaves and put the lid on."

"Oh, and may it have a cris – a crisantepum?" said Archie. "May I pick one?"

"Yes, just one."

Archie laid this above the bird's head, and the lid was put on.

"Oh, and let's have a procession to the tool-shed to get a trowel," said

Jeannie.

"Yes!" squealed Archie, now thoroughly immersed in the fascinating ritual. "And I'll carry the coffin and go first, and you and Blessington shall walk behind and sing."

"Well, we must be quick," said Blessington.

"No, not quick," said Jeannie. "It's a funeral. What shall we sing?"

"Oh, anything. 'The Walrus and the Carpenter.' That's sad, because the oysters were dead."

So, to the moving strains, the procession headed across the lawn, and found a trowel in the tool-shed, and excavated a grave underneath the laurestinus. The coffin was once more opened to see that the thrush was quite comfortable, and then deposited in its sepulchre, and the earth filled in above it. But Archie felt that the ceremony was still incomplete.

"Ought we to say a prayer, Jeannie?" he said.

"No, it's only a thrush."

Archie considered a moment.

"I don't care," he said. "I shall all the same."

He took off his sailor cap and knelt down, closing his eyes.

"God bless the poor thrush," he said. "Good-night, thrush. I can't think of anything more. Amen. Say Amen, Jeannie."

"Amen," said Jeannie.

"And do get up from that damp earth, dear," said Blessington. "And let's see who can run the fastest back to the house."

Blessington ran the least fast, and Archie tripped over a croquet-hoop, and so Jeannie won, and very nearly began telling her mother about it all before Archie arrived. But, though breathless, he shrilly chipped in.

"And then I picked a crisantepum, and we had a procession across the lawn, and made a lovely grave by the tool-house, and I said prayers, though Jeannie told me you didn't have prayers for thrushes. Mummy, when I grow up, may I be a clergyman?"

"Why, dear?"

"Don't they have lots of funerals?"

"Pooh; that's the undertaker," said Jeannie. "Besides, I did say Amen,

Archie."

"I know. But mummy, why did Cyrus kill the thrush? Why did he want to hurt it and kill it? That was the part I didn't like, and I expect the thrush hated it. Wasn't it cruel of him? But if he kills another, may we have another funeral?"

He stood still a moment, cudgelling his small brain in order to grasp exactly what he felt.

"The poor thrush!" he said. "I wish Cyrus hadn't killed it. But, if it's got to be dead, I like funerals."

* * * * *

Tea, on such solemn occasions as birthday feasts, took place for Archie, not in the nursery, but in the drawing-room, as better providing the proper pomp. He appreciated that, and secretly was pleased that Harry Travers should be ushered by William into the drawing-room, and have the door held open for him, and be announced as Mr. Travers. With that streak of snobbishness common to almost all small boys Archie thought it rather jolly, without swaggering at all, to be able to greet his friend in the midst of these glories, so that he could see their splendour for himself. In other ways, he would have perhaps preferred the nursery, and certainly would have done so when the moment came for him to cut his birthday-cake, for the sugar on the side of it cracked and exploded, as such confectionery will do, when Archie hewed his way down that white perpendicular cliff, and (a number of fragments falling on the floor), he had to stand quite still, knife in hand, till William got a housemaid's brush and scoop and removed the debris, for fear it should be trodden into the carpet.

Marjorie had not appeared at tea at all, and when this sumptuous affair was over, Jeannie and Harry and Archie gathered round Lady Davidstow on the hearthrug with a box of chocolates planted at a fair and equal distance between them, and she told them the most delicious story about a boy whose mother had lost his birthdays, so that year after year went by without his having a birthday at all. The lights had been put out, and only the magic of leaping fire-light guided their hands to the chocolate-box, and every moment the phantasy of the story got more and more interwoven with the reality of the chocolates. Eventually, while the birthday-less boy's mother was clearing out the big cupboard underneath the stairs, she came across all his birthdays put away in a purple box with a gold lock on it.

"Was it the cupboard underneath the stairs in the hall here?" asked

Archie, for questions were permitted.

"Yes. There they all were: eight birthdays in all, so he had one every day for more than a week. My dears! What's that?"

It certainly was very startling. A noise like a mixture between the Chinese gong and the bell for the servants' dinner broke in upon the quiet, with the most appalling clamour. Archie swallowed a chocolate whole, and Harry, with great prudence, took two more in a damp hand to sustain him in these rather alarming occurrences.

"It sounds as if it was in the hall," said Lady Davidstow. "Harry, will you open the door and see what it is?"

"Yes, I'll go," he said firmly. "But – but shan't Archie come too?"

The noise ceased as suddenly as it had begun, and with a pleasing sense of terror the two boys went to the drawing-room door and opened it.

"But it's quite dark," said Archie. "Oh, mummy, what *is* happening?"

"I can't think. I only know one person who makes a noise the least like that."

"Oh, is it Abracadabra?" asked Archie excitedly, finding that his scepticism of the day before had vanished like smoke. It had occurred to him that Abracadabra was his mother, but here was his mother telling them stories.

"Well, the only time I ever heard her sneeze it was just like that," said Lady Davidstow.

Archie came running back, shrieking with laughter.

"And what does she do when she blows her nose?" he asked.

The words were hardly out of his mouth when a piercing trumpet-blast sounded, and his mother got up.

"She did it then," she whispered. "What had we better do? Shall we go into the hall? She would like us to be there to meet her, perhaps, if she's coming."

She went to the door, followed by the children, and they all looked out into the black hall. The wood-fire in the hearth there had died down to a mere smoulder of red, which sent its illumination hardly farther than the stone fender-curb.

"But there's something there," said Lady Davidstow in an awe-struck whisper. "There's something sitting in the chair."

"Oh, mummy," said Archie, coming close to her. "I don't think I like it."

"I'm sure there's nothing to be frightened at, Archie," said she. "Which of us shall go and see what it is?"

There was no volunteer for this hazardous job, for now, with eyes more accustomed to the faint light, they could all see that it was not Something there, but Somebody. The outlines of a head, of a body, of legs all clothed in black, could be seen, and Somebody sat there perfectly still…

Then all of a sudden the gong and the bell and the trumpet broke out into a clamour fit to wake the dead, the great chandelier in the hall flared into light, and the black figure sprang up, throwing its darkness behind it, and there, glittering with silks and gems and gold and the flowers of fairyland, stood Abracadabra. She had on a huge poke-bonnet which cast a shadow over her face, and left it terrifyingly vague. Her bonnet was trimmed with sunflowers and lilies of the valley, and round the edge of it went a row of diamonds which were quite as big as the drops in a glass chandelier. Another necklace of the same brilliance went round her throat and rested on a crimson satin bodice covered with gold. From her shoulders sprang spangled wings, and from below her skirt, with its garlands of roses, were silver shoes with diamond buckles. In her hand she carried a blue wand hung with bells, and by her side was a clothes-basket (such was its shape) made of gold.

She stamped her foot with rage.

"Here's a nice welcome, Lady Davidstow," she said in a thin, cracked voice. "I sneezed to show I was coming, and, when I got through the keyhole, I found the hall dark, and no one to receive me. How dare you?"

Lady Davidstow advanced with faltering steps and fell on her knees.

"Oh, your majesty, forgive me," she said.

"Why should I forgive you?" squeaked the infuriated fairy. "Why shouldn't I take you away in my basket and put you in the Tower of Toads?"

Archie gasped. He would have given much for a touch of yesterday's scepticism, but he couldn't find an atom of it. The thought of his mother being whisked off to the Tower of Toads was insupportable.

"Oh, please don't," he said.

"And who is that?" asked Abracadabra.

Archie almost wished he hadn't spoken, and took hold of Jeannie on one side and Harry on the other.

"It's me; it's Archie," he said.

"And you don't want me to take your ridiculous mother away?" she asked.

"No, please don't," said Archie.

"Very well, as it's your birthday, I won't. Instead I'll make her extra lady-in-waiting on my peacock-staircase, and mistress of my tortoise-shell robes."

"Oh, mummy, that will be lovely for you," said Archie, remembering that his mother was something of the kind to somebody already.

Then there came the giving of presents, with the surprises that occurred during such processes. Archie was told to advance and put his hand in the left far corner of the golden basket, and, as he prepared to do so, Abracadabra sneezed so loudly that he fled back to the bottom stair of the staircase where they had been all commanded to sit. There was a tennis racquet for Harry, but the lights all went out when he had just reached the clothes-basket, and Abracadabra blew her nose so preposterously that his ear sang with it afterwards. There was a great parcel for Lady Davidstow, as big as a football, which was found to contain, when all the paper was stripped off, nothing more than a single acid drop, in order to teach the mistress of the tortoise-shell robes better manners when her mistress came to pay a visit, and Blessington, summoned from the nursery, was presented with a new cap. But the bulk of the gifts, as was proper, was for Archie, a clock-work train, and a pen that needed no dipping, and a fishing-rod, and a second suit of sailor-clothes. And then the light went out again, and Abracadabra began sneezing and blowing her nose with such deafening violence that the screen which stood just behind her rocked with the concussion, and the children, at the suggestion of the mistress of the tortoise-shell robes, groped their way back into the drawing-room with their presents, and shut the door till Abracadabra was better. And when, from the cessation of these awful noises, they conjectured she might be better, and ventured out into the hall again, that audience-chamber was just as usual, and Archie's father came out of his room, looking vexed, and asking what that beastly noise was about. But when he heard it was Abracadabra, who had gone away again, he was greatly upset and said that it wasn't a beastly noise at all, but the loveliest music he had ever heard.

Then came bed-time, and Archie, still excited, said his prayers with a special impromptu clause for Abracadabra, and another for the thrush, which he suddenly remembered again, and then lay staring at the fire with his hands clasped round his knees, as his custom was. Certainly Abracadabra had been wonderfully real to-day, and certainly she was not his mother. Then he recollected that Marjorie had not appeared at all, and wondered if Marjorie perhaps was Abracadabra, or if the thrush was Abracadabra, of Cyrus… And his hands relaxed their hold on his knees, and when Blessington came in he did not know that she kissed him and tucked the bed-clothes up under his chin.

# CHAPTER III

Archie did not often come into contact with Miss Schwarz, his sisters' governess; she was not a person to be lightly encountered. Sometimes, if Blessington was busy, he and Jeannie went out for their walk with his eldest sister and Miss Schwarz, and on these occasions Miss Schwarz and Marjorie would talk together in an unknown guttural tongue, very ugly to hear, which Archie vaguely understood was German, and the sort of thing that everybody spoke in the country to which Miss Schwarz went for her holiday at Midsummer and Christmas. That uncouth jargon, full of such noises as you made when you cleared your throat, was quite unintelligible, and it seemed odd that Marjorie should converse in it when she could speak ordinary English; but it somehow seemed to suit Miss Schwarz, who had a sallow face, prominent teeth, and cold grey eyes. Otherwise he did not often meet her, for she led an odd secret existence in his sisters' school-room, breakfasting and having lunch downstairs in the dining-room, but eating her evening meal all by herself in the school-room. She had a black, unrustling dress for the day, and a black rustling dress for the evening, and a necklace of onyx beads which she used to finger with her dry thin hands, which reminded Archie of the claws of a bird. His mother had told him that, after Christmas, he would do his lessons with Miss Schwarz, and this prospect rather terrified him. He supposed that Miss Schwarz would probably teach him in the guttural language that Jeannie was beginning to understand too, and he had moments of secret terror when he pictured Miss Schwarz, enraged at his not comprehending her, striking at him with those claw-like hands.

He was coming upstairs one evening, rather later than usual, for his father had been showing him the contents of a cabinet of butterflies, and Archie, enraptured with the gorgeous, brilliant creatures, had begged to be allowed to wait till the gong rang for dinner. On his way upstairs he remembered that he had lent Jeannie the pen that wrote without being dipped, with which to write her German exercise. She had gone to bed early that night with a bad cold, and Archie, recognizing the impossibility of going to sleep without the precious pen in his possession again, ran along the passage to the school-room, where he was likely to find it. This might entail a momentary encounter with Miss Schwarz, but the recovery of the pen was essential, and he entered.

Miss Schwarz had finished her dinner, and was sitting by the fire on which steamed a kettle. She held a big glass in her hand, and was pouring something into it from a bottle. There was a high colour in her usually sallow face, and as she saw Archie she made one of those guttural exclamations.

"What do you want?" she said, and though she spoke English, Archie noticed that she spoke it in the same thick, guttural manner as German.

Archie froze with terror. This was quite a new Miss Schwarz, a gleaming, eager Miss Schwarz.

"Oh, I lent Jeannie my pen," he stammered. "I came to look for it, but it doesn't matter."

"Nonsense! That is not why!" said Miss Schwarz angrily. Then she suddenly seemed to take hold of herself. "*Ach*, that sweet little pen. You will find it on the table, my dear. Luke, and find it. And then say good-night to poor Miss Schwarz. *Ach*, I am so ill this evening. Such a heartburn, and I was just about to take the medicine vat makes it better. Do not tell any one, dear Archie, that poor Miss Schwarz is ill. I wish to troble nobody. Poor Miss Schwarz naiver geeve troble if she can 'elp. *Ach*, you have your pen! Good-night, my deear."

Archie fled down the passage to the nursery with terror giving wings to his heels. This Miss Schwarz angry one moment, and affectionate and effusive the next, was a new and a more awful person than the one he was acquainted with, and he felt sure she must be very ill indeed. It would be a terrible affair if Miss Schwarz was found dead in her bed, in spite of her medicine, just because he had not told anybody that she was ill, and so a doctor had not been fetched. There would be a burden on his conscience for ever if he did not tell somebody. He burst into the nursery with a wild look behind him, to make sure that Miss Schwarz was not following him in her evening rustling dress.

"Oh Blessington," he cried, "Miss Schwarz is ill; do go and see what is the matter. I went to the school-room for my pen, and she was sitting by the fire, all red, and angry, and then polite, mixing her medicine."

Blessington got up from her rocking-chair.

"Eh, I'll go and see," she said.

"Don't tell her I told you," said Archie.

"Nay, of course I won't. Now you begin your undressing, and I'll be back very soon."

Excited and frightened and yet hugely interested, Archie stood at the door of his room listening. Suddenly he heard the sound of Miss Schwarz's voice raised almost to a scream. Then there came the crash of a glass, and the ringing of a bell, while still Miss Schwarz's voice gabbled on, shrill and guttural. Trembling, and yet unable to resist the call of his curiosity, he stole to the corner of the nursery passage, and saw William come upstairs and go along to the school-room. Then Blessington came out, and, instead of coming back to the nursery, she went downstairs, and presently his father came up again with her. He, too, went along the school-room passage, and suddenly, as if a tap had been turned off, the shrill voice ceased. Once, for a moment, it broke out again, and as suddenly stopped, and then came the very odd sight of Miss Schwarz being led along the landing to her room by his father and Blessington. Blessington and Miss Schwarz entered together, his father went downstairs after a moment's conversation with William, and presently William came along the landing towards the nursery.

"Oh, William, what's happened?" said Archie. "Is Miss Schwarz very ill?"

"Well, she ain't very well," said William. "Lumme!"

"What does that mean?" asked Archie.

"It don't mean anything particular, Master Archie."

"Will Miss Schwarz be better in the morning?" asked Archie.

"Lord, yes. They're always better in the morning, though they don't feel so. Now Blessington won't be back yet awhile, so I'm to look after you, and see you safe to bed."

Suddenly the thought of lying helpless in bed, with no Blessington next door, and the possibility of Miss Schwarz guessing that Archie had told of her illness, filled him with awful apprehension. She might come screaming down the passage, with her claw-like hands starving for Archie's face.

"Oh, William, don't leave me till Blessington comes back," he entreated.

"No, sir, of course I won't. There, let me undo your shoes for you.

You've got the laces in a knot."

"And she won't hurt Blessington either?" asked Archie.

"Bless you, no sir," said William. "And there's your night-shirt. Now jump into bed, and I'll open the windows."

William put out the light, and Archie, with a delicious sense of security seeing him seated by the fire, dozed off. Once, just before he got fairly to sleep, an awful vision of Miss Schwarz's red face came across the field of his closed eyelids, and he started up. But in a moment William was by him.

"It's all right, sir," he said. "I'm on the look out."

* * * * *

There was a decided air of mystery concerning Miss Schwarz next morning. She was better, but she remained unseen, and nobody would answer any questions about her. But in the afternoon Archie met Walter and the odd man carrying her luggage downstairs, and he gleaned the information that she was going away, and again, later in the day, Archie saw a housemaid coming out of her bedroom with a basket full of her medicine-bottles, and he drew the conclusion that she must have been ill a long time without anybody knowing. Not a syllable of news could he obtain from anybody, and, as the image of Miss Schwarz faded now that her dark, ill-omened presence was withdrawn, there was

left in Archie's mind no more than a general sense of some connection between screaming voices, red faces, indistinct utterance, and the drinking of yellow medicine out of a large glass, instead of the usual small one.

There was a pleasant holiday sense for a few days after the departure of Miss Schwarz, for Marjorie took Jeannie's and Archie's lessons, which made a perfect festival of learning; but immediately almost came the ominous news that a new governess was coming next day. Archie believed that Miss Schwarz was a typical specimen of the genus governess, who were all probably in league together, and that some colleague of Miss Schwarz's, bent on avenging her, would render his own security a very precarious matter. It was, indeed, some consolation to know that Miss Bampton was a personal friend of his mother's and was not a "regular" governess at all but was just going to stay at Lacebury and teach lessons; yet Archie wondered, when he went downstairs on the morning after her arrival, whether he would not detect, under the guise of his mother's friend, some secret agent of Miss Schwarz.

Jeannie had lately been promoted to have breakfast with the rest of the family, and as Archie opened the door he heard a burst of laughter. There was Miss Schwarz's secret agent sitting next his father, and she it must have been who had made them all laugh, for she was not laughing herself, and Archie already knew that a joke was laughed at most by the people who hadn't made it. She was a little roundabout person, with blue eyes and a short nose and pincenez, and she got up as he entered.

"And is this Archie?" she said. "Why, I always thought of Archie as a baby. And here's an able-bodied seaman! How are you, Archie?"

Archie stared a moment. He reviewed his suspicion about governesses in general, but certainly if this plump, genial female was a secret colleague of Miss Schwarz her disguise was of the most ingenious kind. But it was as well to be careful.

"I'm quite well, thank you," he said, and, perceiving that a kiss had been intended, presented a sideways cheek. Miss Bampton made a sucking sound against it, and sat down again.

"Well, as I was saying," she went on, "the only plan of teaching is the co-operative principle. There are such heaps of jolly things to learn, that if the girls and I have a meeting, as I suggested, after breakfast, I'm sure we can find plenty of subjects between us. So I summon the meeting for a quarter past ten in the school-room."

Archie suddenly felt he was being left out. A meeting to discuss what you were going to learn sounded most promising in the way of lessons. He ran round to his mother's side.

"Oh, mummy, may I go to the meeting?" he said.

"You must ask Miss Bampton," said she.

Archie stifled his sense of distrust, for he wanted tremendously to go to a meeting where you settled what you were going to learn. He hated lessons, in the ordinary acceptation of that term, with their tiresome copy-books, in which he had to write the same moral maxim all down the page, and the stupid exercise – called French lesson – in which he had to address himself to a cat, and say in French "of a cat," "to a cat," "with the female cat," "with the male cat," and a thing called geography, which was a brown book with lists of countries and capital towns in it. But co-operative lessons, though he had no idea what co-operation meant, sounded far more attractive.

"May I come to the meeting, Miss Bampton?" he said.

"Yes, my dear, of course," said Miss Bampton, "if your mother will let you."

Thereupon there dawned for Archie a great light. Hitherto his lessons had been conducted by his mother, with occasional tuition from his father, and they had always made the impression that they were tasks, not difficult in themselves, but dull. He had learned the various modes of access in French to male and female cats, he had grasped the fact that Rome and not Berlin was the capital of Italy, and Paris not Vienna the capital of France. But these pieces of information were mere disconnected formulae, lessons, in other words, which had to be learned, and which, if imperfectly learned, caused him to be called lazy or inattentive. In the same way, the fact that he had to write in a laborious round

hand all down the page "To be good is to be happy" meant nothing more than the necessity of filling the page without a plethora of blots or erasures. But from the date of this exciting meeting on co-operative learning, a whole new horizon dawned on him. It was settled at once that he was to do his lessons with Miss Bampton, and from that moment they ceased to be lessons at all. Instead of the lists of countries and capitals to be learned by heart, there was provided a jig-saw puzzle of the map of Europe, and Italy became a leg and foot, perpetually kicking Sicily, and Rome the button through which Italy's bootlace passed. And, instead of the dreary copy-book maxims heading each page, Miss Bampton, in a hand quite as perfect as Mr. Darnell's, wrote the most stimulating sentiments on the top of each blank leaf. "He would not sit down, so we bit him" was one, and Archie, with the tip of his tongue at the corner of his mouth, an attitude which is almost indispensable to round-hand orthography, was filled with delightful conjectures as to who the person was who would not sit down, and who were those tigerish people who bit him in consequence. And then Miss Bampton had the most delightful plans of where lessons might be done. One day, when it was snowing hard, she conceived the brilliant plan of doing lessons in the motor in the garage, which gave the most extraordinary stimulus to the proceedings, for early English history was the lesson that morning, and so she and Archie and Jeannie were royal Anglo-Saxons, specially invited to come in their coach to the coronation of William the Conqueror (1066), and it would never do if, at the Coronation banquet afterwards, he asked them questions about their ancestors and they didn't know. Another day, when the sun shone frostily, and the lawn was covered with hoar-frost they wrapped themselves up in furs, and worked at geography, as Laplanders, in the summer-house. Marjorie was too old to need such spurs to industry, but Miss Bampton had enticing schemes for her also, giving her verse translations of Heine and Goethe, and encouraging her to see how near she got to the original when she translated them back into their native tongue.

The Christmas holidays, looked forward to with such eager expectation in the baleful reign of Miss Schwarz, drew near; but now, instead of counting the hours till the moment when Miss Schwarz, safe in the motor, would blow claw-fingered kisses to them, the children got up a Round Robin (or rather, a triangular Robin, which Marjorie translated into German), begging Miss Bampton to stop with them for the holidays. For she was as admirable in play-time as she was over their lessons: she told them enchanting stories on their walks, and painted for them in real smelly oil-paints the most lovely snow-scenes, pine-woods laden with whiteness, and cottages with red blinds lit from within. Never had any one such a repertory of games to be played in the long dark hours between tea and bed-time, and it was during one of these that Archie made a curious discovery.

The game in question was "Animal, Vegetable, or Mineral?" One of them thought of anything in heaven or earth or in the waters under the earth, and the rest, by questions answered only by "Yes" or "No," had to arrive at it. On this occasion Miss Bampton had thought: it was known to be Animal and not in the house.

Archie was sitting on the floor in the school-room leaning against Miss Bampton's knee. He had been staring at the coals, holding Miss Bampton's hand in his, when suddenly there came over him precisely the same sensation that he remembered feeling one night, years ago, when he woke and imagined himself and the night-nursery expanding and extending till they embraced all that existed. That sensation throbbed and thrilled through him now, and he said:

"Oh, Miss Bampton, how easy! Why, it's the longest tail-feather of the thrush that Cyrus killed."

"Oh, Archie, don't guess," said Jeannie. "It's no use just guessing."

"But it is!" said Archie. "I'm not guessing. I know. Isn't it, Miss

Bampton?"

It certainly was, and so, by the rules of the game, since it had been guessed in under five minutes, Miss Bampton had to think again. But now Archie tried in vain to recapture the mood that made Miss Bampton's mind so transparently clear to him. He knew what that mood felt like, that falling

away of the limitations of consciousness, that expansion and extension of himself; but he could not feel it; it would not come by effort on his part; it came, he must suppose, as it chose, like a sneeze…

As Christmas drew near another amazing talent of Miss Bampton's showed itself. Marjorie had been up to London one day, to combine the pains of the dentist with the pleasure of a play, and came back with a comforted tooth and the strong desire to act. Instantly Miss Bampton rose to the occasion.

"Let's get up a play to act to your father and mother on New Year's night," she said.

"Oh, it would be fun," said Marjorie. "But what play could we act?"

"I'll write you one," said Miss Bampton. And write it she did, with a speed and a lavishness of plot that would have astonished more deliberate dramatists. There was a villain, a usurper king (Miss Bampton); there was a fairy (Marjorie); there was the rightful and youthful king (Archie); who lived (Act I) in painful squalor in a dungeon, attended only by the jailer's daughter (Jeannie) who knew his identity and loved him, whether he was in a dungeon or on a throne. Luckily, he loved her too, anywhere, and they were kind to a beggar-woman, who turned out to be the fairy, and did the rest. Miss Bampton was consigned to the lowest dungeon, and everybody else lived happily ever afterwards.

Then came the question of dresses, and Marjorie rather thoughtlessly exclaimed:

"I'm sure mother will let me have her Abracadabra clothes for the fairy.

Oh – I forgot," she added, remembering that Archie was present.

There was an attempt (feeble, so Archie thought it) on the part of Miss Bampton to explain this away. She said that Abracadabra kept a suit of birthday clothes in every house she visited. Archie received the information quite politely, said, "Oh, I see," and remained wholly incredulous. His faith in the Abracadabra myth had tottered before; this was the blow that finally and completely compassed its ruin, and it disappeared in the limbo of discredited imaginings, like the glassy sea between the rugs in the hall, and the snarl of the tigers at his enemies. Never again would the combined crash of the servant's dinner-bell and the Chinese gong make him wonder at the magnificence of Abracadabra's sneezings, and when the play arrived at the stage of dress-rehearsal it was no shock to see Marjorie in Abracadabra's poke-bonnet and bediamonded bodice.

But it must not be supposed that, with the disappearance of those childish illusions, the world became in any way duller or less highly coloured to Archie; it grew, on the contrary, more and more fairy-like. The outburst of spring that year filled him with an ecstasy that could best be expressed by running fast and jumping in the air with shouts of joy. The unfolding of gummy buds on the horse-chestnut by the lake filled him with a rapture all the keener because he could not comprehend it; presently, the sight of pale green five-fingered leaves, weak as new-dropped lambs, made him race round and round Blessington till she got giddy. There was a smell of damp earth in the air, of young varnished grass-blades pushing up among the discoloured and faded foliage of the lawn, and, for the hard bright skies or the sullen clouds of winter, a new and tender blue was poured over the heavens, and clouds white as washed fleeces pursued one another aloft, even as their shadows bowled over the earth beneath. Birds began to sing again, and sparrows, chattering in the ivy, pulled straws and twigs about, practising for the nest-building time which would soon be upon them. A purplish mist hung over the birch-trees, and soon it changed to a mist of green as the buds expanded. Violets hidden behind their leaves bedecked the lane-sides, and one morning the first primrose appeared. Last year, no doubt, and in all preceding springs the same things had happened; but now for the first time they were significant, and penetrated further than the mere field of vision. They filled Archie with an unreasoning joy.

Anything in the shape of natural history received strong encouragement from Lord Davidstow, as well as anything (Archie did not fully grasp this) that tended to keep him out of doors when his short lessons were done, and he and Jeannie started this year a series of joint collections. Certain rules had to be observed: flowers that they picked must be duly pressed and mounted on sheets of cartridge paper, and their names must be ascertained. One bird's egg might be taken in the absence of the mother-bird from any nest which contained four, and must be blown and put in its labelled cell in

the egg-cabinet; but when three specimens of any sort had been collected, no more must be acquired. That, perhaps, was the collection Archie liked best, though the joys of the aquarium ran it close. The aquarium was a big bread-bowl lined at the bottom with spa and crystals, and in it lived caddis-worms and water-snails and a dace – probably weak in the head, for he had allowed himself to be caught in the landing-net without the least effort to get out of the way. He had an inordinate passion for small bread-pills, in pursuit of which he was so violently active that he often hit his nose against the side of the aquarium so hard that you could positively hear the stunning blow. When satiated he would still continue to rush after bread-pills, but, after holding them in his mouth a moment, he would expel them again with such force that he resembled some submarine discharging torpedoes.

Then there was the butterfly and moth collection, which was of short duration, and was abandoned on account of a terrible happening. The insects were emptied into the killing-bottle, and when dead transfixed with a pin, and set. But one morning Archie, examining the setting-board to see if they were stiff and ready to be transferred into the cork-lined boxes, found, to his horror, that, so far from being stiff, two butterflies, a tortoiseshell and a brimstone, were alive still, with waving antennae and twitching bodies. That dreadful incident poisoned the joy of that collection; he felt himself guiltier of a worse outrage than Cyrus, and all Blessington's well-meant consolations that insects hardly felt anything at all would not induce him to run the risk of committing further atrocities. For a day and a night the two had writhed under their crucifixion, and that day the caterpillars were released from their breeding-cage (even including that piece of preciousness, the caterpillar of the convolvulus hawk with a horn on his tail), and the killing-bottle was relegated to the attic.

The Sunday church-goings for which an intermission had been ordained in consequence of Archie's infant remarks about the amusingness of the man with the wagging beard, had long ago been resumed again, and this year he had a sudden attack of spurious and sentimental religion that caused his mother some little anxiety. He developed a dreadful conscience, and came to her with a serious face and confessed trivial wrong-doings. (This phase, she comforted herself to think, occurred in the autumn of this year, at a time when there was nothing much to be done in the way of collecting.) One morning Archie came to her with a crime that sorely oppressed him. Nearly two years ago, somebody had sent her a painted Easter egg, an ostrich's egg, adorned with gilt designs of a cross and a crown and some rays, which Archie had been forbidden to touch.

"I touched it," he said. "I wetted my finger and rubbed it on the crown, and some of it came off."

"Well, dear, of course you shouldn't have done it, if I had told you not to," she said. "But don't bother about it any more. What made you come and tell me so long after?"

Archie grew more solemn still.

"I was leaning out of the nursery-window," he said, "and I heard Charles singing 'A few more years shall roll.' So I came and told you before I 'was asleep within the tomb.'"

His mother laughed, quite as if she was amused.

"We'll hope there'll be more than a few years before that, darling," she said.

"And shall I be forgiven now I've told you?" asked Archie.

"Yes, of course. Don't think anything more about it."

Archie would have preferred a more sentimental treatment of his offence, and rather wished his mother bore a stronger resemblance to Mrs. Montgomery, in the *Wide, Wide World*, whose edifying tears fell so fast and frequently, and after this he tended to keep his misdeeds more to himself and repent of them in secret. Simultaneously also the copy of the *Wide, Wide World*, which he had discovered in a passage book-case, mysteriously vanished, and no one appeared to have the slightest idea where it had gone. So, unable to stuff himself further with that brand of mawkishness, the desire that his mother should be more like Mrs. Montgomery faded somewhat, and there seemed but little pleasure in repentance at all, if your confessions were received in so unsentimental a manner, and it was no fun really keeping them to oneself. But for some weeks Sunday morning service in church (he had expressed a wish to go to evening church as well, but his mother had told him that once was as

much as was good for him) became the emotional centre of his life, though his religion was strangely mixed up with a far more mundane attraction. There was a particular choir-boy there with blue eyes, pink cheeks, and a crop of yellow curls who sang solos, and thrilled Archie with a secret and perfectly sexless emotion. Only last Sunday he had sung "Oh, for the wings of a dove," and religion and childish adoration together had brought Archie to the verge of tears. He longed to be good, to live, until a few more years should roll (for he felt that he was going to die young), a noble and beautiful life; he longed also to fly away and be at rest with the choir-boy. He made up pathetic scenes in which he should be lying on his death-bed, with his weeping family round him, and the choir-boy would sing to him as he died, and they would smile at each other. When this vision proved almost too painful for contemplation he would console himself by picturing an alternative scheme, in which there were to be no death-beds at all, but instead he would get into the church choir, and sit next the choir-boy, and they would sing duets together before a rapt congregation. But, adorable though his idol was, he did not really want to know him, or even find out who he was. The idol existed for him in some remote sphere, becoming incarnate just for an hour on Sunday morning, a golden-haired surpliced voice, that suggested the vanished thrills of the *Wide, Wide World*. He pronounced certain words rather oddly, and had a slight lisp which Archie tried to copy, until one day his father told him never to say "Yeth" again, or he should write out "Yes" a hundred times.

Then came the most exciting discovery: this vocal angel proved to be the son of the head-keeper, and it was therefore perfectly easy to make his acquaintance. The notion of meeting him face to face, of exchanging a "good-morning" with him was almost overpowering, and yet Archie instinctively shrank from bringing the idol into contact with actual life. He began to choose for his walk the rather dank and gloomy path that led past the keeper's cottage, and yet, when that abode where the idol lived came within sight, Archie, with beating heart would avert his eyes, for fear he should see him. Then one day, as they got opposite the gate, a small boy in corduroy knickerbockers with a rather greasy scarf round his neck and a snuffling nose came out, and touched his cap. There could be no doubt about his identity, and Archie suffered the first real disillusionment of his life. The fading of Abracadabra was nothing to this: that had been a gradual disillusionment, whereas this was sudden as a lightning-stroke. He was a shattered idol, and from that moment Archie could hardly recall what it had been about, or recapture the faintest sense of the emotion which had filled him before that encounter in the wood which caused it to reel and totter and fall prone from its unsubstantial pedestal. This blow, on the top of the robust reception of his confession, did much to restore Archie to the ways of normal boyhood, and it was really rather a relief to his mother, when his expanding experimenting nature took a very different turn, and he became for a time obstreperously naughty. She thought, quite rightly, that this evinced a greater vigour. That it undoubtedly did, and the imagination contained in some of Archie's exploits rivalled the more visionary power that constructed death-bed scenes for himself and the idealization (cruelly shattered) of the choir-boy.

One very dreary November afternoon, shortly after his seventh birthday, he was sitting alone in his mother's room. All day the sullen heavens had poured their oblique deluge on the earth, and sheets of water were being flung against the windows by the cold south-easterly gale. Archie was suffering from a slight cold, and had not been out of doors for a couple of days, and this unusual detention in the house had caused him to be very cross, and also had dammed up within him a store of energy which could not disperse itself innocuously in violent movement. Jeannie had gone for a motor-drive with his mother, Marjorie and Miss Bampton were closely engaged over their rotten German, and Archie that morning had been stingingly rebuked by his father for sliding down the banisters in the hall, a mode of progress strictly forbidden. Blessington had not been less stinging, for an hour ago Archie had been extremely rude to her, and, with a dignity that he both respected and resented, she had said, "Then I've nothing more to say to you, Master Archie, till you've remembered your manners again." And had thereupon continued her sewing.

Archie knew he had been rude, but his sense of that was not yet strong enough to enable him to apologize, though of sufficient energy to make him feel woebegone and neglected. He had been allowed by his mother to sit in her room that afternoon, when she went out with Jeannie, and to investigate what was known as her "work-box," which contained her "treasures." In earlier days these had been a source of deep delight: there was a minute china elephant with a silk palanquin on his back; there was a porcupine's quill, there was a set of dolls' tea-things, a pink umbrella, the ferrule of which was a pencil, a chain of amber. Once these had held magic for Archie: they were "mummy's treasures," and could only be seen on wet afternoons or in hours of toothache. But to-day they appeared to him perfectly rubbishy; not a gleam of glamour remained; they were as dull as the leaden skies of this interminable afternoon.

Archie lay in the window-seat, and wondered that his sailor-trousers only a year ago had given him so complete a sense of happiness. He rubbed one leg against the other, trying to recollect how it was that that rough serge against his bare calf felt so manly. He tried to interest himself in *Alice in Wonderland*, and marvelled that he could have cared about an adventure with a pack of cards. He longed to throw the book at the foolish Dresden shepherdess that stood on the mantelpiece. He supposed there would be trouble if he did, that his mother would be vexed, but trouble was better than this nothing-at-all. Probably it would rain again to-morrow, and he would have another day indoors, and the thought of Nothing Happening either to-day or to-morrow seemed the same as the thought of nothing happening for ever and ever.

There was a bright fire in the hearth and beyond the steel fender a thick hearthrug of long white sheep's wool. Suddenly Archie remembered the odour that diffused itself when, one day, a fragment of hot coal flew out of the fire, and lodged in this same hearthrug. There was a fatty, burning smell, most curious, and simultaneously the wild, irresistible desire of doing something positively wicked enthralled him. Instantly he knew what he was going to do, and with set, determined face, he took the fire-shovel in one hand and the tongs in the other, and heaped the shovel high with burning coals. He emptied them on the hearthrug.

The smoke of singeing, burning wool arose, and he took several more lumps of glowing coal from the fire-place and deposited them on the rug. Then a panic seized him, and he tried to stamp the conflagration out. But he only stamped the glowing coals more firmly in, and, though amazed at his audacity, he did not really want to extinguish it. He wanted something to happen. Quite deliberately, though with cheeks burning with excitement, he walked out of the room, leaving the door open, and simultaneously heard the crunch of the gravel under the wheels of his mother's returning motor. He did not wish to see her, and went straight to the night-nursery (now his exclusive bedroom) and locked himself in. But he was not in the least sorry for what he had done: if anything he wished he had put more coals there. Nor was he frightened at the thought of possible consequences. Merely, he did not care what happened, so long as something happened. That, he reflected, it was pretty certain to do. But he made no plans.

Before very long he heard some one turning the handle of his door, and he kept quite still. Then his father's voice said:

"Are you there, Archie?" And still he said nothing.

The voice grew louder and the handle rattled.

"Archie, open your door immediately," said his father.

Not in the least knowing why, Archie proceeded to do so. He still felt absolutely defiant and desperate, but for some instinctive reason he obeyed.

Enormous and terrible, his father stood before him.

"Did you put those coals on your mother's hearthrug?" asked Lord
Davidstow.

"No," said Archie.

"Then how did you know they were there?" asked his father.

Archie had something of the joy of the desperate adventurer.

"Because I put them there," he said.

"Then you have lied to me as well."

"Yes," said Archie.

Lord Davidstow pointed to the door.

"Go downstairs at once," he said, "and wait in my study."

Archie obeyed, still not knowing why. At the top of the stairs was standing his mother, who took a step forward towards him.

"Archie, my darling – " she began.

"Leave the boy to me," said his father, who was following him. Archie marched downstairs, still without a tremor. It occurred to him that his father was going to kill him, as Cyrus killed the thrush. There was a whispered conversation between his mother and father and he heard his mother say, "No, don't, don't," and he felt sure that this referred to his being killed. But he was quite certain that, whatever happened, he was not going to say he was sorry.

He went into his father's study and shut the door. On the table he noticed that there was standing one of Miss Schwarz's medicine-bottles, and a syphon beside it, and wondered whether Miss Schwarz had come back. But there was no other sign of her.

In another moment his father entered.

"Now, you thoroughly deserve a good whipping, Archie," he said. "You might have burned the house down, and if you were a poor boy you'd have been put into prison for this. But your mother has been pleading for you, and, if you'll say you are sorry, and beg her pardon for burning her hearthrug, I'll let you off just this time."

Well, he was not going to be killed, but he was going to be whipped. Archie felt his heart beating small and fast with apprehension; but he was not sorry, and did not intend to say he was.

"Well?" said his father.

"I'm not sorry," said Archie.

"I'll give you one more chance," said his father, moving towards a cupboard above one of the bookcases.

"I'm not sorry," said Archie again.

His father opened the cupboard.

"Lock the door," he said.

But, before he could lock it, it was opened from without, and his mother entered. His father had already a cane in his hand, and he turned round as she came in. She looked at him and then at Miss Schwarz's medicine-bottle on the table.

"Go away, Marion," he said. "I'm going to give the boy a lesson."

She pointed at the bottle.

"You had better learn yours first," she said.

"Never mind that. Archie says he's not sorry. It is my duty to teach him."

Suddenly Archie felt tremendously interested. He had no idea what all this was about, or what his father's lesson was, but he felt he was in the presence of some drama apart from his own. It was with a sense of the interruption of this that he saw his mother turn to him.

"Archie, my dear," she said. "You have vexed and grieved me very much. Supposing I had felt wicked and had burned you stylograph pen, shouldn't I be sorry for having injured you? And aren't you sorry for having burned my hearthrug? What had I done to deserve that? Hadn't I given you leave to sit in my room, and look at my treasures? Why did you hurt me?"

Immediately the whole affair wore a different aspect. Instead of anger and justice, there was the sound of love. His heart melted, and he ran to her.

"Oh mummy, I didn't mean to vex you," he cried. "I didn't think of that.

You hadn't done anything beastly to me."

He burst into tears.

"Oh, mummy, forgive me," he said. "I don't mind being whipped, at least not much; but I'm sorry; I beg your pardon. Please stop my allowance till I've paid for it."

"Yes, dear, it's only right that you should pay some of it. You shall have no more allowance for three weeks. Now go straight upstairs, and go to bed till I come to you and tell you that you may get up. And Blessington tells me you have been rude to her. Go and beg her pardon first."

*** * * * ***

The effect of this episode on Archie's mind was that his mother understood, and his father didn't. The prospect of a whipping had not made him falter in his resolve not to say he was sorry, so long as he wasn't sorry, but the moment his mother had put his misdeeds in a sensible light he saw them sensibly, and would not have minded being whipped if by that drastic method he could have borne witness to the reality of his sorrow. But only three days later he received six smart cuts with that horrible cane for climbing on to the unparapetted roof of the house out of his bedroom window, which he had been expressly forbidden to do. But then there was no question of being sorry or not – as a matter of fact he was not – summary justice was executed for mere disobedience, and, before doing the same thing again, he added up the pleasure of going on the roof, and balanced it against the pain inflicted on the tight seat of his sailor-trousers as he bent over a chair, and found it wanting.

It was during this same month which saw his seven completed years that he did a very strange and unintelligible thing, though he suffered it rather than committed it. He did it, that is to say, quite involuntarily, and did not know he was doing it till it was done. This was the manner of it.

Miss Bampton had set him one of her delightful exercises in handwriting in his copy-book. "Never brush your teeth with the housemaid's broom" she had written in her beautiful copper-plate hand at the top of the page, and Archie was sitting with his tongue out copying this remarkable maxim, and amusing himself with conjectures as to what other strange habits such people as were likely to brush their teeth with the housemaid's broom might be supposed to have – perhaps they would lace their boots with the tongs, or write their letters with a poker… He had got about half-way down the page when suddenly there came over him that sensation with which he was beginning to become familiar, that feeling of extension and expansion within himself, that falling away of the limitations of consciousness which opened some new interior world to him.

His pen paused, and then in the wrist of his right hand and in the fingers that still held his pen he felt a curious imperative kind of twitching, and knew that they wanted to write of their own volition, as it were, though it was not his copy that they were concerned with. Under this sensation of absolute compulsion, he took a sheet of paper that lay at his elbow, and let his pen rest on it, watching with the intensest curiosity what it would do. He had no idea what would happen, but he felt that something had to be written. For a couple of minutes perhaps his pen traced random lines on the paper, moving from left to right with a much greater speed than it was wont to go, and the letters began to form themselves with a rapidity and certainty unknown to his careful, halting calligraphy, and in firm upright characters. He saw his own name traced on the paper followed by a sentence, and then his pen (still apparently obedient to some unknown impulse from his fingers) gave a great dash and stopped altogether. And this is what he read:

"Archie, do let me talk to you sometimes.

**"MARTIN."**

The queer sensation had ceased altogether, and Archie stared blankly at the words that he knew his hand had written. But what they meant, he had no notion, nor did he know who Martin was. The whole thing was quite unintelligible to him, both the impulse that made him write, and that which he had written.

Miss Bampton had left the room on some errand, when she had set Archie his copy, and came back at this moment expecting to find the copy finished. She looked over his shoulder to see how he was getting on.

"My dear, haven't you got further than that?" she said. "I thought you would have finished it by this time."

She saw the other piece of paper half-concealed by Archie's left hand.

"Why, you've been writing something else," she said. "That's why you haven't got on further. Let me look."

"Please not," said Archie. "It's private."

Miss Bampton remembered that, a week ago, Archie had been seized with a strong desire for literary composition, and had composed a very remarkable short story, which may be given in full.

**"CHAPTER I**

"There was once a merderer with yellow eyes, and his wife said to him,

"'If you merder me you will be hung.'

"And he was hung on Tuesday next.

**"FINIS."**

When Archie had brought this yarn to her she had laughed so uncontrollably that he was hurt. So, in the hope of finding another such (though Archie had no business to write stories in lesson-time) she said:

"My dear, do show me; I won't laugh."

Archie hesitated; he felt shy about disclosing this sentence he had written, but, on the other hand, Miss Bampton, who appeared to know everything, might help him towards the interpretation.

"Well, it's not a story," he said. "It's just this. I wrote it without knowing. Oh, Miss Bampton, what does it mean, and who is Martin?"

If it was Archie who hesitated before, it was Miss Bampton who hesitated now. Suddenly she had a clever thought.

"My dear, you've been thinking about the Martins that built in the sandpit last spring," she said. "Don't you remember how you and Jeannie made up a story about them?"

This was true enough, but it failed to satisfy Archie. Also he had a notion that Miss Bampton had made a call on her ingenuity in offering this explanation.

"But isn't there any other Martin?" he asked.

"None that you ever knew, Archie," she said. "I think it's one of those in the sandpit. Now get on with your copy, and we'll walk there before your dinner."

The incident passed into the medley of impressions that were crowding so quickly into the storehouse of Archie's consciousness, but it did not lie there quite unconnected with others. He laid it on the same shelf, so to speak, as that which held the memory of his waking vision one night in remote days, and held also the fact of his knowing what Miss Bampton had thought of in the guessing game. But those were among the secret things of which he spoke to nobody. One more impression for secret pondering, though of different sort from those, he had lately added to his store, and that was when a whipping seemed imminent, and he saw one of Miss Schwarz's medicine-bottles standing on his father's table.

# CHAPTER IV

Lady Davidstow and Miss Bampton were sitting together that night in Lady Davidstow's bedroom. She had sent her maid away, saying that she would not want her again that night, and now she held in her hand the sheet of paper covered with lines of meaningless scribbles, with the one intelligible sentence at the end, which Archie had written that day when he should have been doing his copy. In the other hand she held a letter written in ink that was now rather faded, and she was comparing the two. She looked at them for some time in silence, then turned to Miss Bampton.

"Yes, you are quite right, Cathie," she said. "What Archie wrote might actually be in Martin's handwriting. Look for yourself: there's the last letter he ever wrote to me."

Miss Bampton took the two papers from her.

"There's absolutely no difference," she said. "The moment I saw what Archie had written, I thought of Martin's handwriting. And then it was signed 'Martin.' Are you sure he has never heard of him? Not that that would account for the handwriting."

Lady Davidstow shook her head.

"I think it's impossible," she said. "Jeannie assured me she had never spoken to him about Martin, nor has Blessington. He may have heard his name. He probably has heard his name mentioned. I remember mentioning it in Archie's hearing the other day, but he didn't pay the slightest attention. And he can't possibly recollect him even in the vaguest way. It is five years now since Martin died, and Archie was then only just two, and for six months before that Martin was with me at Grives."

Cathie Bampton laid down the two papers.

"I can't think why you never told Archie about him," she said.

Lady Davidstow's great grey eyes grew dim.

"Ah, my dear, if you were Martin's mother and Archie's mother you would know," she said. "If you had seen your eldest son die of consumption and your second son threatened with it, you would understand how natural it was not to tell Archie yet of the brother he had never consciously seen. Jack agreed with me, too. I have long been prepared for Archie asking questions, which certainly I would answer truthfully, and let the knowledge come to him quietly by degrees. I may have done wrong; I don't know. But I think I did right. I couldn't begin saying to Archie, 'You had a brother, but he died.' More would have come out; that he died of consumption; that for fear of that Archie lives so much in the open air."

"But, my dear, how will Archie begin to know unless you tell him?"

"Oh, in many ways. There is Martin's picture, for instance, in my room. Archie may ask who it is. Or, when he hears Martin's name mentioned, he will ask some time who Martin was. Indeed, I have often thought it odd that he hasn't. Only the other day Jack was talking to me about it, suggesting that it was time that Archie knew. Indeed, he rather urged me to tell him. And now, all of a sudden, we find Archie writing in Martin's handwriting, and signing with Martin's name."

"Shall you tell Lord Davidstow?" asked Miss Bampton.

"No, I certainly shall not. Jack hates all that approaches the neighbourhood of anything that might be called occult or spiritualistic. He says 'Pshaw,' as you know, if even hypnotism is mentioned. I did tell him about Archie's intuition in that guessing game, and, as you again know, he asked you not to play it any more, though at the same time he insisted that it was a mere guess on Archie's part."

Cathie was silent a moment.

"And those scribbles of Archie's?" she asked. "Do they not make it more difficult for you to tell him about Martin now? A sensitive boy like that might get it into his head that his dead brother was writing to him."

"Certainly I don't want Archie to think that," said his mother. "No, I shall put off telling him now."

"And if he asks?" said Miss Bampton.

"I have an idea that he won't ask."

She got up and moved about the room for a moment in silence.

"My dear, all children have got a secret life of their own," she said, "and, oh, how their mothers want to be admitted! But every young thing has a walled-up place in his heart, to which he admits nobody, and, if you ask to be admitted, not only is the door shut, but locked. We all had our secret places, and I make a guess that this bit of paper – by the way, mind you put it back in the school-room where Archie left it – lives in Archie's secret place. How I long to get in, the darling! But all I can do is to wait outside, and take what he gives me. Archie doesn't tell me everything, why should he? He didn't tell me what it was that made him put the burning coals out of the fire on to my hearthrug."

"Probably he didn't know."

"Something inside him knew, or else he wouldn't have done it. All we do is accountable for by what is inside us. Impulses come from within."

"But they are suggested by what is without," said Miss Bampton.

"Yes; that's the box on which the match is struck, but the fire is in the match. All you can do for a child, even your own child, is to suggest, and hope he'll take your suggestions."

Miss Bampton got up.

"It's late; I must go," she said. "But I want to ask you one thing. Do you believe in the possibility of Martin's having made a communication to Archie?"

"Yes; I think I do. That's why this affair has upset me so. The idea is so strange and new, that I'm frightened about it, though why I should be so I can't tell. With my whole heart I believe that my darling is living somewhere in an existence as individual as ever, and even more vivid, because the weakness and the illness and the weariness are past. So why should I be frightened at the thought that he could communicate with Archie? Ah, my dear, if only he would communicate with me! Or with Jack! Poor Jack, how he would scout the idea! How shocked he would be! I suppose that's part of my secret garden which I keep from Jack!"

She held her friend a moment after kissing her.

"Jack never really got over Martin's death," she said. "He couldn't bring himself into line with it. It was then that it became a settled habit with him to try to forget… Just lately he has been very bad. There, good-night, my dear; I can't talk about it."

* * * * *

The whole incident affected Archie far less than it affected either his mother or his governess, and next day when he found his scribbled paper lying where he had left it the day before, it excited no further curiosity in his mind. He put the thought of it away on his shelf of secret things which had nothing to do with his ordinary normal life. In certain moods, which, after all only lasted for a moment or two, the things that shelf contained became far more real to him than any other of his experiences; but for weeks and months at a time its contents remained out of his reach, and if he shared them, as his mother had said, with nobody else, he had no share in them himself except at these odd, queer moments. So when, next day, he came across this curious sentence again, caught by him, as by some process of wireless telegraphy, he felt but little interest in it, though he sat for a couple of minutes with his pen held idly in his hand, just to see if anything else happened. But there was no sensation that ever so faintly resembled the twitching and yearning of his hand to write he knew not what, and he crumpled the paper up, and put it into the fire. Somewhere below the threshold of his conscious self lay the perceptions that were concerned with it, those perceptions that guessed what Miss Bampton had thought of, that somehow swam up to the surface, as he used to lie in bed of a morning, and sink into the depths that lay below the green-tinted ceiling of his room; and, while they lay dormant, it was as if they never existed.

But now for some weeks there had been no light whatever on his ceiling, and morning after morning he awoke with no sense of exhilaration at all in the coming of another day, but with a drowsy depression lying thick upon him, as he heard the rustle of the endless rain in the shrubs outside, and languidly went through those exercises that used to invigorate him but now only tired him. All through the month the damp chilly weather persisted, and day after day the same lowering heavens obscured the sun; never in this bright Sussex upland had there been so continuous a succession of rain-streaked hours. The wonder of seeing the lake slowly rising till it engulfed the lower end of the lawn, and made an island of the summer-house failed to stir him, and there was no magic in the unique experience of punting across the lawn to it. Then, one morning early in December, the deluge was stayed, once more the sun slid up a cloudless sky, and the whole nature of the world was changed.

Archie had again been indoors for a couple of days, with a return of the cold that really was responsible for the burning of his mother's hearthrug, and once more the ecstasy of living possessed him. As consolation for his imprisonment, he and Jeannie were both given a holiday, and, breakfast over, they scampered out, and once more saw their shadows racing in front of them. The game was to tread on somebody else's shadow. Blessington's shadow did not count because anybody could tread on that; but it required real agility to tread on Jeannie's, for it had the nippiest way of dodging before your foot could really descend on it. So they ran in circles round Blessington, and Marco, the collie, ran in circles round them; and though it counted two to tread on Marco's shadow (you must not hold Marco and then stamp on his shadow), no one had got nearer than a doubtful claim to have trod on his tail.

Quite suddenly Archie stopped; he had an odd, warm sensation in his mouth that required investigation. Two days ago Jeannie's nose had bled, which Archie thought rather grand. There had been rather a fuss about it: she was laid down on the floor, and Miss Bampton put the door-key down her back, and eventually some ice was brought, and it was all quite important. But now it was not his nose that was bleeding, but his mouth.

"Oh, I say, I'm bleeding in my mouth," he said. "That's just as good as

Jeannie's nose."

Even while he spoke he felt rather giddy, and instantly Blessington's arm was round him.

"Eh, my dear," she said. "That'll never do. You lean against me, and we'll go home very quietly. You mustn't chase any more shadders this morning."

As a matter of fact, Archie did not want to. He felt a rather enjoyable lightness in his head, but he felt weak also, and disinclined to run.

# Конец ознакомительного фрагмента.

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