

Barclay Florence Louisa

Through the Postern Gate: A Romance in Seven Days



Florence Barclay

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Through the Postern Gate: A Romance in Seven Days

THE FIRST DAY THE STORY OF LITTLE BOY BLUE

"But it was not your niece! It was always you I wanted," said the Boy.

He lay back, in a deep wicker chair, under the old mulberry-tree. He had taken the precaution of depositing his cup and saucer on the soft turf beneath his chair, because he knew that, under the stress of sudden emotion, china – especially the *best* china – had a way of flying off his knee. And there was no question as to the exquisite quality of the china on the dainty tea-table over which Miss Christobel Charteris presided.

The Boy had watched her pouring the tea into those pretty rose-leaf cups, nearly every afternoon during the golden two weeks just over. He knew every movement of those firm white hands, so soft, yet so strong and capable.

The Boy used to stand beside her, ready to hand Mollie's cup, as punctiliously as if a dozen girls had been sitting in the old garden, waiting to be quickly served by the only man.

The Boy enjoyed being the only man. Also he had quite charming manners. He never allowed the passing of bread-and-butter to interfere with the flow of conversation; yet the bread-and-butter was always within reach at the precise moment you wanted it, though the Boy's bright eyes were fixed just then in keenest interest on the person who happened to be speaking, and not a point of the story, or a word of the remark, was missed either by him or by you.

He used to watch the Aunt's beautiful hands very closely; and at last, every time he looked at them, his brown eyes kissed them. The Boy thought this was a delightful secret known only to himself. But one day, when he was bending over her, holding his own cup while she filled it, the Aunt suddenly said: "Don't!" It was so startling and unexpected, that the cup almost flew out of his hand. The Boy might have said: "Don't *what*?" which would have put the Aunt in a difficulty, because it would have been so very impossible to explain. But he was too honest. He at once *didn't*, and felt a little shy for five minutes; then recovered, and hugged himself with a fearful joy at the thought that she had *known* his eyes had kissed her dear beautiful hands; then stole a look at her calm face, so completely unmoved in its classic beauty, and thought he must have been mistaken; only – what on earth else could she have said "Don't!" about, at that moment?

But Mollie was there, then; so no explanations were possible. Now at last, thank goodness, Mollie had gone, and his own seven days had begun. This was the first day; and he was going to tell her everything. There was absolutely nothing he would not be able to tell her. The delight of this fairly swept the Boy off his feet. He had kept on the curb so long; and he was not used to curbs of any kind.

He lay back, his hands behind his head, and watched the Aunt's kind face, through half-closed lids. His brown eyes were shining, but very soft. When the Aunt looked at them, she quickly looked away.

"How could you think the attraction would be gone?" he said. "It was always you, I wanted, not your niece. Good heavens! How can you have thought it was Mollie, when it was *you*– YOU, just only you, all the time?"

The Aunt raised her beautiful eyebrows and looked him straight in the face.

"Is this a proposal?" she asked, quietly.

"Of course it is," said the Boy; "and jolly hard it has been, having to wait two whole weeks to make it. I want you to marry me, Christobel. I dare say you think me a cheeky young beggar to suggest it, point blank. But I want you to give me seven days; and, in those seven days, I am going to win you. Then it will seem to you, as it does to me, the only possible thing to do."

His brown eyes were wide open now; and the glory of the love shining out from them dazzled her. She looked away.

Then the swift colour swept over the face which all Cambridge considered classic in its stern strong beauty, and she laughed; but rather breathlessly.

"You amazing boy!" she said. "Do you consider it right to take away a person's breath, in this fashion? Or are you trying to be funny?"

"I have no designs on your breath," said the Boy; "and it is my misfortune, but not my fault, if I seem funny." Then he sat forward in his chair, his elbows on his knees, and both brown hands held out towards her. "I want you to understand, dear," he continued, earnestly, "that I have said only a very little of all I have to say. But I hope that little is to the point; and I jolly well mean it."

The Aunt laughed again, and swung the toe of her neat brown shoe; a habit she had, when trying to appear more at ease than she felt.

"It is certainly to the point," she said. "There can be no possible doubt about that. But are you aware, dear boy, that I have been assiduously chaperoning you and my niece, during the past two weeks; and watching, with the affectionate interest of a middle-aged relative, the course of true love running with satisfactory and unusual smoothness?"

The Boy ignored the adjectives and innuendoes, and went straight to the point. He always had a way of ignoring all side issues or carefully introduced irrelevancy. It made him a difficult person to deal with, if the principal weapon in your armoury was elaborate argument.

"Why did you say 'Don't'?" asked the Boy.

The Aunt fell at once into the unintentional trap. She dropped her calmly amused manner and answered hurriedly, while again the swift colour flooded her face: "Boy dear, I hardly know. It was something you did, which, for a moment, I could not quite bear. Something passed from you to me, too intimate, too sweet, to be quite right. I said 'Don't,' as involuntarily as one would say 'Don't' to a threatened blow."

"It wasn't a blow," said the Boy, tenderly. "It was a kiss. Every time I looked at your dear beautiful hand, lifting the silver teapot, I kissed it. Didn't you feel it was a kiss?"

"No; I only felt it was unusual; something I could not understand; and I did not like it. Therefore I said 'Don't.'"

"But you admit it was sweet?" persisted the Boy.

"Exactly," replied the Aunt; "quite incomprehensibly sweet. And I do not like things I cannot comprehend; especially with amazing boys about!"

"Didn't you know it was love?" asked the Boy, softly.

"No," replied the Aunt, emphatically; "most certainly, I did not."

The Boy got up, and came and knelt beside the arm of her chair.

"It was love," he said, his lips very close to the soft waves of her hair.

"Go back to your seat at once," said the Aunt, sternly.

The Boy went.

"And where does poor Mollie come in, in all this?" inquired the Aunt, with some asperity.

"Mollie?" said the Boy, complacently. "Oh, Mollie understood all right. She loves Phil, you know; intends to stick to him, and knows you will back her. The last part of the time, I brought her notes from Phil, every day. Don't be angry, dear. You would have done it yourself, if Mollie and Phil had got hold of you, and implored you to be a go-between. You remember the day we invaded the kitchen to see how Martha made those little puffy buns – you know – the explosives? You pinch them in the middle, and they burst into hundreds and thousands of little pieces. Jolly things for a stiff

stand-up-in-a-crowd-and-all-hold-your-own-cups kind of drawing-room party; what we used to call 'a Perpendicular' in my Cambridge days. I suppose they still keep up the name. Fancy those little buns exploding all over the place; and when you try to pick up the fragments, they go into simply millions of crumbs, between your agitated fingers and anxious thumb!"

The Boy slapped his knee in intense enjoyment, and momentarily lost the thread of the conversation. The Aunt's mind was not sufficiently detached to feel equal to a digression into peals of laughter over this vision of the explosive buns. She wanted to find out how much Mollie knew. When the Boy had finished rocking backwards and forwards in his chair, she suggested, tentatively: "You went to the kitchen – ?"

"Oh, yes," said the Boy, recovering. "We went to the kitchen to watch Martha make them, and to get the recipe. You see Mollie wanted them for her father's clerical 'at homes.' Oh, I say – fancy! The archdeacons and curates, the rectors and vicars, all standing in a solemn crowd on the Bishop's best velvet-pile carpet; then Mollie, so demure, handing round the innocent-looking little buns; and, hey presto! the pinching begins, and the explosions, and the hopeless attempts to gather up the fragments!"

The Boy nearly went off again; but he suddenly realized that the Aunt was not amused, and pulled himself together.

"Well, we stopped on the way to the kitchen for mutual confidences. It was not easy, bounded as we were by you on the one side, and Martha on the other. We had to whisper. I dare say you thought we were kissing behind the door, but we jolly well weren't! She told me about Phil; and I told her – oh, I told her *something* of what I am trying to tell you. Just enough to make her understand; so that we could go ahead, and play the game fair, all round. She was awfully glad, because she said: 'I have long feared my dear beautiful Aunt would marry an ichthyosaurus.' I asked her what the – what the – I mean, what on earth the meaning of that was? And she said: 'An old fossil.'"

Again the swift flush swept over the calm face. But this time the Aunt went off, intentionally, on a side issue.

"I have heard you say 'What the deuce' before now, Boy. But I am glad you appear to realize, judging by your laboured efforts to suppress them, that these expressions shock me."

She looked at him, quizzically, through half-closed lids; but the Boy was wholly earnest.

"Well, you see," he said, "I am trying most awfully hard to be, in every respect, just what you would wish the man who loves you should be."

"Oh, you dear boy," said Christobel Charteris, a flood of sudden feeling softening her face; "I must make you understand that I cannot possibly take you seriously. I shall have to tell you a story no one has ever heard before; a tender little story of a long-ago past. I must tell you the story of my Little Boy Blue. Wait here a few moments, while I go indoors and give orders that we are not to be disturbed."

Rising, she passed up the lawn to the little white house. The Boy's eyes followed her, noting with pride and delight the tall athletic figure, fully developed, gracious in its ample lines, yet graceful in the perfect swing of the well-poised walk. During all his college years he had known that walk; admired that stately figure. He had been in the set which called her "Juno" and "The Goddess"; which crowded to the clubs if there was a chance of watching her play tennis. And now, during two wonderful weeks, he had been admitted, a welcomed guest, to this little old-world oasis, bounded by high red-brick walls, where she dwelt and ruled. Quiet, sunny, happy hours he had spent in the hush of the old garden, strolling up and down the long narrow velvet turf, beneath the spreading trees, from the green postern gate in the right-hand corner of the bottom wall, to the flight of stone steps leading up to the garden-door of the little white house.

The Boy knew, by now, exactly what he wanted. He wanted to marry Christobel Charteris.

He must have been rather a brave boy. He looked very youthful and slim as he lay back in his chair, watching the stately proportions of the woman on whom he had set his young heart; very

slight and boyish, in his silver-grey suit, with lavender tie, and buttonhole of violas. The Boy was very particular about his ties and buttonholes. They always matched. This afternoon, for the first time, he had arrived without a buttonhole. In the surprise and pleasure of his unexpected appearance, the Aunt had moved quickly down the sunlit lawn to meet and greet him.

Mollie had departed, early that morning. Her final words at the railway station, as her impish little face smiled farewell from the window of her compartment, had been: "Mind, Auntie dear, no mistake about Guy Chelsea! He's a charming fellow; and thank you ever so much for giving me such a good time with him. But you can report to Papa, that Guy Chelsea, *and* his beautiful properties, *and* his prospective peerage, *and* his fifty thousand a year, *and* his motor-cars, *and* his flying-machines, are absolutely powerless to tempt me away from my allegiance to Phil. Beside, it so happens, Guy himself is altogether in love with SOME ONE ELSE."

The train having begun to move at the words "You can report to Papa," Mollie finished the remainder of the sentence in a screaming crescendo, holding on to her hat with one hand, and waving a tiny lace pocket-handkerchief, emphatically, with the other. Even then, the Aunt lost most of the sentence, and disbelieved the rest. The atmosphere of love had been so unmistakable during those two weeks; the superabundant overflow had even reached herself more than once, with an almost startling thrill of emotion.

The Boy had been so full of vivid, glowing *joie-de-vivre*, radiating fun and gaiety around him.

In their sets of tennis, played on her own court across the lane at the bottom of the garden, when she could beat him easily were he handicapped by partnership with Mollie; but in genuine singles, when Mollie had tactfully collapsed on to a seat and declared herself exhausted, his swift agility counterbalanced her magnificent service, and they were so evenly matched that each game proved a keen delight —

In the quiet teas beneath the mulberry tree, where the incomprehensible atmosphere of unspoken tenderness gilded the light words and laughter, as sunlight touches leaf and flower to gold —

At the cosy dinners, to which they sometimes asked him, sitting in the garden afterwards in the moonlight; when he would tell them thrilling tales of aviation, describing his initial flights, hairbreadth escapes; the joys of rapid soaring; the dangers of cross-currents, broken propellers, or twisted steering-gear —

On all these occasions, the Boy – with his enthusiasm, his fun, and his fire – had been the life of the happy trio.

During those evenings, in the moonlight, when he started off on airships, one heart stood still very often while the Boy talked; but it stood still, silently. It was Mollie who clasped her hands and implored him never to fly again; then, in the next breath, begged him to take her as a passenger, on the first possible occasion.

Happy days! But Mollie was the attraction; therefore, with Mollie's departure, they would naturally come to an end.

The Boy had not asked if he might come again; and, for the moment, she forgot that the Boy rarely asked for what he wanted. He usually took it.

She had a lonely luncheon; spent the afternoon over letters and accounts, picking up the dull threads of things laid aside during the gay holiday time.

It was not the Professor's day for calling. She was alone until four. Then she went out and sat under the mulberry. The garden was very quiet. The birds' hour of silence was barely over.

Jenkins, the butler, had been sent into the town, so Martha brought out tea; as ample, as carefully arranged, as ever; and – cups for two!

"Why two cups, Martha?" queried Miss Charteris, languidly.

"Maybe there'll be a visitor," said Martha in grim prophetic tones. Then her hard old face relaxed and creased into an unaccustomed smile. "Maybe there is a visitor," she added, softly; for

at that moment the postern gate banged, and they saw the Boy coming up the garden, in a shaft of sunlight.

The Aunt walked quickly to meet him. His arrival was so unexpected; and she had been so lonely, and so dull.

"How nice of you," she said; "with the Attraction gone. But Martha seems to have had a premonition of your coming. She has just brought out tea, most suggestively arranged for two. How festive you are, Boy! Why this wedding attire? Are you coming from, or going to, a function? No? Then don't you want tennis after tea – a few good hard sets; just we two, unhandicapped by our dear little Mollie?"

"No," said the Boy; "talk, please, to-day; just we two, unhandicapped by our dear little Mollie. Talk please; not tennis."

He paused beside the border, full of mauve and purple flowers. "How jolly those little what-d'-you-call-'ems look, in the sunshine," he said.

Then the Aunt noticed that he wore no buttonhole, and that his tie was lavender. She picked four of her little violas, and pinned them into his coat.

"Boy dear," she said, "you are a dandy in the matter of ties and buttonholes; only it is so essentially *you*, that one rather enjoys it. But this is the first day I have known you to arrive without one, and have need to fall back upon my garden."

"It is a first day," said the Boy, dropping into step with her, as she moved toward the mulberry tree. "It starts a new régime, in the matter of buttonholes, and – other things. I am going to have seven days, and this is the first."

"Really?" smiled the Aunt, amused at the Boy's intense seriousness. "I am flattered that you should spend a portion of 'the first day' with me. Let us have tea, and then you shall tell me why seven days; and where you mean to pass them."

The Boy was rather silent during tea. The Aunt, trying to read his mind, thought at first that he regretted his flannels, and the chance of tennis; then that he was missing Mollie. Whereupon the Aunt repeated her remark that it was nice of him to come, now the Attraction was no longer there.

This gave him the cue for which he waited. His cup was empty, and safely on the grass. The floodgates of the Boy's pent-up love and longing burst open; the unforgettable words, "It was always you I wanted," were spoken; and now he waited for her, under the mulberry tree. She had something to tell him; but, whatever it might be, it could not seriously affect the situation. *He* had told *her* – that was the great essential. He would win her in seven days. Already she knew just what he wanted – a big step for the first day. He looked up, and saw her coming.

She had regained her usual calm. Her eyes were very kind. She smiled at the Boy, gently.

She took her seat in a low basket-work chair. He had leapt to his feet. She motioned him to another, just opposite hers. She was feeling rather queenly. Unconsciously her manner became somewhat regal. The Boy enjoyed it. He knew he was bent upon winning a queen among women.

"I am going to tell you a story," she said.

"Yes?" said the Boy.

"It is about my Little Boy Blue."

"Yes?"

"*You* were my Little Boy Blue."

"I?"

"Yes; twenty years ago."

"Then I was six," said the Boy, quite unperturbed.

"We were staying at Dovercourt, on the east coast. Our respective families had known each other. I used to watch you playing on the shore. You were a very tiny little boy."

"I dare say I was quite a nice little boy," said the Boy, complacently.

"Indeed you were; quite sweet. You wore white flannel knickers, and a little blue coat."

"I dare say it was quite a nice little coat," said the Boy, "and I hope my womenfolk had the tact to call it a 'blazer.'"

"It was a dear little coat – I should say 'blazer,'" said the Aunt; "and I called you my 'Little Boy Blue.' You also had a blue flannel cap, which you wore stuck on the back of your curls. I spoke to you twice, Little Boy Blue."

"Did you?" he said, and his brown eyes were tender. "Then no wonder I feel I have loved you all my life."

"Ah, but wait until you hear my story! The first time I spoke to you, it happened thus. Your nurse sat high up on the beach, in the long line of nurses, gossiping and doing needlework. You took your little spade and bucket, and marched away, all by yourself, to a breakwater; and there you built a splendid sand castle. I sat on the breakwater, higher up, and watched you. You took immense pains; you overcame stupendous difficulties; and every time your little cap fell off, you picked it up, dusted off the sand with the sleeve of your little blue coat, and stuck it on the back of your curly head again. You were very sweet, Little Boy Blue. I can see you now."

The Aunt paused, and let her eyes dwell upon the Boy in appreciative retrospection. If he felt this something of an ordeal, he certainly showed no signs of it. Not for a moment did his face lose its expression of delighted interest.

"Presently," continued the Aunt, "your castle and courtyard finished, you made a little cannon in the centre of the courtyard, for defence. Then you looked around for a cannon-ball. This was evidently a weighty matter, and indeed it turned out to be such. You stood your spade against the breakwater; placed your bucket beside it; readjusted your little cap, and trotted off almost to the water's edge. Your conception of the size of your castle and cannon must have become magnified with every step of those small sturdy feet, for, arrived at the water, you found a huge round stone nearly as large as your own little head. This satisfied you completely, but you soon found you could not carry it in your hands. You spent a moment in anxious consideration. Then you took off your little blue coat, spread it upon the sand, rolled the cannon-ball upon it, tied the sleeves around it, picked up the hem and the collar, hoisted the heavy stone, and proceeded slowly and with difficulty up the shore. Every moment it seemed as if the stone must fall, and crush the bare toes of my Little Boy Blue. So I flew to the rescue.

"'Little Boy Blue,' I said, 'may I help you to carry your stone?'"

"You paused, and looked up at me. I doubt if you had breath to answer while you were walking. Your little face was flushed and damp with exertion; the blue cap was almost off; you had sand on your eyebrows, and sand on your little straight nose. But you looked at me with an expression of indomitable courage and pride, and you said: 'Fanks; but I always does my own cawwyng.' With that you started on, and I fell behind – rebuffed!"

"Surly little beast!" ejaculated the Boy.

"Not at all," said the Aunt. "I won't have my Little Boy Blue called names! He showed a fine independence of spirit. Now hear what happened next.

"Little Boy Blue had almost reached his castle, with his somewhat large, but otherwise suitable, cannon-ball, when his nurse, glancing up from her needlework, perceived him staggering along in his shirt-sleeves, and also saw the use to which he was putting his flannel coat. She threw aside the blue over-all she was making, rushed down the shore, calling my Little Boy Blue every uncomplimentary compound noun and adjective which entered her irate and flurried mind; seized the precious stone, unwound the little jacket, flung the stone away, shook out the sand and seaweed, and straightened the twisted sleeves. Then she proceeded to shake the breath out of my Little Boy Blue's already rather breathless little body; put on the coat, jerked him up the shore, and plumped him down with his back to the sea and his castle, to sit in disgrace and listen, while she told the assembled nurses what a 'born *himp* of *hevil*' he was! I could have slain that woman! And I knew my little Boy Blue had no dear mother of his own. I wanted to take him in my arms, smooth his tumbled curls, and comfort him.

And all this time he had not uttered a sound. He had just explained to me that he always did his own carrying, and evidently he had learned to bear his childish sorrows in silence. I watched the little disconsolate blue back, usually so gaily erect, now round with shame and woe. Then I bethought me of something I could do. I made quite sure he was not peeping round. Then I went and found the chosen stone, and it was heavy indeed! I carried it to the breakwater, and deposited it carefully within the courtyard of the castle. Then I sat down behind the breakwater, on the other side, and waited. I felt sure Little Boy Blue would come back for his spade and bucket.

"Presently the nurses grew tired of bullying him. The strength of his quiet non-resistance proved greater than their superior numbers and brute force. Also his intelligent little presence was, undoubtedly, a check upon their gossip. So he was told he might go; I conclude, on the understanding that he should 'be a good boy' and carry no more 'nasty heavy stones.' I saw him rise and shake the dust of the nurses' circle off his little feet! Then he pushed back his curls, and, without looking to the right or to the left, trotted straight to his castle. I wondered he did not glance, however hopelessly, in the supposed direction of the desired stone. But, no! He came gaily on; and the light of a great expectation shone in his brown eyes.

"When he reached the breakwater, and found his castle, there – safely in the courtyard – reposed the mighty cannon-ball. He stood still a moment, looking at it; and his cheeks went very pink. Then he pulled off his little cap, and turned his radiant face up to the blue sky, flecked with fleeting white clouds. And – 'Fank de Lord,' said my Little Boy Blue."

There were unconcealed tears in the Aunt's kind eyes, and she controlled her quiet voice with difficulty. But the glory of a great gladness had come over the Boy. Without as yet explaining itself in words, it rang in his voice and laughter.

"I remember," he said. "Why, of course I remember! Not you, worse luck; but being lugged up the shore, and fearing I had lost my cannon-ball. And, you know, as quite a tiny chap, I had formed a habit of praying about all my little wants and woes. I sometimes think, how amused the angels must have been when my small petitions arrived. There was a scarecrow, in a field, I prayed for, regularly, every night, for weeks. I had been struck by the fact that it looked lonely. Then I seriously upset the theology of the nursery, by passing through a course of persistent and fervent prayer for Satan. It appeared as an obvious logical conclusion to my infant mind: that if the person who – according to nurse – spent all his time in going about making everybody naughty, could himself become good, all naughtiness would cease. Also, that anybody must be considered as 'past praying for,' was an idea which nearly broke my small heart. With rage and misery, when it was first crudely forced upon me. I think the arch-fiend must have turned away, silent and nonplussed, if he ever chanced to pass by, while a very tiny boy was kneeling up in his crib, pleading with tearful earnestness: 'Please God, bless poor old Satan; make him good an' happy; an' take him back to heaven.' But it used to annoy nurse considerably, when she came into the same prayer, with barely a comma between."

"Oh, my Little Boy Blue!" cried the Aunt. "Why was I not your mother!"

"Thank goodness, you were not!" said the Boy, imperturbably. "I don't want you for a mother, dear. I want you for my wife."

"So you had prayed about the stone?" remarked the Aunt, hurriedly.

"Yes. While seated there in disgrace, I said: 'Please God, let an angel find my cannon-ball, which howwid old nurse fwowed away. An' let the angel cawwy it safe to the courtyard of my castle.' And I was not at all surprised to find it there; merely very glad. So you see, Christobel, you were my guardian angel twenty years ago. No wonder I feel I have known and loved you, all my life."

"Wait until you hear the rest of my story, Little Boy Blue. But I can testify that you were not surprised. Your brown eyes were simply shining with faith and expectation, as you trotted down the shore. But – who said you might call me 'Christobel'?"

"No one," replied the Boy. "I thought of it myself. It seemed so perfect to be able to say it on the first of my seven days. And, if you consider, I have never called you 'Miss Charteris.' You always

seemed to me much too splendid to be 'Miss' anything. One might as well say 'Miss Joan of Arc' or 'Miss Diana of the Ephesians.' But of course I won't call you 'Christobel' if you would rather not."

"You quite absurd boy!" said the Aunt, laughing. "Call me anything you like – just for your seven days. But you have not yet told me the meaning or significance of these seven days."

The Boy sat forward, eagerly.

"It's like this," he said. "I have always loved the story of how the army of Israel marched round Jericho during seven days. It appeals to me. The well-garrisoned, invincible city, with its high walls and barred gates. The silent, determined army, marching round it, once every day. Apparently nothing was happening; but, in reality, their faith, enthusiasm, and will-power were undermining those mighty walls. And on the seventh day, when they marched round seven times to the blast of the priestly trumpets; at the seventh time, the ordeal of silence was over; leave was given to the great silent host to shout. So the rams' horns sounded a louder blast than ever; and then, with all the pent-up enthusiasm born of those seven days of silent marching, the people shouted! Down fell the walls of Jericho, and up the conquerors went, right into the heart of the citadel... *I am prepared to march round in silence, during seven days; but on the seventh day, Jericho will be taken.*"

"*I being Jericho, I conclude,*" remarked the Aunt, dryly. "I cannot say I have particularly noticed the silence. But that part of the programme would be decidedly dull; so we will omit it, and say, from the first: 'little Boy Blue, come blow me your horn!'"

"I shall blow it all right, on the seventh day," said the Boy, "and when I do, you will hear it."

He got up, came across, and knelt by the arm of her chair.

"I shall walk right up into the heart of the citadel," he said, "when the gates fly open, and the walls fall down; and there I shall find you, my Queen; and together we shall 'inherit the kingdom.' O dear unconquered Citadel! O beautiful, golden kingdom! Don't you wish it was the seventh day *now*, Christobel?"

His mouth looked so sweet, as he bent over her and said "*Christobel*," with a queer little accent on the final syllable, that the Aunt felt momentarily dizzy.

"Go back to your chair, at once, Boy," she whispered.

And he went.

Neither spoke a word, for some minutes. The Boy lay back, watching the mysterious moving of the mulberry leaves. The triumphant happiness in his face was a rather breathless thing to see. It made you want to hear a great orchestra burst into the Hallelujah Chorus.

The Aunt watched the Boy, and wondered whether she must tell him about the Professor, before the seventh day; and what he would say, when she did tell him; and how Jericho would feel when the army of Israel, with silent trumpets and banners drooping, marched disconsolate away, leaving its walls still standing; its gates still barred. Poor walls, supposed to be so mighty! Already they were trembling. If the Boy had not been so chivalrously obedient, he could have broken into the citadel, five minutes ago. Did he know? ... She looked at his radiant face... Yes; he knew. There were not many things the Boy did not know. She must not allow the seven days, even though she could absolutely trust his obedience and his chivalry. She must tell him the rest of the story, and send him away to-day. Poor invading army, shorn of its glad triumph! Poor Jericho, left desolate! It was decidedly unusual to be compared to Jericho, and Diana of the Ephesians, and Joan of Arc, all in the same conversation; and it was rather funny to enjoy it. But then most things which happened by reason of the Boy *were* funny and unusual. He would always come marching 'as an army with banners.' The Professor would drive up to Jericho in a fly, and knock a decorous rat-tat on the gate. Would the walls tremble at that knock? Alas, alas! They had never trembled yet. Would they ever tremble again, save for the march-past of the Boy? Would the gates ever really fly open, except to the horn-blast of little Boy Blue? ... The Aunt dared not think any longer. She felt she must take refuge in immediate action.

"Boy dear," she said, in her most maternal voice, "come down from the clouds, and listen to me. I want to tell you the rest of the story of my Little Boy Blue."

He sprang up, and came and sat on the grass at her feet. All the Boy's movements were so bewilderingly sudden. They were over and done, before you had time to consider whether or no you intended to allow them. But this new move was quite satisfactory. He looked less big and manly, down on the grass; and she *really* felt maternal, with his curly head so close to her knee. She even ventured to put out a cool motherly hand and smooth the hair back from his forehead, as she began to speak. She had intended to touch it only once – just to accentuate the fact of her motherliness – but it was the sort of soft thick hair which seemed meant for the gentle passing through it of a woman's fingers. And the Boy seemed to like it, for he gave one long sigh of content, and leaned his head against her knee.

"Now I must tell you," said the Aunt, "of the only other time when I ventured to speak to my Little Boy Blue. He had come to his favourite place beside the breakwater. The tide had long ago swept away castle, courtyard, and cannon; but the cannon-ball was still there. It partook of the nature of 'things that remain.' Heavy stones usually do! When I peeped over the breakwater, Little Boy Blue was sitting on the sand. His sturdy legs were spread wide. His bare toes looked like ten little pink sea-shells. Between his small brown knees, he had planted his bucket. His right hand wielded a wooden spade, on the handle of which was writ large, in blue pencil: *Master Guy Chelsea*. He was bent upon filling his bucket with sand. But the spade being long, and the bucket too close to him – (Boy, leave my shoe alone! It does not require attention) – most of the sand missed the bucket, and went over himself. I heard him sigh rather wearily, and say 'Blow!' in a tired little voice. I leaned over the breakwater. 'Little Boy Blue,' I said, 'may I play with you, and help you to fill your bucket with sand?'

"Little Boy Blue looked up. His curls, his eyebrows, his long dark eyelashes were full of sand. There was sand on his little straight nose. But no amount of sand could detract from the dignity of his little face, or weaken its stern decision. He laid down his spade, put up a damp little hand, and, lifting his blue cap to me, said: 'Fanks; but I don't like girls.' Oh, Master Guy Chelsea, how you snubbed me!"

The Boy's broad shoulders shook with laughter, but he captured the hand still smoothing his hair; and, drawing it down to his lips, kissed it gently, back and palm, and then each finger.

"Poor kind-hearted, well-meaning little girl," he said. "But she must admit, little girls of seven are not always attractive to small boys of six."

"I was not seven," said the Aunt, with portentous emphasis. "Leave go of my hand, Boy, and listen. *When you were six, I was sixteen.*"

This bomb of the Aunt's was received with a moment's respectful silence, as befitted the discharge of her principal field-piece. Then the Boy's gay voice said:

"And what of that, dear? When I was six, you were sixteen. When I was twenty, you were twenty-nine –"

"Thirty, Boy; thirty! Be accurate. And now – you are twenty-six, and I am getting on towards forty –"

"Thirty-six, dear, thirty-six! Be accurate!" pleaded the Boy.

"And when you are forty, I shall be fifty; and when you are fifty, Boy – only fifty; a man is in his prime at fifty – I shall be sixty."

"And when I am eighty," said the Boy, "you will be ninety – an old lady is in her prime at ninety. What a charming old couple we shall be! I wonder if we shall still play tennis. I think quite the jolliest thing to do, when we are very *very* old – quite decrepit, you know – will be to stay at Folkestone, and hire two bath-chairs, with nice active old men to draw them; ancient, of course, but they would seem young compared to us; and then make them race on the Leas, a five-pound note to the winner, to insure them really galloping. We would start at the most crowded time, when the band was playing, and race in and out among lots of other bath-chairs going slowly, and simply terrified at us. Let's be sure and remember to do it, Christobel, sixty years from to-day. Have you a pocket-book? I shall be a gay young person of eighty-six, and you –"

"Boy dear," she said, bending over him, with a catch in her voice; "you *must* be serious and listen. When I have said that which I must say, you will understand directly that it is no use having

your seven days. It will be better and wiser to raise the siege at once, and march away. Listen! ... Hush, stay perfectly still. No; I can say what I am going to say more easily if you don't look at me... Please, Boy; *please*... I told you my 'Little Boy Blue stories' to make you realize how very much older I am than you. I was practically grown up, when you were still a dear delightful baby. I could have picked you up in my arms and carried you about. Oh, *cannot* you see that, however much I loved him – perhaps I should rather say: just *because* I love him, because I have always wanted to help him carry his heavy stones; make the best of his life, and accomplish manfully the tasks he sets himself to do – I could not possibly marry my Little Boy Blue? I could not, oh I *could* not, let him tie his youth and brightness to a woman, staid and middle-aged, who might almost be his mother!"

The earnest, anxious voice, eager in its determined insistence, ceased.

The Boy sat very still, his head bent forward, his brown hands clasping his knees. Then suddenly he knelt up beside her, leaned over the arm of her chair, and looked into her eyes. There was in his face such a tender reverence of adoration, that the Aunt knew she need not be afraid to have him so near. This was holy ground. She put from off her feet the shoes of doubt and distrust; waiting, in perfect calmness, to hear what he had to say.

"Dear," murmured the Boy, tenderly, "your little stories might possibly have had the effect you intended – specially the place where you paused and gazed at me as if you saw me still with sand upon my nose, and ten pink toes like sea-shells! That was calculated to make any chap feel youngish, and a bit shy. Wasn't it? Yes; they might have told the way you meant, were it not for one dear sentence which overshadows all the rest. You said just now: 'I knew my little Boy Blue had no mother. I wanted to take him in my arms, smooth his curls, and comfort him.' Christobel, that dear wish of yours was a gift you then gave to your Little Boy Blue. You can't take it away now, because he has grown bigger. He still has no mother, no sisters, no near relations in the world. That all holds good. Can you refuse him the haven, the help, the comfort you would have given him then, now – when at last he is old enough to know and understand; to turn to them, in grateful worship and wonder? Would you have me marry a girl as feather-brained, as harum-scarum, as silly as I often am myself? You suggest Mollie; but the Boy Blue of to-day agrees with his small wise self of twenty years ago and says: 'Fanks, but I don't like girls!' Oh, Christobel, I want a woman's love, a woman's arms, a woman's understanding tenderness! You said, just now, you wished you had been my mother. Does not the love of the sort of wife a fellow really wants, have a lot of the mother in it too? I've been filled with such a glory, Christobel, since you admitted what you felt for your Little Boy Blue because I seemed to know, somehow, that having once felt it, though the feeling may have gone to sleep, you could never put it quite away. But, if your Little Boy Blue came back, from the other end of the world, and wanted you – "

The Boy stopped suddenly, struck dumb by the look on the beautiful face beneath his. He saw it pale to absolute whiteness, while the dear firm lips faltered and trembled. He saw the startled pain leap into the eyes. He did not understand the cause of her emotion, or know that he had wakened in that strongly repressed nature the desperate hunger for motherhood, possible only to woman at the finest and best.

She realized now why she had never forgotten her Little Boy Blue of the Dovercourt sands. He, in his baby beauty and sweetness, had wakened the embryo mother in the warm-hearted girl of sixteen. And now he had come back, in the full strength of his young manhood, overflowing with passionate ideality and romance, to teach the lonely woman of thirty-six the true sweet meaning of love and of wifehood.

Her heart seemed to turn to marble and cease beating. She felt helpless in her pain. Only the touch of her Little Boy Blue, or of baby Boy Blues so like him, that they must have come trotting down the sands of life straight from the heaven of his love and hers, could ever still this ache at her bosom.

She looked helplessly up into his longing, glowing, boyish face – so sweet, so young, so beautiful.

Should she put up her arms and draw it to her breast?

She had given no actual promise to the Professor. She had not mentioned him to the Boy.

Ah, dear God! If one had waited twelve long years for a thing which was to prove but an empty husk after all! In order not to fail the possible expectations of another, had she any right to lay such a heavy burden of disappointment upon her little Boy Blue? And, if she *must* do so, how could she best help him to bear it?

"Fanks," came a brave little voice, with almost startling distinctness, across the shore of memory; "Fanks, but I always does my own cawwyng."

At last she found her voice.

"Boy dear," she said, gently; "please go now. I am tired."

Then she shut her eyes.

In a few seconds she heard the gate close, and knew the garden was empty.

Tears slipped from between the closed lids, and coursed slowly down her cheeks. The only right way is apt to be a way of such pain at the moment, that even those souls possessing clearest vision and endowed with strongest faith, are unable to hear the golden clarion-call, sounding amid the din of present conflict: "Through much tribulation, enter into the kingdom."

Thus hopeless tears fell in the old garden.

And Martha, the elderly housekeeper, faithful but curious, let fall the lath of the green Venetian blind covering the storeroom window, through which she had permitted herself to peep. As the postern gate closed on the erect figure of the Boy, she dropped the blind and turned away, an unwonted tear running down the furrows of her hard old face.

"Lord love 'im!" she said. "He'll get what he wants in time. There's not a woman walks this earth as couldn't never refuse *'im* nothing."

With which startling array of negatives, old Martha compiled one supreme positive in favour of the Boy, leaving altogether out of account – alas! – the Professor.

Then she wiped her eyes with her apron, and chid her nose harshly for an unexpected display of sentiment.

And the Boy tramped back to his hotel with his soul full of glory, knowing his first march round had been to some purpose. The walls of the beloved Citadel had trembled indeed.

"And the evening and the morning were the first day."

THE SECOND DAY

MISS CHARTERIS TAKES CONTROL

The Boy arrived in flannels, his racket under his arm. He came in, as usual, through the little green gate in the red-brick fruit-wall at the bottom of the garden. From the first, he had taken this privilege, which as a matter of fact had never been accorded to anybody.

The Professor always entered by the front door, placed his umbrella in the stand, wet or shine; left his goloshes on the mat: hung up his cap and gown, and followed Jenkins into the drawing-room. Though he had called regularly, twice a week, during the last dozen years – first on his old friend and tutor, Professor Charteris; after his death, on his widow and daughter; and, when Miss Charteris was left alone, on herself only – he never failed to knock and ring; nor did he ever enter unannounced.

The Boy had dashed in at the garden gate on the occasion of his second visit, and appeared to consider that he had thus created a precedent which should always be followed.

Once, and once only – on her thirtieth birthday – the Professor had brought Miss Charteris a bouquet; but, being very absent-minded, he deposited the bouquet on the mat, and advanced into the drawing-room carrying his goloshes in his left hand. Having shaken hands with his right, he vaguely presented the goloshes. Miss Charteris, never at a loss where her friends were concerned, took the Professor's goloshes from his hand, carried them out into the hall, found the bouquet on the mat, and saved the situation by putting the flowers in water, and thanking the Professor with somewhat more hilarity than the ordinary presentation of a bouquet would have called forth.

But to return to the second day. The Boy arrived in flannels, and tea was a merry meal. The Boy wanted particulars concerning the marriage, which had taken place a year or so before, between Martha – maid of thirty years' standing, now acting as cook-housekeeper to Miss Charteris – and Jenkins, the butler. The Boy wanted to know which proposed, Jenkins or Martha; in what terms they announced the fact of their engagement, to Miss Charteris; whether Jenkins ever "bucked up and looked like a bridegroom," and whether Martha wore orange-blossom and a wedding veil. He extorted the admission that Christobel had been present at the wedding, and insisted on a detailed account; over which, when given at last, he slapped his knee so often, and went into such peals of laughter, that Miss Charteris glanced anxiously towards the kitchen and pantry windows, which unfortunately looked out on the garden.

The Boy expatiated on his enthusiastic admiration for Martha; but at the same time was jolly well certain he would have bolted when it came to "I, Martha, take thee, Jenkins," had he stood in the latter's shoes. Miss Charteris did not dare admit, that as a matter of fact the sentence had been: "I, Martha, take thee, Noah." That the meek Jenkins should possess so historical and patriarchal a name, would completely have finished the Boy, who was already taking considerable risks by combining much laughter with an unusually large number of explosive buns.

The Boy would have it, that, excepting in the rôle of bride and subsequent conjugal owner and disciplinarian, Martha was perfect.

Miss Charteris admitted Martha's unrivalled excellence as a cook, her economy in management, and fidelity of heart. But Martha had a temper. Also, though undoubtedly a superficial fault, yet trying to the artistic eye of Miss Charteris, Martha's hair was apt to be dishevelled and untidy.

"It is a bit wispy," admitted the Boy, reluctantly. "Why don't you tell her so?"

Miss Charteris smiled. "Boy dear, I daren't! It would be as much as my place is worth, to make a personal observation to Martha!"

"I'll tell her for you, if you like," said the Boy, coolly.

"If you do," warned Miss Charteris, "it will be the very last remark you will ever make in Martha's kitchen, Boy."

"Oh, there are *ways of telling*," said the Boy, airily; and pinched an explosive bun.

After tea they took their rackets and strolled down the lawn, pausing a moment while she chose him a buttonhole. The tie was orange on this second day, and she gathered the opening bud of a William Allen Richardson rose. She smiled into its golden heart as she pinned it in his white flannel coat. Somehow it brought a flash of remembrance of the golden heart of Little Boy Blue, who could not bear that any one should be past praying for, or that even a scarecrow should seem lonely.

They crossed the lane and entered the paddock; tightened the net on the tennis-court; chose out half a dozen brand-new balls, and settled down to fast and furious singles.

Miss Charteris played as well as she had ever played in her life; but the Boy was off his service, and she beat him six to four. Next time, he pulled off 'games all,' but lost the set; then was beaten, three to six.

Miss Charteris was glowing with the exercise, and the consciousness of being in great form.

"Boy dear!" she called, as she played the winning stroke of the third set, "I'm afraid you're lazy to-day!"

The Boy walked up to the net, and looked at her through his racket.

"I'm not lazy," he said; "but I'm on the wrong side of Jordan. This sort of thing is waste of time. I want to go over, and start marching."

"Don't be absurd, Boy. I prefer *this* side Jordan, thank you; and you shall stay here until you beat me."

The Boy won the next set.

It was deliciously cool and quiet under the mulberry-tree.

The Boy was quite subdued – for him. He seemed inclined to do his marching in silence, on this second day.

Miss Charteris felt her mental balance restored. She held the reins to-day, and began considering how to deal wisely with the Boy. So much depended upon how she managed him.

At length she said: "Boy, when you were at Trinity, I often used to see you. I knew you were my Little Boy Blue of all those years ago. I used to feel inclined to send for you, talk to you for your good, and urge you to set to, and do great things; but I remembered the stone, and the bucket; and I did not want to let myself in for a third snubbing."

The Boy smiled. "Did you think me a lazy beggar?" he asked. "I wasn't really, you know. I did quite a good deal of all kinds of things. But I didn't want to get played out. I wanted to do things all the rest of my life. Fellows who grind at college and come out Senior Wranglers, begin and end there. You don't hear of 'em again."

"I see," said Miss Charteris, amusement in her eyes. "So you felt it wisest to avoid being Senior Wrangler?"

"Just so," said the Boy. "I was content with a fairly respectable B.A. and I hope you saw me take it. How rotten it is, going up in a bunch, all hanging on to an old chap's fingers."

"Boy, Boy! I know all about you! You wasted golden opportunities; you declined to use your excellent abilities; you gave the authorities an anxious time. You were so disgracefully popular, that everybody thought your example the finest thing to follow, and you were more or less responsible for every lark and row which took place during your time."

The Boy did not smile. He looked at her, with a quaint, innocent seriousness, which made her feel almost uncomfortable.

"Dear," he said, "I had plenty of money, and heaps of friends, and I wanted to have a good time. Also I wanted all the other fellows to have a good time; and I enjoyed getting the better of all the old fogies who had forgotten what youth was like – if they'd ever known it. And I had no mother to ask me questions, and no sisters to turn up at my rooms unexpectedly. But I can tell you this, Christobel. I hope to be married soon; and I hope to marry a woman so sweet and noble and pure, that her very presence tests a man's every thought, feeling, and memory. And I can honestly

look into your dear eyes and say: My wife will be welcome to know every detail of every prank I ever played in Cambridge; nor is there a thing in those three years I need feel ashamed of her knowing. There! Will that do?"

Miss Charteris threw out a deprecatory hand. "Oh, Boy dear!" she said. "I never doubted that. My Little Boy Blue, don't I know you? But I cannot let you talk as if you owe me any explanations. How curious to think I saw you so often during those years, yet we never actually met."

The Boy smiled. "Yes," he said, "we were all awfully proud of you, you know. What was it you took at Girton?"

Miss Charteris mentioned, modestly, the highest honours in classics as yet taken by a woman. The Boy had often heard it before. But he listened with bated breath.

"Yes," he said, "we were awfully proud of it, because of your tennis, and because of you being – well, just *you*. If you had been a round-shouldered little person in a placket, we should have taken it differently. We always called you 'The Goddess,' because of your splendid walk. Did you know?"

"No, Boy, I did not know; but I confess to feeling immensely flattered. Only, take a friend's advice, and avoid conversational allusions to plackets, because you are obviously ignorant of the meaning of the word. And now, tell me? Having successfully escaped so serious a drawback to future greatness as becoming Senior Wrangler, on what definite enterprise have you embarked?"

"Flying," said the Boy, sitting forward in his chair. "I am going to break every record. I am going to fly higher, farther, faster, than any man has ever flown before. This week, if I had not stayed on here – you know originally I came up only for the 'May week' – I was to have done a Channel flight. Ah, you don't know what it means, to own three flying-machines, all of different make, and each the best of its kind! You feel you own the world! And then to climb into your seat and go whirling away, with the wonderful hum in your ears, mastering the air – the hitherto invincible air. May I tell you what I am going to do for my next fly? Start from the high ground between Dover and Folkestone; fly over the Channel; circle round Boulogne Cathedral – you remember the high dome, rising out of the old town surrounded by the ramparts? Then back across the Channel, and to ground again at Folkestone; all in one flight; and I hope to do it in record time, if winds are right."

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