The Education of Uncle Paul

by Algernon Blackwood

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THE

EDUCATION OF UNCLE PAUL

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TORONTO

THE EDUCATION OF UNCLE PAUL

BY

ALGERNON BLACKWOOD

AUTHOR OF

‘JIMBO,’ ‘JOHN SILENCE,’ ‘THE LISTENER,’ ETC.

MACMILLAN AND CO., LIMITED

ST. MARTIN’S STREET, LONDON

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Know you what it is to be a child? It is to be something very different from the man of to-day. It is to have a spirit yet streaming from the waters of baptism; it is to believe in love, to believe in loveliness, to believe in belief; it is to be so little that the elves can reach to whisper in your ear; it is to turn pumpkins into coaches, and mice into horses, lowness into loftiness, and nothing into everything, for each child

has its fairy godmother in its own soul; it is to live in a nutshell and to count yourself the king of infinite space; it is

To see a world in a grain of sand,

And a heaven in a wild flower,

Hold infinity in the palm of your hand,

And eternity in an hour;

it is to know not as yet that you are under sentence of life, nor petition that it is to be commuted into death.—Francis Thompson.

TO

ALL THOSE CHILDREN

BETWEEN THE AGES OF EIGHT AND EIGHTY

WHO LED ME TO ‘THE CRACK’;

AND HAVE SINCE JOURNEYED WITH ME THROUGH IT

INTO

THE LAND ‘BETWEEN YESTERDAY AND TO-MORROW’

CHAPTER I

... I stand as mute

As one with full strong music in his heart

Whose fingers stray upon a shattered lute.

Alice Meynell.

All night the big liner had been plunging heavily, but towards morning she entered quieter water, and when the passengers woke, her rising and falling over the great swells was so easy that even the sea-sick women admitted the relief.

‘Land in sight, sir! We shall see Liverpool within twenty hours now, barring fog.’

The friendly bathroom steward passed the open door of Stateroom No. 28, and the big, brown-bearded man in the blue serge suit who was sitting, already dressed, on the edge of the port-hole berth, started as though he had been shot, and ran up on deck without waiting to finish tying the laces of his india-rubber shoes.

‘By Jove!’ he said, as he thundered along the stuffy passages of the rolling vessel, and ‘By Gad!’

He emerged on the upper deck in the sunlight, having nearly injured several persons in his impetuous journey, and, taking a great gulp of the salt air with keen satisfaction, he crossed to the side in a couple of strides, the shoe-laces clicking against the deck as he went.

‘Twenty years ago,’ he muttered, ‘when I was barely out of my teens. And now——!’

The big man was distinctly excited, though ‘moved’ perhaps is the better word, seeing that the emotion was a little too searching, too tinged with sadness, to include elation. He plunged both hands into his coat pockets with a violence that threatened to tear the bottoms out, and leaned over the railing.

Far away a faint blue line, tinged delicately with green, rose out of the sea. He saw it instantly, and his throat tightened unexpectedly, almost like a reflex action. For, about that simple little blue line on the distant horizon there was something strangely seizing, something absolutely arresting. The sight of it was a hundred times more poignant than he had imagined it would be; it touched a thousand springs of secret life in him, and a mist rose faintly before his eyes.

Paul Rivers had not realised that his emotion would be so intense; but from that instant everything on the ship, otherwise familiar and rather boring, looked different. A new sense of locality came to him. The steamer became strange and new; he ‘recognised’ bits of it as though he had just come aboard a ship known aforetime. It was no longer the steamer that was merely crossing the Atlantic; it was the boat that

was bringing him home. And there, trimming the horizon in a thin ribbon of most arresting beauty, was the coast-line of the first Island.

‘But it seems so much more solid—and so much more real than I expected!’

Though it was barely seven o’clock a few early passengers were already astir, and he made his way back again to the lower deck and thence climbed up into the bows. He wished to be alone. Another man, apparently from the steerage, was there before him, leaning over the rail and peering fixedly under one hand at the horizon. The saloon passenger took up his position a few feet farther on and stared hard. He, too, stared with the eyes of memory, now grown a little dim. The air was fresh and sweet, fragrant of long sea distances; there was a soft warmth in it too, for it was late April and the spring made its presence known even on the great waters where there was nothing to hang its fairy banners on.

‘So that’s land! That’s the Old Country!’

The words dropped out of their own accord; he could not help himself. The sky seemed to come down a little closer, with a more familiar and friendly touch; the very air, he fancied, had a new taste in it,—a whiff of his boyhood days—a smell of childhood and the things of childhood—ages ago, it seemed, in another life.

The huge ship rose and fell on the regular, sweeping swells, and sea-birds from the land already came out to meet her. He easily imagined that the thrills in the depths of his own being somehow communicated themselves to the mighty vessel that tore the seas asunder in her great desire to reach the land.

‘Twenty years,’ he repeated aloud, oblivious of his neighbour, ‘twenty years since I last saw it!’

‘And it’s gol-darned nearer fifty since I seen it,’ exclaimed a harsh voice just behind him.

He turned with a start. The steerage passenger beside him, he saw, was an old man with a rough, grey face, and hair turning white; the hand that shaded his eyes was

thick and worn; there was a heavy gold ring on the little finger, and the dirty cuff of a dark flannel shirt tumbled, loosely and unbuttoned, over the very solid wrist. The face, he noticed, at a second glance, was rugged, beaten, scored, the face of a man who had tumbled terribly about life, battered from pillar to post; and it was only the light in the hard blue eyes—eyes still fixed unwaveringly on the distant line of the land—that redeemed it from a kind of grim savagery. Beaten and battered, yes! Yet at the same time triumphant. The atmosphere of the man proclaimed in some vibrant fashion beyond analysis that he had failed in all he undertook—failed from stupidity rather than character, and always doggedly beginning over again with the same lack of intelligence—but yet had never given in, and never would give in.

It was not difficult to reconstruct his history from his appearance; or to realise his feelings as he saw the Old Country after fifty years—a returned failure. Although the voice had vibrated with emotion, the face remained expressionless and unmoved; but down both cheeks large tears ran slowly, in sudden jerks, to drop with a splash upon the railing. And Paul Rivers, after his intuitive fashion, grasped the whole drama of the man with a sudden completeness that touched him with swift sympathy. At the same time he could not help thinking of rain-drops running down the face of a statue. He recognised with shame that he was conscious of a desire to laugh.

‘Fifty years! That’s a long time indeed,’ he said kindly. ‘It’s half-a-century.’

‘That’s so, Boss,’ returned the other in a dead voice that betrayed Ireland overlaid with acquired American twang and intonation; ‘and I guess now I’ll never be able to stick it over here. Jest see it—and then git back again.’

He kept his eyes fixed on the horizon, and never once turned his head towards the man he was speaking to; only his lips moved; he did not even lift a finger to brush off the great tears that fell one by one from his cheeks to the deck. He seemed unconscious of them; as though it was so long since those hard eyes had melted that

they had forgotten how to do it properly and the skin no longer registered the sensation of the trickling. The tears continued to fall at intervals; Paul Rivers actually heard them splash.

‘I went out steerage,’ the man continued to himself, or to the sea, or to any one else who cared to listen, ‘and I come back steerage. That’s my trouble. And now’—his eye shifted for a fraction of a second and watched a huge wave go thundering by—‘I’m grave-huntin’, I guess. And that’s about the size of it. Jest see it and—git back again!’

The first-class passenger made some kind and appropriate reply—words with genuine sympathy in them—and then, getting no further answer, found it difficult to continue the conversation. The man, he realised, had only wanted a peg to hang his emotion on. It had to be a living peg, but any other living peg would do equally well, and before long he would find some one in the steerage who would listen with delight to the flood that was bound to come. And, presently, he took his departure to his own quarters where the sailors, with bare feet, were still swabbing the slippery decks.

A couple of hours later, after breakfast, he leaned over the rail and again saw the man on the steerage deck, and heard him talking volubly. The tears were gone, but the smudges were still visible on the cheeks, where they had traced a zigzag pattern. He was telling the history of his fifty years’ disappointments and failures to one and all who cared to listen.

And, apparently, many cared to listen. The man’s emotion was real; it found vigorous expression. The sight of the old, loved shore, not seen for half-a-century, but the subject of ten thousand yearnings, had been too much for him. He told in detail the substance of these ten thousand dreams—ever one and the same dream, of course—and in the telling of it he found the relief his soul sought. He got it all out; it did him a world of good, saving his inner being from a whole army of severe mental

fevers and spiritual pains. The man revelled in a delirium of self-expression, and in so doing found sanity and health for his overburdened soul.

And the picture of that hard-faced old man crying accompanied Paul Rivers to the upper decks, and remained insistently with him for a long time. It portrayed with such neat emphasis precisely what was so deplorably lacking in his own character. There, in concrete form, though not precisely his own case, still near enough to be extremely illuminating, he had seen a grown-up man finding abundant and natural expression for his emotion. The man was not ashamed of his tears, and would doubtless have let them splash on the deck before a hundred passengers, whereas he, Paul Rivers, was, it seemed, constitutionally unable to reveal himself, to tell his deep longings, to find expression through any sensible medium for the ten thousand dreams that choked his life to the brim. He was unable, perhaps ashamed, to splash on the deck.

It was not that the big, bronzed Englishman wanted to cry, or to wash his soul in sentiment, but that the sight of this old man's passion, and its frank and easy utterance, touched with dramatic intensity the crying need of his whole temperament. The need of the steerage passenger was the need of a moment; his own was the need of an existence.

'Lucky devil!' he exclaimed, half laughing, half sighing, as he went to his cabin for the field-glasses; 'he knows how to get it out—and does get it out! while I—with my impossible yearnings and my absurd diffidence in speaking of them to others—I haven't got a single safety-valve of any sort or kind. I can't get it out of me—all this ocean in my heart and soul—not a drop, not even a blessed tear!'

He laughed again and, stooping to pick up the glasses, he caught a glimpse of his sunburned, bearded face in the cabin mirror.

'Even my appearance is against me,' he went on with mournful humour; 'I look like a healthy lumberman more than anything else in God's world!'

He bent forward and examined himself carefully in detail.

‘What has such a face as that to do with beauty, and the stars, and the moon sinking over a summer sea, or those night-winds I know rising faintly from their hiding-places in the dim forests and stealing on soft tiptoe about the sleeping world until the dawn gives them leave to run and sing? Yet I know—though I can never tell it to another—what so many do not know! Who could ever believe that that man’—he pointed to himself in the glass, laughing—‘wants above all else in life, above wealth, fame, success, the knowledge of spiritual things, which is Reality—which is God?’

A flash of light from nowhere ran over his face, making it for one instant like the face of a boy, shining, wonderful, radiantly young.

‘I know, for instance,’ he went on, the strange flush of enthusiasm rising into his eyes, ‘that the pine trees hold wind in their arms as cups hold rare wine, and that when it spills I hear the exquisite trickling of its music—but I can’t tell any one that! And I can’t even put the wild magic of it into verse or music. Or even into conduct,’ he concluded with a laugh, ‘conduct that’s sane, that is. For, if I could, I should find what I’m for ever seeking behind all life and behind all expressions of beauty—I should find the Reality I seek!’

‘I’ve no safety-valves,’ he added, swinging the glasses round by their strap to the imminent danger of various articles of furniture, ‘that’s the long and short of it. Like a giraffe that can’t make any sound at all although it has the longest throat in all creation. Everything in me accumulates and accumulates. If only’—and the strange light came back for a second to his brown eyes—‘I could write, or sing, or pray—live as the saints did, or do something to—to express adequately the sense of beauty and wonder and delight that lives, like the presence of a God, in my soul!’

The lamp in his eyes faded slowly and he sat back on the little cabin sofa, screwing and unscrewing his glasses till it was surprising that the thread didn’t wear out. And

as he screwed, a hundred fugitive pictures passed thronging through his mind; moments of yearning and of pain, of sudden happiness and of equally sudden despondency, vivid moods of all kinds provoked by the smallest imaginable fancies, as the way ever was with him. For the moods of the sky were his moods; the swift, coloured changes of sea and cloud were mirrored in his heart as with all too impressionable people, and he was for ever trying to seize the secret of their loveliness and to give it form—in vain. Like many another mystical soul he saw the invisible foundations of the visible world—longed to communicate it to others—found he couldn't—then suffered all the pain and fever of repression that seeks in vain for adequate utterance. Too shy to stammer his profound yearnings to ears that would not hear, and, never having known the blessed relief of a sympathetic audience, he perforce remained choked and dumb, the only mitigation he knew being that loss of self which follows prolonged contemplation. In his contemplation of Nature, for instance, he would gaze upon the landscape, the sky, a tree or flower, until their essential beauty passed into his own nature. For the moment he felt with these things. He was them. He took their qualities literally into himself. He lost his ordinary personality by changing its centre, merging it into those remoter phases of consciousness which extended from himself mysteriously to include the landscape, the sky, the tree, the flower.

For him everywhere in Nature there was psychic energy. And it was difficult to say which was with him the master passion: to find Reality—God—through Nature, or to explain Nature through God.

Then the busy faces of America, now left behind after twenty years, gradually receded, and others, dimly seen through mist, rose above the horizon of his thoughts. And among them he saw that two stood forth with more clearness than the rest. One of these was Dick Messenger, the friend of his boyhood, now dead but a few years; and the other, the face of his sister, Margaret, whom Dick had left a widow, and whose children he would now see for the first time at their country home in the

South of England.

The ‘Old Country!’ He repeated the words softly to himself, weaving it like a coloured thread through all his reverie. He had lived away long enough to understand the poignant magic that lies in the little phrase, and to appreciate the seizing and pathetic beauty lying along that faint blue line of sea and sky.

And presently he took his field-glasses again and went up on deck and hid himself in the bows alone. Leaning over the bulwarks he took the scented wind of spring full in the face, and watched with a curious exhilaration the huge rollers, charging and bellowing like wild bulls of the sea as the ship drew nearer and nearer to the coast, plunging, leaping, and thundering as she moved.

CHAPTER II

Justice is not done to the versatility and the unplumbed childishness of man’s imagination. His life from without may seem but a rude mound of mud, there will be some golden chamber at the heart of it, in which he dwells delighted; and for as dark as his pathway seems to the observer, he will have some kind of a bull’s-eye at his belt.—R. L. S.

The case of Paul Rivers after all was very simple, though perhaps in some respects uncommon. Circumstances—to sum it up roughly—had so conspired that the most impressionable portion of his character—half of his mind and most of his soul, that is—had never found utterance. He had never discovered the medium that could carry forth into the relief of expression all the inner turmoil and delight of a soul that was very much alive and singularly in touch with the simple and primitive forces of the world.

It was not, as with the returned emigrant, grief that he felt, but something far more troublesome: Joy. For the beauty of the world, of character as of nature, laid a spell upon him that set his heart in the glow and fever of an inner furnace, while the play

of his imagination among the ‘common’ things of life which the rest of the world apparently thought dull set him often upon the borders of an ecstasy whereof he found himself unable to communicate one single letter to his fellow-beings. Thus, in later years, and out of due season, he was afflicted and perplexed by a luxuriant growth that by rights should have been harvested before he was twenty-five; and a great part of him had neglected to grow up at all.

This result was due to no fault—no neglect, that is—of his own, but to circumstances and temperament combined. It explains, however, why, after twenty years in the backwoods of America, he saw the coast of the Old Country with a deep emotion that was not all delight, but held something also of dismay.

Left an orphan, with his younger sister, at an early age, the blundering of trustees had forced him out into the world before his first term at Cambridge was over, and after various vicissitudes he had found his way to America and had been drawn into the lumber trade. Here his knowledge and love of trees—it was a veritable passion with him—soon resulted in a transfer from the Minneapolis office to the woods, and after an interesting apprenticeship, he came to hold an important post in which he was strangely at home. He was appointed to the post of ‘Wood Cruiser’—forest-traveller, commis voyageur of the primeval woods. His duties, well paid too, were to survey, judge, mark, and report upon the qualities and values of the immense timber limits owned by his Company. And he loved the work. It was a life of solitude, but a life close to Nature; borne in his canoe down swift wilderness streams; meeting the wild animals in their secret haunts; becoming intimate with dawns and sunsets, great winds, the magic of storms and stars, and being initiated into the profound mysteries of the clean and haunted regions of the world.

And the effect of this kind of life upon him—especially at an age when most men are busy learning more common values in the strife of cities—was of course significant. For here, in this solitary existence, the beauty of the world, virgin and

glorious, struck the eyes of his soul and nearly blinded them.

His whole being threw itself inwards upon his thoughts, and outwards upon what fed his thoughts—the wonder of Nature. Even as a boy he had been mystically minded, a poet if ever there was one, though a poet without a lyre; but at school he had chanced to come under the influence of masters who had sought to curb the exuberance of his imagination, so that he started into life with the rooted idea that it was something of a disgrace for a man to be too sensitive to beauty, and to possess a vivid and coloured imagination was almost a thing to be ashamed of.

This view of his only ‘silver talent,’ moreover, was never permitted by the nature of his life to alter. His early American experiences stiffened it into a conviction which he yet despised. The fires ran hidden, if unchecked. Had he dwelt in cities, they might have suffered total extinction perhaps, but here, in the heart of the free woods, they speedily rose to the surface again and flamed. He grew up singularly unspoilt, the shyness of the original nature utterly uncorrected, the stores of a poetic imagination accumulating steadily, but always unuttered.

For his sole companions all these years when he had any at all were the ‘Bosses’ of the lumber camps he inspected, the ‘Cookee’ who looked after his stew-pot in the ‘home-shack,’ and the half-breed Indian who accompanied him in the stern-seat of the bark canoe during the month-long trips about the wilderness: these—with the animals, winds, stars, and the forms of beauty his imagination for ever conjured out of them.

For twenty years he lived thus, knowing all the secrets of the woods and streams. In the summer he never slept under cover at all, so that even in sleep he understood, through closed eyelids, the motions of the stars behind the tangled network of branches overhead. In winter his snow-shoes carried him into the heart of the most dazzling scenes imaginable—the forest lying under many feet of snow with a cloudless sun lifting it all into an appearance of magic that took the breath away.

Moreover, the fierce spring, when the streams became impassable floods, and the autumn, with a flaming glory of gold and scarlet unknown anywhere else in the world, he knew as intimately as the dryads themselves.

And all these moods became the intimate companions of his life, taking the place of men and women. He came to personify Nature as a matter of course.

Without knowing it, too, the place of children was taken somehow by the wild animals. He knew them all. He surprised them in their haunts in the course of his silent journeys into the heart of their playgrounds; and his headquarters—a one-story shanty on the height of land between his two chief 'limits'—was never without a tamed baby bear, a young moose to draw him on his snow-shoes with the manners of a well-bred pony, and a dozen other animals reclaimed from savagery and turned by some mysterious system of his own into real companions and confidants.

And the only books he read in the long winter nights, besides a few modern American novels that puzzled and vaguely distressed him, were Blake, his loved Greek plays, and the Bible.

He rarely saw a woman. Sides of his nature that ought to have developed under the influences of normal life at home lay dormant altogether, or were filled as best might be by his intercourse with Nature. He wrote few letters. After Dick Messenger died, the formal correspondence he kept up at long intervals with his sister—Dick's widow—hardly deserved the name of letters. Great slabs of him, so to speak, stopped growing up, sinking down into the subconscious region to await conditions favourable for calling them to the surface again, and eventually coming to life—this was his tragic little secret—at a time when they were long overdue.

To the end of life he remained shy, shy in the sense that most of his thoughts and emotions he was afraid to reveal to others; with the shyness, too, of the utterly modest soul that cannot believe the world will give it the very things it has most right to claim, yet never dares to claim. And to the end Nature never lifted the spell

laid upon him during those twenty years of initiation in her solitudes. To see the new moon tilting her silver horns in the west; to hear the wind rustling in high trees, like old Indians telling one another secrets of the early world; and to see the first stars looking down from the height of sky through spaces of watery blue—these, and a hundred other things that the majority seemed to ignore, were to him a more moving and terrible delight than anything he could imagine. For him such things could never be explained away, but remained living and uncorrected to the end.

Thus when, at forty-five, he inherited the fortune of his aunt (which he had always known must one day come to him), he returned to England with the shy, bursting, dream-laden heart of a boy, young as only those are young whom life has kept clean and sweet in the wilderness; and the question that sprang to life in his heart when he saw the blue line of coast was a vague wonder as to what would become of his full-blooded dreams when tested by the conventional English life that he remembered as a boy. To whom could he speak of his childlike yearning after God; of his swift divinations, his passionate intuitions into the very things that the majority put away with childhood? What modern priest—so he felt, at least—what befuddled mystic, could possibly enter into the essential nature of these cravings as he did, or understand, without a sneer, the unspoilt passions of a man who had never ‘grown up’?

‘I shall be out of touch with it all,’ he thought as he stood there in the bows and watched the blue line grow nearer, ‘utterly out of touch. What shall I find to say to the men of my own age—I, who stopped growing up twenty years ago? How shall I ever link on with them? Children are the only things I can talk to, and children!’—he shrugged his shoulders and laughed—‘children will find me out at once and give me away to the others.’

‘Dick’s children, though, may be different!’ came the sudden reflection. ‘Only—I’ve had nothing to do with children for such ages. Dick had real

imagination. By George,'—and his eyes glowed a moment—'what if they took after him!'

And for the fiftieth time, as he pictured the meeting with his stranger sister, his heart sank, and he found refuge in the knowledge that he had not altogether burned his boats behind him. For he had been wise in his generation. He had arranged with his Company, who were only too glad of the chance of keeping his services, that he should go to England on a year's leave, and that if in the end he decided to return he should have a share in the business, while still continuing the work of forest-inspection that he loved.

'I'm nothing but a wood cruiser. I shall go back. In the big world I might lose all my vision!'

And, having lived so long out of the world, he now came back to it with this simple, innocent, imaginative heart of a great boy, a boy still dreaming, for all his five-and-forty years. Fully realising that something was wrong with him, that he ought to be more sedate, more cynical, more prosaic and sober, he yet could not quite explain to himself wherein lay the source of his disability. His thoughts stumbled and blundered when he tried to lay his finger on it, with the only result that he felt he would be 'out of touch' with his new world, not knowing exactly how or why.

'It's a regular log-jam,' he said, using the phraseology he was accustomed to, 'and I'm sorry for the chap that breaks it.'

It never occurred to him that in this simple thrill that Nature still gave him he possessed one of the greatest secrets for the preservation of genuine youth; indeed, had he understood this, it would have meant that he was already old. For with the majority such dreams die young, brushed rudely from the soul by the iron hand of experience, whereas in his case it was their persistent survival that lent such a childlike quality to his shyness, and made him secretly ashamed of not feeling as

grown up as he realised he ought to feel.

Paul Rivers, in a word, belonged to a comprehensible though perhaps not over common type, and one not often recognised owing to the elaborate care with which its ‘specimens’ conceal themselves from the world under all manner of brave disguises. He was destitute of that nameless quality that constitutes a human being, not mature necessarily, but grown up. Sources of inner enthusiasm that most men lose when life brings to them the fruit of the Tree of Good and Evil, had kept alive; and though on the one hand he was secretly ashamed of the very simplicity of his great delights, on the other hand he longed intensely for some means by which he could express them and relieve his burdened soul.

He envied the emigrant who could let fall hot tears on the deck without further ado, while at the same time he dreaded the laughter of the world into which he was about to move when they learned the cause of the emotions that produced them. A boy at forty-five! A dreamer of children’s dreams with fifty in sight—and no practical results!

These were some of the thoughts still tumbling vaguely about his mind when the tug brought letters aboard at Queenstown, and on the dining-room table where they were spread out he found one for himself in a handwriting that he both welcomed and dreaded.

CHAPTER III

He welcomed it, because for years it had been the one remaining link with the life of his old home—these formal epistles that reached him at long intervals; and he dreaded it, because he knew it would contain a definite invitation of an embarrassing description.

‘She’s bound to ask me,’ he reflected as he opened it in his cabin; ‘she can’t help herself. And I am bound to accept, for I can’t help myself either.’ He was far too

honest to think of inventing elaborate excuses. ‘I’ve got to go and spend a month with her right away whether I like it or not.’

It was not by any means that he disliked his sister, for indeed he hardly knew her; after all these years he barely remembered what she looked like, the slim girl of eighteen he had left behind. It was simply that in his mind she stood for the conventional life, so alien to his vision, to which he had returned.

He would try to like her, certainly. Very warm impulses stirred in his heart as he thought of her—his only near relative in the world, and the widow of his old school and Cambridge friend, Dick Messenger. It was in her handwriting that he first learned of Dick’s love for her, as it was in hers that the news of his friend’s death reached him—after his long tour—two months old. The handwriting was a symbol of the deepest human emotions he had known. And for that reason, too, he dreaded it.

He never realised quite what kind of woman she had become; in his thoughts she had always remained simply the girl of eighteen—grown up—married. Her letters had been very kind and gentle, if in the nature of the case more and more formal. She became shadowy and vague in his mind as the years passed, and more and more he had come to think of her as wholly out of his own world. Reading between the lines it was not difficult to see that she attached importance to much in life that seemed to him unreal and trivial, whereas the things that he thought vital she never referred to at all. It might, of course, be merely restraint concealing great depths. He could not tell. The letters, after a few years, had become like formal government reports. He had written fully, however, to announce his home-coming, and her reply had been full of genuine pleasure.

‘I don’t think she’ll make very much of me,’ was the thought in his mind whenever he dwelt upon it. ‘I’m afraid my world must seem foreign—unreal to her; the things I know rubbish.’

So, in the privacy of his cabin, his heart already strangely astir by the emotion of that blue line on the horizon, he read his sister's invitation and found it charming. There was spontaneous affection in it.

'We shall fix things up between us so that no one would ever know.' He did not explain what it was 'no one would ever know,' but went on to finish the letter. He was to make his home with her in the country, he read, until he decided what to do with himself. The tone of the letter made his heart bound. It was a real welcome, and he responded to it instantly like a boy. Only one thing in it seriously disturbed his equanimity. Absurd as it may seem, the fact that his sister's welcome included also that of the children, had a subtly disquieting effect upon him.

... for they are dying to see you and to find out for themselves what the big old uncle they have heard so much about is really like. All their animals are being cleaned and swept so as to be ready for your arrival, and, in anticipation of your stories of the backwoods, no other tales find favour with them any more.

An expression of perplexity puckered his face. 'I declare, I'm afraid of those children—Dick's children!' he thought, holding the open letter to his mouth and squinting down the page, while his eyebrows rose and his forehead broke into lines. 'They'll find out what I am. They'll betray me. I shall never be able to hold out against them.' He knew only too well how searching was the appeal that all growing and immature life made to him. It touched the very centre of him that had refused to grow up and that made him young with itself. 'I can no more resist them than I could resist the baby bears, or that little lynx that used to eat out of my hand.' He shrugged his big shoulders, looking genuinely distressed. 'And then every one will know what I am—an overgrown boy—a dumb poet—a dreamer of dreams that bear no fruit!'

He was not morbidly introspective. He was merely trying to face the little problem squarely. He got up and staggered across the cabin, steadying himself against the rolling of the ship in front of the looking-glass.

‘Big Old Uncle!’

He stuffed the letter into his pocket and surveyed himself critically. Big he certainly was, but that other adjective brought with it a sensation of weariness that had never yet troubled him in his wilderness existence. He was only a little, just a very little, on the shady side of forty-five, but to the children he might seem really old, aged, and to his sister, who was considerably his junior, as elderly, and perhaps in need of the comforts of the elderly.

He squared his shoulders and looked more closely into the glass. There, opposite to him, stood a tall, dignified man in a blue suit, with a spotless linen collar and a neat tie passing through a gold ring, instead of the unkempt fellow he was accustomed to in a flannel shirt, red handkerchief and big sombrero hat pulled over his eyes; a man weighing the best part of fifteen stones, lean, well-knit, vigorous, and nearly six feet three in his socks. A pair of brown eyes, kindly brown eyes he thought, met his own questioningly, and a brown beard—yes, it was still brown—covered the lower part of the face. He put up a hand to stroke it, and noticed that it was a strong, muscular hand, sunburnt but well kept, with neat finger-nails, and a heavy signet ring on one finger. It brushed across the rather deep lines on the bronzed forehead, without brushing them away, however, and then travelled higher to the rough parting in the dark-brown hair, and the hair, he noticed, was brushed in a particular way evidently, a way he thought no one would notice but himself and the lumber-camp barber who first taught him, so as to cover up a few places where the wind made little chilly feelings in winter-time under his fur cap.

Old? No, not old yet—but “getting on” was a gentler phrase he could not deny, and there were certainly odd traces where the crows had walked on his skin while he slept in the forest, and had hopped up even to the corners of his eyes to see if he were really asleep. There were other lines, too—lines of exposure, traced by wind and sun, and one or two queer marks that are said only to come from prolonged

hardship and severest want. For he had known both sides of the wilderness life, and on his long journeys Nature had not always been kind to him.

He stared for a long time at his reflection in the glass, lost in reverie. This coming back to England after so many years was like looking at a picture of himself as he was when he had left; it furnished him with a ready standard of comparison; the changes of the years stood out very sharply, as though they had come about in a single night.

Yes, his face and figure had aged a good deal. He admitted it. And when he frowned he had distinctly an appearance of middle age. This, of course, was the absurd part of it, for in spirit he had remained as young as he was at twenty, as enthusiastic, hopeful, spontaneous as ever, just as much in love with the world, and just as full of boyhood's dreams as when he went to Cambridge. And in his eyes still burned the strange flames that sought to pierce behind the veil of appearances.

'And those children will find it out and make me look ridiculous before I've been there a week!' he exclaimed again, sitting down on his bunk with a crash as the steamer gave a sudden lurch; 'and then where shall I be, I'd like to know?'

He lay on his back for an hour thinking out a plan of action. For, of course, he decided that he must go; only—he must go disguised. And he spent hours inventing the disguise, and more hours perfecting it. For the first time in his life he would adopt a distinct attitude, and, having carefully thought out the attitude he intended to adopt by way of disguise, he buckled it on like armour and fastened it very securely indeed to his large person.

He would be kind; he would even meet the children half-way, kiss them if necessary at stated times, in a stated way, and perhaps occasionally unbend a little as opportunity served and circumstances permitted. But never must he forget, or allow them to forget, that he was a stiff and elderly man, a little grim and gruff, sometimes even severe and short-tempered, and never to be trifled with at any time, or under

any conditions.

Over the tenderer emotions he must keep especial watch; these were a direct channel to his secrets, and once the old unsatisfied enthusiasms escaped, there was no saying what might happen. The thought frightened him, for the pain involved might be very great indeed.

With people of his own age, he realised, the danger would be less. Silence and reserve cover a multitude of shortcomings. But children, he knew, had a simple audacity, a merciless penetration, that no mere pose could ever withstand. And this he felt intuitively, knowing nothing of children, but being taught by these very qualities in himself. Like little animals they would soon find the direct channel to his heart unless well guarded, and come tumbling along it without delay. And then——!

So Paul Rivers left London the very next day, glad in many ways to think that he had this haven of refuge to go to from the noisy horror of the huge strange city; yet with a sinking of his heart lest his true self should be discovered, and held up to scorn.

Moreover, the strange part of it was that as he sped down through the smiling green country that spring afternoon, armed from head to foot in the rigid steel casings of his disguise, he seemed to hear a faint singing deep within him, a singing that belonged to the youngest part of him and yet sprang from that which was vastly ancient, but as to the cause of which he was so puzzled that, in his efforts to analyse it, he forgot about his journey altogether, and was nearly carried past the station where he had to get out.

CHAPTER IV

No man worth his spiritual salt can ever become really entangled in locality.—A. H. L.

The house, like the description of himself in the letter, was big and old. It consisted

of three rambling wings, each added at a different period to an original farmhouse, and was thus full of unexpected staircases, sudden rising passages, and rooms of queer shapes. It resembled, indeed, the structure of a mind that has grown by chance and not by system, and was just as difficult for a stranger to find his way in.

It stood among pine-woods, at the foot of hills that ran on another five miles to drop their chalk cliffs abruptly into the sea. Where the lawns stopped on one side and the kitchen-garden on the other began an expanse of undulating heather-land, dotted with pools of brown water and yellow with patches of gorse and broom. Here rabbits increased and multiplied; sea-gulls screamed and flew, using some of the more secluded ponds for their annual breeding places; foxes lived happily, unhunted and very bold; and the dainty hoof-marks of deer were sometimes found in the sandy margins of the freshwater springs.

It was beautiful country, a bit of wild England, out of the world as very few parts of it now are, and haunted by a loveliness that laid its spell on the heart of the returned exile the moment he topped the hill in the dog-cart and saw it spread out before him like a softly coloured map. The scenery from the train window had somehow disheartened him a little, producing a curious sense of confinement, almost of imprisonment, in his mind: the neat meadows holding wooden cattle; the careful boundaries of ditch and hedge; the five-barred gates, strong to enclose, the countless notices to warn trespassers, and the universal network of barbed wire. Accustomed as he was to the vast, unhedged landscapes of a primitive country, it all looked to him, with its precise divisions, like a toy garden, combed, washed, swept—exquisitely cared for, but a little too sweet and perfumed to be quite wholesome. Only tame things, he felt, could enjoy so gentle a playground, and the call of his own forests—for this really was what worked in him—sang out to him with a sterner cry.

But this view from the ridge pleased him more: there were but few hedges visible;

the eye was led to an open horizon and the sea; an impression of space and freedom rose from the hills and moorlands. Here his thoughts, accustomed to deal with leagues rather than acres, could at least find room to turn about in. And although the perfume that rose to his nostrils was like the perfume of flowers preserved by some artificial process rather than the great clean smells of a virgin world such as he was used to, it was nevertheless the smell of his boyhood, and it moved him powerfully. Odour is the one thing that is impossible to recall in exile. Sights and sounds the imagination can always reconstruct after a fashion, but odour is too elusive. It rose now to his nostrils as something long forgotten, and swept him with a wave of memory that was extraordinarily keen.

‘That’s a smell to take me back twenty-five years,’ he thought, inhaling the scent of the heather. He caught his breath sharply, uncertain whether it was pain or pleasure that predominated. A profound yearning, too fugitive to be seized, too vague to be definitely labelled, stirred in the depths of him as his eye roamed over the miles of sunlight and blue shadow at his feet; again something sang within him as he gazed over the long ridges of heathland, sprinkled with silvery pools, and bearing soft purple masses of pine-woods on their sides as they melted away through haze to the summer sea beyond.

Only when his gaze fell upon the smoke rising from the grey stone roof of the house nestling far below did the joy of his emotion chill a little. A vague sense of alarm and nervousness touched him as he wondered what that grey old building might hold in store for him.

‘It’s silly, I know,’ his thought ran, ‘but I feel like a lost sheep here. It’s Nature that calls me, not people. I don’t know how I shall get on in this chess-board sort of a country. They’ll never care for the things that I care for.’

For a moment a sort of panic came over him. He could almost have turned and run. Vaguely he felt that he was an unfinished, uncouth article in a shop of dainty china.

He sent the dog-cart on ahead, and walked down the hillside towards the house, thinking, thinking—wondering almost why he had ever consented to come, and already conscious of a sense of imprisonment. He was still impressionable as a boy, with sharp, fleeting moods like a boy's.

Then, quite suddenly it seemed, he had walked up the drive and passed through the house, and a figure moved across a lawn to meet him. The first sight of his sister he had known for twenty years was a tall woman in white serge, with a prim, still girlish figure and a quiet, smiling face, moving graciously through patches of sunshine between flower-beds of formal outline. There was no spontaneous rush of welcome, no gush, or flood of questions. He felt relieved. With a flash, too, he realised that her dominant note was still grief for her lost husband. It was written all over her.

Instantly, however, shyness descended upon him like a cloud. The scene he had rehearsed so often in imagination vanished before the reality. He slipped down inside himself, as his habit sometimes was, and watched the performance curiously, as though he were a spectator of it instead of an actor.

He saw himself, hot and rather red in the face, walking awkwardly across the lawn with both hands out, offering his bearded face clumsily to be kissed. And it was kissed, first on one cheek, then on the other, calmly, soberly, delicately. He felt the tingling of it for a long time afterwards. That kiss confused him ridiculously.

At first he could think of nothing to say except the form of address he always used to the Bosses of the lumber camps—'How's everything up your way?'—which he felt was not quite the most suitable phrase for the occasion. Then his sister spoke, and quickly set him more at his ease.

'But you don't look one little bit like an American, Paul!'

He gazed at her in admiration, just as he might have gazed at a complete stranger. The soft intonation of her voice was a keen delight to him. And her matter-of-fact

speech put his shyness to flight.

‘Of course not,’ he replied, leaving out her name after a second’s hesitation, ‘but my voice, I guess——’

‘Not a bit either,’ she repeated, surveying him very critically. ‘You look like a sailor home from the sea more than anything else.’

She wore a wide garden hat of Panama straw, charmingly trimmed with flowers. Her face beneath it, Paul thought, was the most refined and exquisitely delicate he had ever seen. It was like chiselled porcelain. He thought of Hank Davis’s woman at Deep Bay Camp—whose face he used to think wonderful rather—and it suddenly seemed by comparison to have been chopped with a blunt axe out of wood.

They moved to the long chairs upon the lawn, and her brother realised for the first time that his boots were enormous, and that his Minneapolis clothes did not sit upon him quite as they might have done. He trod on a corner of a geranium bed as they went, crushing an entire plant with one foot. But his sister appeared not to notice it.

‘It’s an awful long time, M—Margaret,’ he stammered as they went.

They both sat down and turned to stare at each other. It was, of course, idle to pretend that after so long an absence they could feel any very profound affection. Dick, he realised quickly with a flash of intuition, was the truer link. And, on the whole, it was all much easier than he had expected. His mind began to work very quickly in several directions at once. The beauty of the English garden in its quiet way touched him keenly, stirring in him little whirls of inner delight, fugitive but wonderful. Only a portion of him, after all, went out to his sister.

‘I believe you expected a Red Indian, or a bear,’ he said at length.

She laughed gently, returning his stare of genuine admiration. ‘One couldn’t help wondering a little, Paul dear,—after so many years—could one?’ She always said ‘one’ instead of the obvious personal pronoun. ‘You had no beard, for instance, when you left?’

‘And more hair, perhaps!’

‘You look splendid. I shall be proud of you!’

Paul blushed furiously. It was the first compliment ever paid to him by a woman.

‘Oh, I feel all right,’ he stammered. ‘The healthy life in the woods, open air, and constant moving keep a fellow “fixed-up” to concert pitch all the time. I’ve never once—consulted a doctor in my life.’ He was careful to keep the slang out. He felt he managed it admirably. He said ‘consulted.’

‘And you wrote such nice letters, Paul. It was dear of you.’

‘I was lonely,’ he said bluntly. And after a pause he added, ‘I got all yours.’

‘I’m so glad.’ And then another pause. In which fashion they talked on for half an hour, each secretly estimating the other—wondering a little why they did not feel all kind of poignant emotions they had rather expected to feel.

It was a perfectly natural scene between a brother and sister who had grown up entirely apart, who were quite honest, who were utterly different types, and who yet wished to hold to one another as the nearest blood ties they possessed. They skimmed pleasantly and, so far as he was concerned, more and more easily, over the surface of things. Her talk, like her letters, was sincere, simple, shallow; it concealed no hidden depths, he felt at once. And by degrees, even in this first conversation, crept a shadow of other things, so that he realised they were in reality leagues apart, and could never have anything much in common below the pleasant surface relations of life.

Yet, even while he sheered off, as oil declines from its very nature to mingle with water, he felt genuinely drawn to her in another way. She was his own sister; she was his nearest tie; and she was Dick’s widow. They would get along together all right; they would be good friends.

‘Twenty years, Margaret.’

‘Twenty years, Paul.’

And then another pause of several minutes during which something that was too vague to be a real thought passed like a shadow through his mind. What could his friend Dick have seen in her that was necessary to his life and happiness—Dick Messenger, who was scholar, poet, thinker—who sought the everlasting things—God? He instantly suppressed it as unworthy, something of which he was ashamed, but not before it had left a definite little trace in his imagination.

‘So at last, Paul, you’ve really come home,’ she resumed; ‘I can hardly believe it,—and are going to settle down. You are a rich man.’

‘Aunt Alice did her duty,’ he laughed. He ignored the reference to settling down. It vaguely displeased him. ‘It’s for you as well as me,’ he added, meaning the money. ‘I want to share with you whatever you need.’

‘Not a penny,’ she said quickly; ‘I have all I need. I live with my memories, you know. I am only so glad for your sake,—after all your hard life out there.’

‘The life wasn’t hard; it was rather wonderful,’ he said simply. ‘I liked it.’

‘For a time perhaps; but you must have had curious experiences and lived with very rough people in those—lumber camp places you wrote about.’

He shrugged his shoulders. ‘Simple kind of men, but very decent, very genuine. Few signs of city polish, I admit, but then you know I never cared for frills, Margaret.’

‘Frills!’ she exclaimed, without any expression on her face. ‘Of course not. Still, I am very glad you have left it all. The life must often have been unsuitable and lonely; one always felt that for you. You can’t have had any of the society that one’s accustomed to.’

‘Not of that kind,’ he put in hurriedly with a short laugh, ‘but of other kinds. I struck a pretty good crowd of men on the whole.’

She turned her face slightly away from him; her eyes, he divined, had been fixed for

a moment on his hands. For the first time in his life he realised that they were large and rough and brown. Her own were so pale and dainty—like china hands, glossy and smooth—and the gold bangle on her thin wrist looked as though every second it must slip over her fingers. His own hands disappeared swiftly into the pockets of his coat.

She turned to him with a gentle smile. ‘Anyhow,’ she said, ‘it is simply too delightful to know that you really are here at last. It must seem strange to you at first, and there are so many things to talk over—such a lot to tell. I want to hear all your plans. You’ll get used to us after a bit, and there are lots of nice people in the neighbourhood who are dying to meet you.’

Her brother felt inclined to explain that he had no wish to interfere with their ‘dying’; but, instead, he returned her smile. ‘I’m a poor hand at meeting people, I’m afraid,’ he said. ‘I’m not as sociable as I might be.’

‘But you’ll get over that. Of course, living so long in the backwoods makes one unsociable. But we’ll try and make you happy and comfortable. You have no idea how very, very glad I am that you’ve come home.’

Paul believed her. He leaned over and patted her hand, and she smiled frankly and sweetly in his face. She was a very shadowy sort of personality, he felt. If he blew hard she might blow away altogether, or disappear like a soap-bubble.

‘I’m glad too, of course,’ he replied. ‘Only at my age, you know, it’s not easy to tackle new habits.’

‘No one could take you for a day more than thirty-five,’ she said with truth; ‘so that shall be our own little private secret. You look quite absurdly young.’

They laughed together easily and naturally. Paul felt more at home and soothed than he had thought possible. It had not been in the least formidable after all, and for the first time in his life he knew a little of that enervating kind of happiness that comes from being made a fuss of. As there was still a considerable interval before tea, they

left their chairs and strolled through the garden, and as they went, the talk turned upon the past, and his sister spoke of Dick and of all he had meant to do in the world, had he lived. Paul heard the details of his sudden death for the first time. Her voice and manner were evidence of the melancholy she still felt, but her brother's heart was deeply stirred; he asked for all the particulars he had so often wondered about, and in her quiet, soothing tone, tinged now with tender sadness, she supplied the information. Clearly she had never arisen from the blow. She had worshipped Dick without understanding him.

'Death always frightens me, I think,' she said with a faint smile. 'I try not to think about it.'

She passed on to speak of the children, and told him how difficult she found it to cope with them—she suffered from frequent headaches and could not endure noise—and how she hoped when they were a little older to be more with them. Mademoiselle Fleury, meanwhile, was such an excellent woman and was teaching them all they should know.

'Though, of course, I keep a close eye on them so far as I am able,' she explained, 'and only wish I were stronger.'

They sauntered through the rose-garden and down the neat gravel paths that led to the wilder parts of the grounds where the rhododendron bushes stood in rounded domes and masses. It was very peaceful, very beautiful. He trod softly and carefully. The hush of centuries of cultivation lay over it all. Even the butterflies flew gently, as to the measure of a leisurely dance that deprecated undue animation. Paul caught his thoughts wandering to the open spaces of untamed moorland he had seen from the hill-top. More and more, as his sister's personality revealed itself, he got the impression that she lived enclosed like the wooden cows he had seen from the train, in a little green field, with precise and neatly trimmed borders. Strong emotions, as all other symptoms of plain and vigorous life, she shrank from. There were

notice-boards set about her to warn trespassers, stating clearly that she did not wish to be let out. Yet in her way she was true, loving, and sweet—only it was such a conventional way, he felt.

Leaving the world of rhododendron bushes behind them, they came to the beginning of a pine-wood leading to the heather-land beyond. There was a touch of primitive wildness here. The trees grew straight and tall, filling the glade, and a stream ran brawling among their roots.

‘This is the Gwyle,’ she said, as they entered the shade, ‘it was Dick’s favourite part of the whole grounds. I rarely come here; it’s dark even in summer, and rather damp and draughty, I always think.’

Paul looked about him and drew a long breath. The air was strong with open-air scents of earth and bark and branches. Far overhead the tufted pines swayed, murmuring to the sky; the ground ran away downhill, becoming broken up and uneven; nothing but dark, slender stems rose everywhere about him, like giant seaweeds, he thought, rising from the pools of a deep sea. And the soft wind, moving mysteriously between the shadows and the sunlight, completed the spell. He passed suddenly—willy-nilly, as his nature would have it—into that mood when the simplest things about him turned their faces upwards so that he caught their eyes and their meaning; when the well-known and common things of the world shone out and revealed the infinite. Something in this quiet pine-wood that was mighty, and utterly wonderful, entered his soul, linking him on at a single stroke with the majesty of the great spirit of the earth. What lay behind it? What was its informing spirit? How and where could it link on so intimately with his soul? And could it not be a channel, as he always felt it must be, to the God behind it? Beauty seized him by the throat and made him tremble.

This sudden rush came over him, sea-like. His moods were ever like the sea, some strange touch of colour shifting the entire key. Something, too, made him feel lonely

and oppressed. He, who was accustomed to space in bulk—the space the stars and winds live in—had come to this little, parcelled-out place. He felt clipped already. He turned to the shadowy personality beside him, the boyish impulse bursting its way out. After all, she was his own sister; he could reveal himself to no one if not to her.

‘By Gosh, Margaret,’ he cried, ‘this is the real thing. This wood must be alive and haunted just as the James Bay forests are. It’s simply full of wonder.’

‘It’s the Gwyle wood,’ she said quietly. ‘It’s usually rather damp. But Dick loved it.’

Her brother hardly heard what she said. ‘Listen,’ he said in a hushed tone; ‘do you hear the wind up there aloft? The trees are talking. The wood is full of whispers. There’s no sound in the world like that murmur of a soft breeze in pine branches. It’s like the old gods sighing, which only their true worshippers hear! Isn’t it fine and melancholy? Margaret, d’you know, it goes through me like a fever.’

His sister stopped and stared at him. She wore a little frightened expression. His sudden enthusiasm puzzled her evidently.

‘It’s the Gwyle wood,’ she repeated mechanically. ‘It’s very pretty, I think. Dick always thought so too.’

Her brother, surprised at his own rush of ready words, and already ashamed of the impulse that had prompted him to reveal himself, fell into silence.

‘Nature excites me sometimes,’ he said presently. ‘I suppose it’s because I’ve known nothing else.’

‘That’s quite natural, I’m sure, Paul dear,’ she rejoined, turning to lead the way back to the sunshine of the open garden; ‘it’s very pretty; I love it too. But it rather alarms me, I think, sometimes.’

‘Perhaps the natural tendency in solitude is to personify nature, and make it take the place of men and women. It has become a profound need of my being certainly.’ He

spoke more quietly, chilled by her utter absence of comprehension.

‘In its place I think it is ever so nice. But, Paul, you surprise me. I had no idea you were clever like that.’ She was perfectly sincere in what she said.

Her brother blushed like a boy. ‘It’s my foolishness, I suppose, Margaret,’ he said with a shy laugh. ‘I am certainly not clever.’

‘Anyhow, you can be foolish or clever here to your heart’s content. You must use the place as though it were your own exactly.’

‘Thank you, Margaret.’

‘Only I don’t think I quite understand all those things,’ she added vaguely after a pause. ‘Nixie talks rather like that. She has all poor Dick’s ideas and strange fancies. I really can’t keep up with her at all.’

Paul stiffened at the reference to the children; he remembered his attitude. Already he had been guilty of a serious lapse from his good intentions.

‘She comes down to this wood far too much, and I’m sure it’s not quite healthy for her. I always forget to speak to Mlle. Fleury.’ Then she turned to him and smiled. ‘But they are all so excited about your coming. They will simply devour you.’

‘I’m a poor hand at children, I’m afraid,’ he said, falling back upon his usual formula, ‘but, of course, I shall be delighted to see them.’

She gathered up her white skirts about her trim ankles and led the way out of the wood, her brother following and thinking how slim and graceful she was, and what a charming figure she made among the rose-trees. He got the impression of her as something unreal and shadowy, a creature but half alive. It would hardly have surprised him to see her suddenly flit off into mist and sunshine and disappear from view, leaving him with the certainty that he had been talking with a phantasm of a dream. Between himself and her, however, he realised now, there was a gulf fixed. They looked at one another as it were down the large end of a telescope, and talked

down a long-distance telephone that changed all their words and made the sense unintelligible and meaningless. The scale of values between them had no common denominator. Yet he could love her, and he meant to.

They crossed the lawns and went through the French window into the cool of the drawing-room, and while he was sipping his first cup of afternoon English tea, struggling with a dozen complex emotions that stirred within him, there suddenly darted across the lawn a vision of flying children, with a string of animals at their heels. They swept out of some laurel shrubberies into the slanting evening sunlight, and came to a dead stop on the gravel path in front of the window.

Their eyes met. They had seen him.

There they stood, figures of suddenly arrested motion, staring at him through the glass. ‘So that’s Uncle Paul!’ was the thought in the mind of each. He was being inspected, weighed, labelled. The meeting with his sister was nothing compared to this critical examination, conducted though it was from a distance.

But it lasted only a moment. With a sudden quietness the children passed away from the window towards another door round the corner, and so out of sight.

‘They’ve gone up to get tidy before coming to see you,’ explained his sister; and Paul used the short respite to the best possible advantage by collecting his thoughts, remembering his ‘attitude and disguise,’ and seeing to it that his armour was properly fastened on, leaving no loopholes for sudden attack. He retired cautiously to the only place in a room where a shy man feels really safe—the mat before the fireplace. He almost wished for his gun and hunting-knife. The idea made him laugh.

‘They already love you,’ he heard his sister’s gentle whispering voice, ‘and I know you’ll love them too. You must never let them annoy you, of course.’

‘They’re your children—and Dick’s,’ he answered quietly. ‘I shall get on with them famously, I’m sure.’

CHAPTER V

I kiss you and the world begins to fade.

Land of Heart's Desire.—Yeats.

A few minutes later the door opened softly, and a procession, solemn of face and silent of foot, marched slowly into the room. The moment had come at last for his introduction, and, by a single stroke of unintentional diplomacy, his sister did more to winning her brother's shy heart than by anything else she could possibly have devised. She went out.

'They will prefer to make your acquaintance by themselves,' she said in her gentle way, 'and without any assistance from me.'

The procession advanced to the middle of the room and then stopped short. Evidently, for them, the departure of their mother somewhat complicated matters. They had depended upon her to explain them to their uncle. There they stood, overcome by shyness, moving from one foot to another, with flushed and rosy faces, hair brushed, skin shining, and eyes all prepared to laugh as soon as somebody gave the signal, but not the least knowing how to begin.

And their uncle faced them in similar plight, as, for the second time that afternoon, shyness descended upon him like a cloud, and he could think of nothing to say. His size overwhelmed him; he felt like an elephant. With a sudden rush all his self-possession deserted him. He almost wished that his sister might return so that they should be brought up to him seriatim, named just as Adam named the beasts, and dismissed—which Adam did not do—with a kiss. It was really, of course—and he knew it to his secret mortification—a meeting on both sides of children; they all felt the shyness and self-consciousness of children, he as much as they, and at any moment might take the sudden plunge into careless intimacy, as the way with children ever is.

Meanwhile, however, he took rapid and careful note of them as they stood in that silent, fidgety group before him, with solemn, wide-open eyes fixed upon his face.

The youngest, being in his view little more than a baby, needs no description beyond the fact that it stared quite unintelligently without winking an eye. Its eyes, in fact, looked as though they were not made to close at all. And this is its one and only appearance.

Standing next to the baby, holding its hand, was a boy in a striped suit of knickerbockers, with a big brown curl like a breaking wave on the top of his forehead; he was between eight and nine years old, and his names—for, of course, he had two—were Richard Jonathan, shortened, as Paul learned later, into Jonah. He balanced himself with the utmost care in the centre of a particular square of carpet as though half an inch to either side would send him tumbling into a bottomless abyss. The fingers not claimed by the baby travelled slowly to and fro along the sticky line of his lower lip.

Close behind him, treating similarly another square of carpet, stood a rotund little girl, slightly younger than himself, named Arabella Lucy. There was a touch of audacity in her eyes, and an expression about the mouth that indicated the imminent approach of laughter. She had been distinctly washed and brushed-up for the occasion. Her face shone like a polished onion skin. She had the same sort of brown hair that Jonah considered fashionable, and her name for all common daily purposes was Toby.

The eldest and most formidable of his tormentors, standing a little in advance of the rest, was Margaret Christina, shortened by her father (who, indeed, had been responsible for all the nicknames) into Nixie. And the name fitted her like a skin, for she was the true figure of a sprite, and looked as if she had just stepped out of the water and her hair had stolen the yellow of the sand. Her eyes ran about the room like sunshine from the surface of a stream, and her movements instantly made Paul

think of water gliding over pebbles or ribbed sand with easy and gentle undulations. Flashlike he saw her in a clearing of his lonely woods, a creature of the elements. Her big blue eyes, too, were full of wonder and pensive intelligence, and she stood there in a motherly and protective manner as though she were quite equal to the occasion and would presently know how to act with both courage and wisdom.

And Nixie, indeed, it was, after this prolonged and critical pause, who commenced operations. There was a sudden movement in the group, and the next minute Paul was aware that she had left it and was walking slowly towards him. He noticed her graceful, flowing way of moving, and saw a sunburnt arm and hand extended in his direction. The next second she kissed him. And that kiss acted like an electric shock. Something in her that was magical met its kind in his own soul and, flamelike, leaped towards it. A little tide of hot life poured into him, troubling the deeps with a momentary sense of delicious bewilderment.

‘How do you do, Uncle Paul,’ she said; ‘we are very glad you have come—at last.’

The blood ran ridiculously to his head. He found his tongue, and pulled himself sharply together.

‘So am I, dear. Of course, it’s a long way to come—America.’ He stooped and bestowed the necessary kisses upon the others, who had followed their leader and now stood close beside him, staring like little owls in a row.

‘I know,’ she replied gravely. ‘It takes weeks, doesn’t it? And mother has told us such a lot about you. We’ve been waiting a very long time, I think,’ she added as though stating a grievance.

‘I suppose it is rather a long time to wait,’ he said sheepishly. He stroked his beard and waited.

‘All of us,’ she went on. She included the others in this last observation by bending her head at them, and into her uncle’s memory leaped the vision of a slender silver birch tree that grew on the edge of the Big Beaver Pond near the Canadian border.

She moved just as that silver birch moved when the breeze caught it.

Her manner was very demure, but she looked so piercingly into the very middle of his eyes that Paul felt as though she had already discovered everything about him. They all stood quite close to him now, touching his knees; ready, there and then, to take him wholly into their confidence.

An impulse that he only just managed to control stirred in him and a curious pang accompanied it. He remembered his ‘attitude,’ however, and stiffened slightly.

‘No, it only takes ten days roughly from where I’ve come,’ he said, leaving the mat and dropping into a deep arm-chair a little farther off. ‘The big steamers go very fast, you know, nowadays.’

Their eyes remained simply glued to his face. They switched round a few points to follow his movement, but did not leave their squares of carpet.

‘Madmerzelle said’—it was Toby, née Arabella Lucy, speaking for the first time—‘you knew lots of stories about deers and wolves and things, and would look like a Polar bear for us sometimes.’

‘Oh yes, and beavers and Indians in snowstorms, and the roarer boryalis,’ chimed in Jonah, giving a little hop of excitement that brought him still closer. ‘And the songs they sing in canoes when there are rapids,’ he added with intense excitement. ‘Madmizelle sings them sometimes, but they’re not a bit the real thing, because she hasn’t enough bass in her voice.’

Paul bit his lip and looked at the carpet. Something in the atmosphere of the room seemed to have changed in the last few minutes. Jolly thrills ran through him such as he knew in the woods with his animals sometimes.

‘I’m afraid I can’t sing much,’ he said, ‘but I can tell you a bear story sometimes—if you’re good.’ He added the condition as an afterthought.

‘We are good,’ Jonah said disappointedly, ‘almost always.’

Again that curious pang shot through him. He did not wish to be unkind to them. He pulled back his coat-sleeve suddenly and showed them a scar on his arm.

‘That was made by a bear,’ he said, ‘years ago.’

‘Oh, look at the fur!’ cried Toby.

‘Don’t be silly! All proper men have hair on their arms,’ put in Jonah. ‘Does it still hurt, Uncle Paul?’ he asked, examining the place with intense interest.

‘Not now. We rolled down a hill together head over heels. Such a big brute, too, he was, and growled like a thunderstorm; it’s a wonder he didn’t squash me. I’ve got his claws upstairs. I think, really, he was more frightened than I was.’

They clapped their hands. ‘Tell us, oh, do tell us!’

But Nixie intervened in her stately fashion, leaning over a little and stroking the scar with fingers that were like the touch of leaves.

‘Uncle Paul’s tired after coming such a long way,’ she said gravely with sympathy. ‘He hasn’t even unpacked his luggage yet, have you, Uncle?’

Paul admitted that this was the case. He made the least possible motion to push them off and clear a space round his chair.

‘Are you tired? Oh, I’m so sorry,’ said Jonah.

‘Then he ought to see the animals at once,’ decided Toby, ‘before they go to bed,’—she seemed to have a vague idea that the whole world must go to bed earlier than usual if Uncle Paul was tired—‘or they’ll be awfully disappointed.’ Her face expressed the disappointment of the animals as well as her own; her uncle’s fatigue had already taken a second place. ‘Oughtn’t he?’ she added, turning to the others.

Paul remembered his intention to remain stiffly grown up.

He made a great effort. Oh, but why did they tug and tear at his heart so, these little fatherless children? And why did he feel at once that he was in their own world, comfortably ‘at home’ in it? Did this world of children, then, link on so easily and

naturally with the poet's region of imagination and wonder in which he himself still dwelt for all his many years, bringing him close to his main passion—to know Reality?

'Of course, I'll come and say good-night to them before they turn in,' he decided kindly, letting Nixie and Toby take his hands, while Jonah followed in the rear to show that he considered this a girl's affair yet did not wholly disapprove.

'Hadn't we better tell your mother where we're going?' he asked as they started.

'Oh, mother won't mind,' came the answer in chorus. 'She hardly ever comes up to the nursery, and, besides, she doesn't care for the animals, you see.'

'They're rather 'noying for mother,' Nixie added by way of explanation. She decapitated many of her long words in this way, and invariably omitted difficult consonants.

It was a long journey, and the explanations about the animals, their characteristics, names, and habits, occupied every minute of the way. He gathered that they were chiefly cats and kittens, to what number he dared not calculate, and that puppies, at least one parrot, a squirrel, a multitude of white mice, and various larger beasts of a parental and aged description, were indiscriminately all mixed up together. Evidently it was a private menagerie that he was invited to say good-night to, and the torrent of outlandish names that poured into his ears produced a feeling of confusion in his mind that made him wonder if he was not turning into some sort of animal himself, and thus becoming free of their language.

It was the beginning of a very trying ordeal for him, this being half pulled, half shoved along the intricate passages of the old house; now down a couple of unexpected steps that made him stumble; now up another which made him trip; through narrow doorways, where Jonah had the audacity to push him from behind lest he should stick half-way; and, finally, at full speed, the girls tugging at his arms in front, down a long corridor which proved to be the home-stretch to the nursery.

‘I was afraid we’d lost the trail,’ he gasped. ‘It’s poorly blazed.’

‘Oh, but we haven’t got any tails to lose,’ laughed Toby, misunderstanding him. ‘And they wouldn’t blaze if we had.’

‘Look out, Nixie! Not so fast! Uncle Paul’s losing his wind as well as his trail,’ shouted Jonah from the rear. And at that moment they reached the door of the nursery and came to an abrupt halt, Paul puffing like a lumberman.

It was impossible for him to remain sedate, but he did the next best thing—he remained silent.

Then Jonah, pushing past him, turned the handle, and he was ushered, still panting, into so typical a nursery-schoolroom that the scenes of his forgotten boyhood rushed back to him with a vividness that seemed to destroy the passage of time at a single stroke. The past stood reconstructed. The actual, living mood of his own childhood rose out of the depths of blurred memories and caused a mist to rise before his eyes. An emotion he was utterly unable to define shook his heart.

The room was filled with the slanting rays of the setting sun, and the air from the open windows smelt of garden trees, lawns, and flower-beds. Sea and heather, too, added their own sharper perfumes. It caught him away for a moment—oh, that strange power of old perfumes—to the earliest scenes of his own life, the boyhood in the gardens of Kent before America had claimed him. And then the details of the room itself became so insistent that he almost lost his head and turned back without more ado into a boy of fifteen.

He looked swiftly about him. There was the old-fashioned upright piano against the wall, the highly coloured pictures hanging crooked on the wall, the cane chairs, the crowded mantelpiece, the high wire fender before the empty grate, the general atmosphere of toys, untidiness and broken articles of every sort and kind—and, above all, the figures of these excited children all bustling recklessly about him with their glowing and expectant faces.

There was Toby, her blue sash all awry, running busily about the room; and Nixie, now in sunshine, now in shadow, with her hair of yellow sand and her blue dreaming eyes that saw into the Beyond; and little Jonah, moving about somewhat pompously to prepare the performance that was to follow. It all combined to produce a sudden shock that swept down upon him so savagely, that he was within an ace of bolting through the door and making his escape into safer quarters.

The False Paul, that is, was within an ace of running away with all his elaborate armour, and leaving the True Paul dancing on the floor, a child among children, a spirit of impulse, enthusiasm and imagination, laughing with the sheer happiness of his perpetual youth.

It was a dangerous moment; he was within measurable distance of revealing himself. For a moment his clothes felt far too large for him; and only just in time did he remember his ‘attitude,’ and the danger of being young when he really was old, and the absurdity of being anything else than a large, sedate man of forty-five. Only he wished that Nixie would not watch him so appealingly with those starry eyes of hers ... and look so strangely like the forms that haunted his own wild forests and streams on the other side of the Atlantic.

He stiffened quickly, drew himself up, and turned to give his elderly attention to the chorus of explanation and introduction that was already rising about him with the sound and murmur of the sea.

Something was happening.

For the floor of the room, he now perceived, had become suddenly full of movement, as though the carpet had turned alive. He felt a rubbing against his legs and ankles; with a soft thud something leaped upon the table and covered his hand with smooth, warm fur, uttering little sounds of pleasure at the same time. On the top of the piano, a thing he had taken for a heap of toys rose and stretched itself into an odd shape of straight lines and arching curves. From the window-sill, where the

sun poured in, a round grey substance dropped noiselessly down upon the carpet and advanced with measured and calculated step towards him; while, from holes and hiding-places undivined, three or four little fluffy things, with padded feet and stiff pointing tails, shot out like shadows and headed straight for a row of saucers that he now noticed for the first time against the farther wall. The whole room seemed to fill with soft and graceful movement; and, mingled with the voices of the children, he caught a fine composite murmur that was soothing as the sound of flowing wind and water.

It was the sound and the movement of many animals.

‘Here they are,’ said a voice—‘some of them. The others are lost, or out hunting.’

For the moment Paul did not stop to ask how many ‘others’ there were. He stood rigidly still for fear that if he moved he might tread on something living.

There came a scratching sound at the door, and Toby dashed forward to open it.

‘Silly, naughty babies!’ she cried, nearly tumbling over the fender in her attempt to seize two round bouncing things that came tearing into the room like a couple of yellow puddings. ‘Uncle Paul has come to see you all the way from America! And then you’re late like this! For shame!’

With a series of thuds and bangs that must have bruised anything not unusually well padded, the new arrivals, who looked for all the world like small fat bears, or sable muffs on short brown legs with feet of black velvet, dashed round the room in a mad chase after nothing at all. A hissing and spitting issued from dark corners and from beneath various pieces of furniture, but the two balls confined their attentions almost at once to the honoured guest. They charged up against his legs as though determined to upset his balance—this mountain of a man—and then careered clumsily round the room, knocking over anything small enough that came in their way, and behaving generally as though they wanted to clear the whole place in the shortest possible time for their own particular and immediate benefit.

Next, lifting his eyes for a moment from this impetuous attack, he saw a brilliantly coloured thing behind bars, standing apparently on its head and looking upside-down at him with an expression of undisguised and scornful amusement; while not far from it, in a cage hanging by the cuckoo clock, some one with a tail as large as his body, shot round and round on a swinging trapeze that made Paul think of a midget practising in a miniature gymnasium.

‘These are our animals, you see, Uncle Paul,’ Jonah announced proudly from his position by the door. There was a trace of condescension in his tone.

‘We have lots of out-of-door animals as well, though,’ Toby hastened to explain, lest her uncle should be disappointed.

‘I suppose they’re out of doors?’ said Paul lamely.

‘Of course they are,’ replied Jonah; ‘in the stables and all about.’ He turned to Nixie, who stood quietly by her uncle’s side in a protective way, superintending. Nixie nodded corroboration.

‘Now, we’ll introduce you—gradgilly,’ announced Toby, stooping down and lifting with immense effort the large grey Persian that had been sleeping on the window-sill when they came in. She held it with great difficulty in her arms and hands, but in spite of her best efforts only a portion of it found actual support, the rest straggling away like a loosely stuffed bolster she could not encompass.

It was evidently accustomed to being dealt with thus in sections, for it continued to purr sleepily, blinking its large eyes with the usual cat-smile, and letting its head fall backwards as though it suddenly desired to examine the ceiling from an entirely fresh point of view. None of its real attention, of course, was given to the actual proceeding. It merely suffered the absurd affair—absent-mindedly and with condescension. Its whiskers moved gently.

‘What’s its name?’ he asked kindly.

‘Her name,’ whispered Nixie.

‘We call her Mrs. Tompkyns, because it’s old now,’ Toby explained, ignoring genders.

‘After the head-gardener’s gra’mother,’ Nixie explained hastily in his ear; ‘but we might change it to Uncle Paul in honour of you now, mightn’t we?’

‘Mrs. Uncle Paul,’ corrected Jonah, looking on with slight disapproval, and anxious to get to the white mice and the squirrel.

‘It would be a pity to change the name, I think,’ Paul said, straightening himself up dizzily from the introduction, and watching the splendid creature fall upon its head from Toby’s weakening grasp, and then march away with unperturbed dignity to its former throne upon the window-sill. ‘I feel rather afraid of Mrs. Tompkyns,’ he added; ‘she’s so very majestic.’

‘Oh, you needn’t be,’ they cried in chorus. ‘It’s all put on, you know, that sort of grand manner. We knew her when she was a kitten.’

The object-lesson was not lost upon him. Of all creatures in the world, he reflected as he watched her, cats have the truest dignity. They absolutely refuse to be laughed at. No cat would ever betray its real self, yet here was he, a grown-up, intelligent man, vacillating, and on the verge already of hopeless capitulation.

‘And what’s the name of these persons?’ he asked quickly, turning for safety to Nixie, who had her arms full of a writhing heap she had been diligently collecting from the corners of the room.

‘Oh, that’s only Mrs. Tompkyns’ family,’ exclaimed Jonah impatiently; ‘the last family, I mean. She’s had lots of others.’

‘The last family before this was only two,’ Nixie told him. ‘We called them Ping and Pong. They live in the stables now. But these we call Pouf, Sambo, Spritey, Zezette, and Dumps——’

‘And the next ones,’ Toby broke in excitedly, ‘we’re going to call with the names on

the engines when we go up to London to see the dentist.'

'Or the names of the Atlantic steamers wouldn't be bad,' said Paul.

'Not bad,' Jonah said, with lukewarm approval; 'only the engines would be much better.'

'There may not be any next ones,' opined Toby, emerging from beneath a sofa after a frantic, but vain, attempt to catch something alive.

Jonah snorted with contempt. 'Of course there will. They come in bunches all the time, just like grapes and chestnuts and things. Madmizelle told me so. There's no end to them. Don't they, Uncle Paul?'

'I believe so,' said the authority appealed to, extracting his finger with difficulty from the teeth and claws of several kittens.

There came a lull in the proceedings, the majority of the animals having escaped, and successfully concealed themselves among what Toby called 'the furchinur.' Paul was still following a prior train of reflection.

'Yes, cats are really rather wonderful creatures,' he mused aloud in spite of himself, turning instinctively in the direction of Nixie. 'They possess a mysterious and superior kind of intelligence.'

For a moment it was exactly as if he had tapped his armour and said, 'Look! It's all sham!'

The child peered sharply up in his face. There was a sudden light in her eyes, and her lips were parted. He had not exactly expected her to answer, but somehow or other he was not surprised when she did. And the answer she made was just the kind of thing he knew she would say. He was annoyed with himself for having said so much.

'And they lead secret little lives somewhere else, and only let us see what they want us to see. I knew you understood really.' She said it with an elfin smile that was

certainly borrowed from moonlight on a mountain stream. With one fell swoop it caught him away into a world where age simply did not exist. His mind wavered deliciously. The singing in his heart was almost loud enough to be audible.

But he just saved himself. With a sudden movement he leaned forward and buried his face in the pie of kittens that nestled in her arms, letting them lose their paws for a moment in his beard. The kittens might understand, but at least they could not betray him by putting it into words. It was a narrower escape than he cared for.

‘And these are the Chow puppies,’ cried Jonah, breathless from a long chase after the sable muffs.

‘We call them China and Japan.’

Paul welcomed the diversion. Their teeth were not nearly so sharp as the kittens’, and they burrowed with their black noses into his sleeves. So thick was their fur that they seemed to have no bones at all; their dark eyes literally dripped laughter.

With an effort he put on a more sedate manner.

‘You have got a lot of beasts,’ he said.

‘Animals,’ Nixie corrected him. ‘Only toads, rats, and hedgehogs are beasts. And, remember, if you’re rude to an animal, as Mademoiselle Fleury was once, it only ’spises you—and then——’

‘I beg their pardon,’ he put in hurriedly; ‘I quite understand, of course.’

‘You see it’s rather important, as they want to like you, and unless you respect them they can’t, can they?’ she finished earnestly.

‘I do respect them, believe me, Nixie, and I appreciate their affection. Affection and respect must always go together.’

The children were wholly delighted. Paul had completely won their hearts from the very beginning. The parrot, the squirrel, and the white mice were all introduced in turn to him, and he heard sundry mysterious allusions to ‘the owl in the stables,’

‘Juliet and her two kids,’ to say nothing of dogs, ponies, pigeons, and peacocks, that apparently dwelt in the regions of outer space, and were to be reserved for the morrow.

The performance was coming to an end. Paul was already congratulating himself upon having passed safely, if not with full credit, through a severe ordeal, when the door opened and a woman of about twenty-five, with a pleasant face full of character and intelligence, stood in the doorway. A torrent of French instantly broke loose on all sides. The woman started a little when she perceived that the children were not alone.

‘Oh, Mademoiselle, this is Uncle Paul,’ they cried, each in a different fashion. ‘This is our Uncle Paul! He’s just been introduced to the animals, and now he must be introduced to you.’

Paul shook hands with her, and the introduction passed off easily enough; the woman was charming, he saw at the first glimpse, and possessed of tact. She at once took his side and pretended to scold her charges for having plagued and bothered him so long. Evidently she was something more to them than a mere governess. The lassitude of his sister, no doubt, gave her rights and responsibilities.

But what impressed Paul when he was alone—for her simple remark that it was past bedtime was followed by sudden kisses and disappearance—was the remarkable change that her arrival had brought about in the room. It came to him with a definite little shock. It was more than significant, he felt.

And it was this: that the children, though obviously they loved her, treated her as some one grown up and to be obeyed, whereas himself, he now realised, they had all along treated as one of themselves to whom they could be quite open and natural. His ‘attitude’ they had treated with respect, just as he had treated the attitude of the animals with respect, but at the same time he had been made to feel one of themselves, in their world, part and parcel of their own peculiar region. There had

been nothing forced about it whatever. Whether he liked it or not they accepted him. His ‘attitude’ was not regarded seriously. It was not regarded at all. And this was grave.

He was so simple that he would never have thought of this but for the entrance of the governess. Her arrival threw it all into sharp relief. Clearly the children recognised no barrier between themselves and him; he had been taken without parley straight into their holy of holies. Nixie, as leader and judge, had carried him off at once.

And this was a very subtle and powerful compliment that made him think a great deal. He would either have to drop his armour altogether or make it very much more effective.

Indeed, it was the immediate problem in his mind as he slowly made his way downstairs to find his sister on the lawn, and satisfy her rather vague curiosity by telling her that the children had introduced him to the animals, and that he had got on famously with them all.

CHAPTER VI

Oh! Fairies, take me out of this dull world

For I would ride with you upon the wind,

Run on the top of the dishevelled tide,

And dance upon the mountains like a flame!

Land of Heart’s Desire.—Yeats.

Paul went early to bed that night. It was his first night in an English country home for many years; strange forces were at work in him. His introduction to the children, his meeting with Nixie especially, had let loose powers in his soul that called for sober reflection; and he felt the need of being alone.

Another thing, too, urged him to seek the solitude of his chamber, for after dinner he had sat for a couple of hours with his sister, talking over the events and changes of the long interval since they had met,—the details that cannot be told in letters, the feelings that no one writes. And he came upstairs with his first impression of her character slightly modified. She had more in her than he first divined. Beneath that shadowy and silken manner he had caught traces of distinct purpose. For one thing she was determined to keep him in England.

He had told her frankly about his arrangement with the lumber Company, explaining that he regarded his present visit in the light of a holiday. ‘I suppose that is—er—wise of you,’ she said, but she had not been able to conceal her disappointment. She asked him presently if he really wanted to live all his life in such a place, and what it was in English life, or civilised, conventional life, that he so disliked, and Paul, feeling distinctly uncomfortable—for he loathed giving pain—had answered evasively, with more skill than he knew, ‘“Where your treasure is, there shall your heart be also.” I suppose my treasure—the only kind I know—is out there in the great woods, Margaret.’

‘Paul, are you married, then?’ she asked with a start; and when he laughed and assured her most emphatically that he was not, she looked exceedingly puzzled and a little shocked too. ‘Are you so very fond of this—er—treasure, then?’ she asked point blank in her softest manner, ‘and is she so—I mean, can’t you bring her home and acknowledge her?’ And after his first surprise when he had gathered her meaning, it took him a long time to explain that there was no woman concerned at all, and that it was entirely a matter of his temperament.

‘Everybody makes his own world, remember,’ he laughed, ‘and its size depends, I suppose, upon the power of the imagination.’

‘Then I fear one’s imagination is a very poor one,’ she said solemnly, ‘or else I have none at all. I cannot pretend to understand your tastes for trees and woods and

things; but you're exactly like poor Dick in that way, and I suppose one must be really clever to be like that.'

'A year is a long time, Margaret,' he said after a pause, to comfort her. 'Much may happen before it's over.'

'I hope so,' she had answered, standing behind his chair and stroking his head. 'By that time you may have met some one who will reconcile you to—to staying here—a little longer.' She patted his head as though he were a Newfoundland dog, he thought. It made him laugh.

'Perhaps,' he said.

And, now in his room, before the candles were lighted, he was standing by the open window, thinking it all over. Of women, of course, he knew little or nothing; to him they were all charming, some of them wonderful; and he was not conscious that his point of view might be considered by a man of the world—of the world that is little, sordid, matter-of-fact—distinctly humorous. At forty-five he believed in women just as he had believed in them at twenty, only more so, for nothing had ever entered his experience to trouble an exquisite picture in his mind. They stood nearer to God than men did, he felt, and the depravity of really bad women he explained by the fact that when they did fall they fell farther. The sex-fever, so far as he was concerned, had never mounted to his brain to obscure his vision.

He only knew—and knew it with a sacred wonder that was akin to worship—that women, like the angels, were beyond his reach and beyond his understanding. Comely they all were to him. He looked up to them in his thoughts, not for their reason or strength, but for the subtlety of their intuition, their power of sacrifice, and last but not least, for the beauty and grace of their mere presence in a world that was so often ugly and unclean.

'The flame—the lamp—the glory—whatever it may be called—keeps alight in their faces,' he loved to say to himself, 'almost to the end. With men it is gone at

thirty—often at twenty.’

And his sister, for all her light hold on life, and the strain in her that in his simplicity he regarded as rather ‘worldly,’ was no exception to the rule. He thought her entirely good and wonderful, and, perhaps, so far as she went, he was not too egregiously mistaken. He looked for the best in everybody, and so, of course, found it.

‘Only she will never make much of me, or I of her, I’m afraid,’ he thought as he leaned out of the window, watching the scented darkness. ‘We shall get along best by leaving each other alone and being affectionate, so to speak, from a distance.’

And, indeed, so far he had escaped the manifold seductions by which Nature seeks to attain her great object of perpetuating the race. As a potential father of many sons he was of course an object of legitimate prey; but his forest life had obviated all that; his whole forces had turned inwards for the creation of the poet’s visions, and Nature in this respect, he believed, had passed him by. So far as he was aware there was no desire in him to come forth and perform a belated duty to the world by increasing its population. It was the first time any one had even suggested to him that he should consider such a matter, and the mere idea made him smile.

Gradually, however, these thoughts cleared away, and he turned to other things he deemed more important.

The night was still as imaginable; odours of earth and woods were wafted into the room with the scent of roses. Overhead, as he leaned on his elbow and gazed, the stars shone thickly, like points of gold pricked in a velvet curtain. A lost wind stirred the branches; he could distinguish their solemn dance against the constellations. Orion, slanting and immense, tilted across the sky, the two stars at the base resting upon the shoulder of the hill, and far off, in the deeps of the night, the murmur of the pines sounded like the breaking of invisible surf.

Something indescribably fresh and wild in the taste of the air carried him back again across the ocean. The ancient woods he knew so well rose before the horizon’s rim,

swimming with purple shadows and alive with a continuous great murmur that stretched for a hundred leagues. The picture of those desolate places, lying in lonely grandeur beneath the glitter of the Northern Lights, with a thousand lakes echoing the laughter of the loons, came seductively before his inner eye. The thought of it all stirred emotions profound and primitive, emotions too closely married to instincts, perhaps, to be analysed; something in him that was ancestral, possibly pre-natal. There was nothing in this little England that could move him so in the same fashion. His thoughts carried him far, far away....

The faint sound of a church clock striking the hour—a sound utterly alien to the trend of his thoughts—brought him back again to the present. He heard it across many fields, fields that had been tilled for centuries, and there could have been no more vivid or eloquent reminder that he was no longer in a land where hedges, church bells, notice-boards, and so forth were not. He came back with a start, and a sensation almost akin to pain. He felt cramped, caught, caged. The tinkling church bells annoyed him.

His thoughts turned, with a sudden jerk, as it were, to the undeniable fact that he had been trying to go about in a disguise, with a clumsy mask over his face, so that he might appear decently grown up in his new surroundings.

A pair of owls began to hoot softly in the woods, answering one another like voices in a dream, and just then the lost wind left the pine branches and died away into the sky with a swift rush as of many small wings. In the sudden pool of silence that followed, he fancied he could hear across the dark miles of heathland the continuous low murmur of the sea.

The beauty of night, as ever, entered his soul, but with a joy that was too solemn, too moving, to be felt as pleasure. It touched something in him beyond the tears of either pain or delight: something that held in it a mysterious wonder so searching, so poignant, as to be almost terrible.

He caught his breath and waited.... The great woods of the world, mountains, the sea, stars, and the crying winds were always for him symbols of the gateways into a mightier and ideal region, a Beyond-world where he found rest for his yearnings and a strange peace. They were his means of losing himself in a temporary heaven.

And to-night it was the beauty of an English scene that carried him away; and this in spite of his having summoned the wilder vision from across the seas. Already the forces of his own country were insensibly at work upon an impressionable mind and temperament. The very air, so sweetly scented as he drew it in between his lips, was charged with the subtly-working influences of the 'Old Country.' A new web, soft but mighty, was being woven about his spirit. Even now his heart was conscious of its gossamer touch, as his dreams yielded imperceptibly to a new colour.

He followed vaguely, curiously, the leadings of delicate emotions that had been stirred in him by the events of the day. Symbols, fast-shifting, protean, passed in suggestive procession before his mind's eye, in the way that symbols ever will—in a poet's heart. He thought of children, of the children, and of the extraordinarily fresh appeal they had made to him. Children: how near they, too, stood to the great things of life, and all the nearer, perhaps, for not being aware of it. How their farseeing eyes and their simple, unlined souls pointed the way, like Nature, to the ideal region of which he was always dreaming: to Reality, to God.

All real children knew and understood; were ready to offer their timid yet unhesitating guidance, and without question or explanation.

Had, then, Nixie and her troupe already taken him prisoner? And were the soft chains already twined about his neck?...

Paul hardly acknowledged the question definitely to himself. He was merely dreaming, and his dreams, rising and falling like the tides of a sea, bore him to and fro among the shoals and inlands of the day's events. The spell of the English June night was very strong upon him, no doubt, for presently a door opened somewhere

behind him, and the very children he was thinking about danced softly into the room. Nixie came up close and gazed into his very eyes, and again there began that odd singing in his heart that he had twice noticed during the day. An atmosphere of magic, shot with gold and silver, came with the child into the room.

For the fact was—though he realised it only dimly—the Fates were now making him a deliberate offer. Had he not been so absorbed, he would have perceived and appreciated the delicacy of their action. As a rule they command, whereas now they were only suggesting.

It was really his own heart asking. Here, in this rambling country house under the hills, was an opportunity of entering the region to which all that was best and truest in him naturally belonged. The experience might prove a stepping-stone to a final readjustment of his peculiar being with the normal busy world of common things. Here was a safety-valve, as he called it, a channel through which he might express much, if not all, of his accumulated stores. The guides, now fast asleep in their beds, had sent out their little dream-bodies to bring the invitation; they were ready and waiting.

And he, thinking there under the stars his queer, long thoughts, bred in years of solitude, dallied with the invitation, and—hesitated. The inevitable pain frightened him—the pain of being young when the world cries that you are old; the pang of the eternal contrast when the world would laugh at what seemed to it a foolish fantasy of youth—a pose, a dream that must bring a bitter awakening! He heard the voices but too plainly, and shrank quickly from the sound.

But Nixie, standing there beside him with such gentle persistence, certainly made him waver.... The temptation to yield was strong and seductive.... Yet, when the faint splendour of the summer moonrise dimmed the stars near the horizon, and the pines shone tipped with silver, he found himself borne down by the sense of caution that urged no revolutionary change, and advised him to keep his armour tightly

buckled on in the disguise he had adopted.

He would wait and see—a little longer, at any rate; and meanwhile he must be firm and stern and dull; master of himself, and apparently normal.

He walked to the dressing-table and lit his candles, and, as he did so, caught a picture of himself in the glass. There was a gleam of subdued fire in his eyes, he thought, that was not naturally there. Something about him looked a little wild; it made him laugh.

He laughed to think how utterly absurd it was that a man of his size and age, and—But the idea refused to frame himself in language—He did not know exactly why he laughed, for at the same time he felt sad. With him, as with all other children, tears and laughter are never far apart. It would have been just as intelligible if he had cried.

But when the candles were out and he was in bed, and the stars were peeping into the darkened room, the memory of his laughter seemed unreal, and the sound of it oddly remote.

For, after all, that laughter was rather mysterious. It was not the Outer Paul laughing at the Inner Paul. It was the Inner Paul laughing with himself.

CHAPTER VII

The imaginative process may be likened to the state of reverie.

—Alison.

The psychology of sleep being apparently beyond all intelligible explanation, it was not surprising that he woke up next morning as though he had gone to bed without a single perplexity. He remembered none of the thoughts that had thronged his brain a few short hours before; perhaps they had all slipped down into the region of submerged consciousness, to crop out later in natural, and apparently spontaneous,

action.

At any rate he remembered little enough of his troubles when he woke and saw the fair English sun streaming in through the open windows. Odours of woods and dew-drenched lawns came into the room, and the birds were singing with noise enough to waken all the country-side. It was impossible to lie in bed. He was up and dressed long before any servant came to call him.

Downstairs he found the house in darkness; doors barred and windows heavily shuttered as though the house had expected an attack. Not a soul was stirring. The air was close and musty. The idea of having to strike a match in a 'country' house at 6 A.M. somehow oppressed him. Not knowing his way about very well yet, he stumbled across the hall to find a door, and as he did so something soft came rubbing against his legs. He put his hand down in the darkness and felt a furry, warm body and a stiff upright tail that reached almost to his knees. The thing began to purr.

'I declare!' he exclaimed; 'Mrs. Tompkyns!' and he struck a match and followed her to the drawing-room door. A moment later they had unfastened the shutters of the French window—Mrs. Tompkyns assisting by standing on her hind legs and tapping the swinging bell—and made their way out on to the lawn.

The sunshine came slanting between the cedars and lay in shining strips on the grass. Everything glistened with dew. The air was sweet and fresh as it only is in the early hours after the dawn. Very faintly, as though its mind was not yet made up, the air stirred among the bushes.

Paul's first impulse was to waken the entire household so that they might share with him this first glory of the morning. 'Probably they don't know how splendid it is!' The thought of the sleeping family, many of them perhaps with closed windows, missing all the wonder, was a positive pain to him. But, fortunately for himself, he decided it might be better not to begin his visit in this way.

‘I guess you and I, Mrs. Tompkyns, are the only people about,’ he said, looking down at the beautiful grey creature that sniffed the air calmly at his feet. ‘Come on, then. Let’s make a raid together on the woods!’

He threw a disdainful glance at the sleeping house; no smoke came from the chimneys; most of the upper windows were closed. A delicious fragrance stole out of the woods to meet him as he strolled across the wet lawn. He felt like a schoolboy doing something out of bounds.

‘You lead and I follow,’ he said, addressing his companion in mischief.

And at once his attention became absorbed in the animal’s characteristic behaviour. Obviously it was delighted to be with him; yet it did not wish him to think so, or, if he did think so, to give any sign of the fact. Nothing could have been plainer. First it crept along by the stone wall delicately, with its body very close to the ground as though the weight of the atmosphere oppressed it; and when he spoke, it turned its head with an affectation of genuine surprise as though it would say, ‘You here! I thought I was alone.’ Then it sat down on the gravel path and began to wash its face and paws till he had passed, after which—when he was not looking, of course—it followed him condescendingly, sniffing at blades of grass en route without actually touching them, and flicking its tail upwards with sudden, electric jerks.

Paul understood in a general way what was expected of him. He watched it surreptitiously, pretending to examine the flowers. For this, he knew, was the great Cat Game of elaborate pretence. And Mrs. Tompkyns, true adept in the art, played up wonderfully, and incidentally taught him much about the ways and methods of simple disguise; it advanced stealthily when he wasn’t looking; it stopped to wash, or gaze into the air, the moment he turned. It was very shy, and very affected, and very self-conscious. Inimitable was the way it kept to all the little rules of the game. It walked daintily down the path after him, shaking the dew from its paws with a rapid, quivering motion. Then, suddenly arching its back as though momentarily

offended—at nothing—it stared up at him with an expression that seemed to question his very existence. ‘I guess I ought to fade away when you look at me like that!’ was his thought.

‘I’m here. I’m coming, Mrs. Tompkyns,’ he felt constrained to remark aloud before going forward again. ‘The grand morning excites my blood just as much as it excites your own.’

It seemed necessary to assert his presence. No intelligent person can be conceited long in the presence of a cat. No living creature can so sublimely ‘ignore.’ But Paul was not conceited. He continued to watch it with delight.

One very important rule of the game appeared to be that plenty of bushes were necessary by way of cover, so that it could pretend it was not really coming farther than the particular bush where it was hiding at the moment. Instinctively, he never made the grave mistake of calling it to follow; and though it never trotted alongside, being always either behind or in front of him, the presence of the cat in his immediate neighbourhood provided all sorts of company imaginable. It had also provided him with an opportunity to play the hero.

Then, suddenly, the calm and peace of the morning was disturbed by a scene of strange violence. Mrs. Tompkyns, with spread legs, dashed past him at a surprising speed and flew up the trunk of a big tree as though all the dogs in the county were at her heels. From this position of vantage she looked back over her shoulder with hysterical and frightened eyes. There was a great show of terror, a vast noise of claws upon the bark. No actress could have created better the atmosphere of immediate danger and alarm.

Paul had an instinctive flair for this move of the game. He made a great pretence of running up to save the cat from its awful position, but of course long before he got there she had dropped laughingly to earth again, having thus impressed upon him the value of her life.

‘A question of life or death that time, I think, Mrs. Tompkyns,’ he said soothingly, trying to stroke her back. ‘I wonder if the head-gardener’s grandmother after whom you were named ever did this sort of thing. I doubt it!’

But the creature escaped from him easily. For no one is ever caught in the true Cat Game. It scuttled down the path at full speed in a sort of canter, but sideways, as though a violent wind blew it and desperate resistance was necessary to keep on its feet at all. After that its self-consciousness seemed to disappear a little. It behaved normally. It stalked birds that showed, however, no fear of its approach. It sniffed the tips of leaves. It played baby-fashion with various invisible companions; and finally it vanished in a thick jungle of laurels to hunt in savage earnest, and left Paul to his own devices. Like all its kind, it only wished to prove how charming it could be, in order to emphasise later its utter independence of human sympathy and companionship.

‘If you must go, I suppose you must,’ he laughed, ‘and I shall try to enjoy myself without you.’

He strolled on alone and lost himself in the pine-wood that flanked the back lawn, stopping finally by a gate that led to the world of gorse and heather beyond. The brilliant patches of yellow wafted perfumes to his nostrils. Far in the distance a blue line hinted where the sea lay; and over all lay the radiance of the early morning. The old spell was there that never failed to make his heart leap. And, as he stood still, the cuckoo flitted, invisible and mischievous, from tree to tree, calling with its flutelike notes,—

Sung beyond memory,

When golden to the winds this world of ours

Waved wild with boundless flowers;

Sung in some past where wildernesses were,—

and his thoughts went roaming back to the great woods he had left behind, woods

where the naked streams ran shouting and lawless, where the trees had not learned self-consciousness, and where no little tame folk trotted on velvet feet through trim and scented gardens.

And the virgin glory of the morning entered into him with that searching sweetness which is almost suffering, just as a few hours before the Night had bewitched him with the mystery of her haunted caverns. For the beauty of Nature that comes to most softly, with hints, came to him with an exquisite fierce fever that was pain,—with something of the full-fledged glory that burst upon Shelley—and to bear it, unrelieved by expression, was a perpetual torment to him.

But, after long musing that led he scarcely knew where, Paul came back to himself—and laughed. Laughter was better than sighing, and he was too much of a child to go long without the sense of happiness coming uppermost. He lit his pipe—that most delicious of all, the pipe before breakfast—and wandered out into the sea of yellow gorse, thinking aloud, laughing, talking to himself.

Something in the performance of Mrs. Tompkyns awakened the train of thought of the night before. The sublime acting of the animal—he dared not call it ‘beast’—linked him on to the children’s world. They, too, had a magnificent condescension for the mere grown-up person. But he—he was not grown up. It made him sigh and laugh to think of it. He was a great, overgrown child, playing with gorgeously coloured dreams while the world of ordinary life passed him by.

The animals and the children linked on again, of course, with the region of fantasy and make-believe, the world of creation, the world of eternity, the world where thoughts were alive, and strong belief was a creative act.

‘That’s where I still belong,’ he said aloud, picking his way among the waves of yellow sea, ‘and I shall never get out till I die, my visions unexpressed, my singing dumb.’ He laughed and threw a stone at a bush that had no blossoms. ‘Oh, if only I knew how to link on with the normal world of fact without losing the other! To turn

all these seething dreams within me to some account. To show them to others!'

He ran and cleared a low gorse-bush with a flying jump.

'That would be worth living for,' he continued, panting; 'to make these things real to all the people who live in little cages. By Jove, it would open doors and windows in thousands of cages all over the world, besides providing me with the outlet I must find some day or—' he sprang over a ditch, slipped, and landed head first into prickles—'or explode!' he concluded with a shout of laughter that no one heard but the cuckoos and the yellow-hammers. Then he fell into a reverie, and his thoughts travelled farther still—into the Beyond.

Quickly recovering himself, and picking up his pipe, he went on towards the house; and, as he emerged from the pine copse again, the sound of a gong, ringing faintly in the distance, brought him back to earth with a shock almost as abrupt as the ditch. Mrs. Tompkyns appeared simultaneously, wearing an aspect of pristine innocence, admirably assumed the instant she caught sight of him.

'Fancy your being out here!' was the expression of her whole person, 'and coming, too, in just as the gong sounds!'

'Breakfast, I suppose!' he observed. And she trotted behind him like a dog. For all her affectations of superiority she wanted her milk just as much as he wanted his coffee.

He walked into the dining-room, through the window, stiffening as he did so with the resolution of the night before. His armour fitted him tightly. Little animals, children, the too searching calls of Nature, occult, symbolic, magical—all these must be sternly resisted and suppressed in the company of others. The danger of letting his imagination loose was too alarming. The ridicule would overwhelm him. In the eyes of the world he now lived in he would seem simply mad. The risk was impossible.

Like the Christian Scientists, he felt the need of vigorous affirmation: 'I am Paul

Rivers. I am a grown-up man. I am an official in a lumber Company. I am forty-five. I have a beard. I am important and sedate.'

Thus he fortified himself; and thus, like the persuasive Mrs. Tompkyns on the lawn, he imagined that he was deceiving both himself—and those who were on the watch!

CHAPTER VIII

And a little child shall lead them.

A week passed quickly away and found Paul still in his sister's house. The country air agreed with him, and he went for long walks over the heathery hills and down to the sea. The little private study provided for him,—remembering Mrs. Tompkyns' example, he made a brave pretence of having reports to write to his lumber Company—was admirable for his work. As a place of retreat when he felt temptation too strong upon him, or danger was near at hand, he used it constantly. He scented conditions in advance very often, though no one probably would have suspected it of him.

Once or twice he lunched out with neighbours, and sometimes people motored over to tea; companionship and society were at hand if he wanted them. And books of the kind he loved stood in precious rows upon the shelves of Dick's well-stored library. Here he browsed voraciously.

His sister, meanwhile, showed tact hardly to be expected of her. She tried him tentatively with many things to see if he liked them, but she made no conspicuous plans for him, and took good care that he was left entirely to his own devices. A kind of intelligent truce had established itself between them—these two persons who lived in different worlds and stared at one another with something like astonishment over the top of a high wall. Moreover, her languid interest in life made no claims upon him; there was pleasant companionship, gentle talks, and genuine, if thinly coloured, affection. He felt absolutely free, yet was conscious of being looked after

with kindness and discretion. She managed him so well, in fact, that he hardly realised he was being managed at all.

He fell more easily than he had thought possible into the routine of the uneventful country life. From feeling ‘caged’ he came to feel ‘comfortable.’ June, and the soft forces of the summer, purred about him, and almost without knowing it he began to purr with them.

For his superabundant energy he found relief in huge walks, early and late, and in all manner of unnecessary and invented labours of Hercules about the place. Thus, he dammed up the little stream that trickled harmlessly through the Gwyle pine-wood, making a series of deep pools in which he bathed when the spirit moved him; he erected a gigantic and very dangerous see-saw for the children (and himself) across a fallen trunk; and, by means of canvas, boards, and steps, he constructed a series of rooms and staircases in a spreading ilex tree, with rope railings and bells at each ‘floor’ for visitors, so that even the gardeners admitted it was the most wonderful thing they had ever set eyes upon in a tree.

With the children he was, however, careful to play the part he had decided to play. He was kind and good-natured; he spent a good deal of time with them daily; he even submitted periodically to be introduced all over again to the out-of-door animals, but he went through it all soberly and deliberately, and flattered himself that he was quite successful in presenting to them the ‘Uncle Paul’ whom it was best for his safety they should know.

Heart-searchings and temptations he had in plenty, but came through the ordeal with flying colours, and by the end of the first week he was satisfied that they accepted him as he wished—sedate, stolid, dull, and ‘grown up.’

Yet, all the time, there was something that puzzled him. Under the leadership of Nixie the children played up almost too admirably. It was almost as though he had called them and explained everything in detail. In spite of himself, they seemed

somehow or other to have got into his confidence, so that he felt his pretence was after all not so effective as he meant it to be.

Even—nay, especially—the way he was ‘accepted’ by the animals was suspicious—for nothing can be more eloquent of the true relations between children and a grown-up than the terms they permit their animals to have towards him—and this easy acceptance of himself as he pretended to be constituted the most wearing and subtle kind of attack he could possibly conceive. He felt as if the steel casings of his armour were changing into cardboard; soon they would become mere tissue-paper, and then turn transparent and melt away altogether.

‘They seem to think it’s all put on, this stiffness of mine,’ he thought more than once. ‘Perhaps they’re playing a sort of game with me. If once they find out I’m only acting—whew!’ he whistled low—‘the game is up at once! I must keep an eye peeled!’

Consequently he kept that eye peeled; he made more use of his private study, and so often gave the excuse of having reports to write that, had it been true, his lumber Company would have been obliged to double its staff in order to read them.

Yet, even in the study, he was not absolutely safe.

The children penetrated there too. They knocked elaborately—always; but with the knock he invariably realised a roguish pair of eyes and a sly laugh on the other side of the door. It was like knocking on his heart direct. He always said—in a bored, unnatural tone:

‘Oh, come in, whoever it is!’ knowing quite well who it was. And, then, in they would come—one or the other of them.

They slipped in softly as shadows, like the coming of dusk, like stray puffs of wind, fragrant and summery, or like unexpected rays of light as the sun walked round the house in the afternoon. And when they were gone—swiftly, like the sun dipping behind a cloud—lo, the room seemed cold and empty again.

‘Oh, they’re up to something, they’re up to something,’ he said wisely to himself with a sigh. ‘They’re laying traps for me, bless their little insolences!’

And the more he thought about it, the more certain he felt that Nixie, Jonah, and Toby were simply playing the Cat Game—pretending to accept his attitude because they saw he wished it. Only, less occult and intelligent than the cat, they sometimes made odd little slips that betrayed them.

For instance, one evening Jonah penetrated into the study to say good-night, and brought the Chow puppies, China and Japan, with him. Their tails curled over their backs like wire brushes; their vigorous round bodies, for ever on the move, were all he could manage. Having been duly kissed, the child waited, however, for something else, and at length, receiving no assistance from his uncle, he lifted each puppy in turn on to the table.

‘You, Uncle, please hold them; I can’t,’ he explained.

And, rather grimly, Paul tried to keep the two wriggling bodies still, while Jonah then came up a little closer to his chair.

‘They have reports to write too, to their lumber-kings,’ he said, his face solemn as a gong—using a phrase culled heaven knows where. ‘So will you please see that they don’t make blots either.’

‘But how did you know there were such things as lumber-kings?’ Paul asked, surprised.

‘I didn’t know. They knew,’ with a jerk of his head toward the struggling puppies, who hated the elevation of the table and the proximity of Paul’s bearded face. ‘They said you told them.’

There was no trace of a smile in his eyes; nothing but the earnest expression of the child taking part in the ponderous make-believe of the grown-up. Paul felt that by this simple expedient his reports and the safety they represented had been reduced in a single moment to the level of a paltry pretence.

He blushed. ‘Well, tell them to run after their tails more, and think less,’ he said.

‘All right, Uncle Paul,’ and the boy was gone, grave as any judge.

And Toby, her small round face still shining like an onion skin, had a different but equally effective method of showing him that he belonged to their world in spite of his clumsy pretence. She gave him lessons in Natural History. One afternoon when a brightly-coloured creature darted across the page of his book, and he referred to it as a ‘beetle,’ she very smartly rebuked him.

‘Not beetle, but beetie, that one,’ she corrected him.

He thought at first this was merely a child’s abbreviation, but she went on to instruct him fully, and he discovered that the ordinary coleopterist has a great deal yet to learn in the proper classification of his species.

‘There are beetles, and beedles, and beeties,’ she explained standing by his chair on the lawn, and twiddling with his watch-chain. ‘Beeties are all bright-coloured and little and very pretty—like ladybirds.’

‘And beedles?’

‘Oh, b-e-e-e-d-d-dles,’ pronouncing the word heavily and slowly, ‘are the stupid fat ones in the road that always get run over. They’re always sleepy, you see, but quite nice, oh, quite nice;’ she hastened to add lest Paul should dislike them from her description.

‘And all the rest are beetles, I suppose, just ordinary beetles?’ he asked.

‘Beetles,’ she said, with the calmness of superior knowledge, ‘are fast, black things that scuttle about kitchens. Horrid and crawly! Now you know them all!’

She ran off with a burst of laughter upon that face of polished onion skin, and left her uncle to reflect deeply upon this new world of beetles.

The lesson was instructive and symbolic, though the choice of subject was not as poetic as might have been. With this new classification as a starting-point, the child,

no doubt, had erected a vast superstructure of wonder, fun, beauty, and—why not?—truth! For children, he mused, are ever the true idealists. In their games of make-believe they create the world anew—in six minutes. They scorn measurements, and deal directly with the eternal principles behind things. With a little mud on the end of a stick they trace the course of the angels, and with the wooden-blocks of their building-boxes they erect the towering palaces of a universe that shall never pass away.

Yet what they did, surely he also did! His world of imagination was identical with theirs of make-believe. Was, then, the difference between them one of expression merely?...

Toby came thundering up and fell upon him from nowhere.

‘Uncle Paul,’ she said rather breathlessly.

‘Yes, dear,’ he made answer, still thinking upon beedles and beeties.

‘On the path down there by the rosydandrums there’s a beedle now—a big one with horns—if you’d like to see it.’

‘Oh! By the rhododendrons, you mean?’

‘Yes, by the rosydandrums,’ she repeated. ‘Only we must be quick or he’ll get home before we come.’

He was far more keen to see that “beedle” than she was. Yet for the immediate safety of his soul he refused.

Nixie it was, however, who penetrated furthest into the fortress. She came with a fearless audacity that fairly made him tremble. She had only to approach for him to become aware how poorly his suit of armour fitted.

But she was so gentle and polite about it that she was harder to withstand than all the others put together. She was slim and insinuating in body, mind and soul. Often, before he realised what she was talking about, her slender little fingers were between

the cracks of his breast-plate. For instance, after leaving Toby and her “beedle,” he strolled down to the pine-wood and stood upon the rustic bridge watching the play of sunlight and shadow, when suddenly, out of the very water it seemed, up rose a veritable water-sprite—hatless and stockingless—Nixie, the ubiquitous.

She scrambled lightly along the steep bank to his side, and leaned over the railing with him, staring at their reflections in the stream.

‘I declare you startled me, child!’ Paul exclaimed.

Her eyes met his in the running reflection beneath them. Of course, it may have been merely the trick of the glancing water, but to him it seemed that her expression was elfin and mischievous.

‘Did I—really, Uncle Paul?’ she said after a long silence, and without looking up. But woven through the simple words, as sunlight is woven through clearing mist, he divined all the other meanings of the child’s subtle and curious personality. It amounted to this—she at once invited, nay included, him in her own particular tree and water world: included him because he belonged there with her, and she simply couldn’t help herself. There was no favour about it one way or the other.

The compliment—the temptation—was overwhelming. Paul shivered a little, actually shivered, as he stood beside her in the sunshine. For several minutes they leaned there in silence, gazing at the flowing water.

‘The woods are very busy—this evening,’ she said at length.

‘I’m sure they are,’ he answered, before he quite realised what he was saying. Then he pulled himself together with an effort.

‘But does Mlle. Fleury know, and approve—?’ he asked a little stiffly, glancing down at her bare legs and splashed white frock.

‘Oh, no,’ she laughed wickedly, ‘but then Mlle. only understands what she sees with her eyes! She is much too mixed up and educated to know all this kind of thing!’

She made a gesture to include the woods about them. ‘Her sort of knowledge is so stuffing, you know.’

‘Rather,’ he exclaimed. ‘I would far sooner know the trees themselves than know their Latin names.’

It slipped out in spite of himself. The next minute he could have bitten his tongue off. But Nixie took no advantage of him. She let his words pass as something taken for granted.

‘I mean—it’s better to learn useful things while you can,’ he said hurriedly, blushing in his confusion like a child.

Nixie peered steadily down into the water for several minutes before she said anything more.

‘Either she’s found me out and knows everything,’ thought Paul; ‘or she hasn’t found me out and knows nothing.’ But which it was, for the life of him, he couldn’t be certain.

‘Oh,’ she cried suddenly, looking up into his face, her eyes, to Paul’s utter amazement, wet with tears, ‘Oh! how Daddy must have loved you!’

And, before he could think of a word to say, she was gone! Gone into the woods with a fluttering as of white wings.

‘So apparently I am not too mixed up and educated for their exquisite little world,’ he reflected, as soon as the emotion caused by her last words had subsided a little; ‘and the things I know are not of the “stuffing” kind!’

It all made him think a good deal—this attitude the children adopted towards his attitude, this unhesitating acceptance of him in spite of all his pretence. But he still valiantly maintained his studied aloofness of manner, and never allowed himself to overstep the danger line. He never forgot himself when he played with them, and the stories he told were just what they called “ornary” stories, and not tales of pure

imagination and fantasy. The rules of the game, finely balanced, were observed between them just as between himself and Mrs. Tompkyns.

Yet somehow, by unregistered degrees and secretly, they loosened the joints of his armour day by day and hour by hour.

CHAPTER IX

All the Powers that vivify nature must be children, for all the fairies, and gnomes, the goblins, yes, and the great giants too, are only different sizes and shapes and characters of children.—George MacDonald.

It was a week later, and Paul was smoking his evening pipe on the lawn before dinner. His sister was in London for a couple of days. Mlle. Fleury had gone to the dentist in the neighbouring town and had not yet returned. The children, consequently, had been running rather wild.

The sun had barely disappeared, when the full moon, rising huge and faint in the east, cast a silvery veil over the gardens and the wood. The night came treading softly down the sky, passing with an almost visible presence from the hills to the motionless trees in the valley, and then sinking gently and mysteriously down into the very roots of the grass and flowers.

During the day there had been rain—warm showers alternating with dazzling sunshine as in April—and now the earth, before going to sleep, was sending out great wafts of incense. Paul sniffed it in with keen enjoyment.

The odour of burning wood floated to him over the tree-tops, hanging a little heavily in the moist atmosphere; he thought of a hundred fires of his own making—elsewhere, far away! ‘And grey dawns saw his camp-fires in the rain,’ he murmured.

He wandered down to the Larch Gate, so called by the children because the larches

stood there about the entrance of the wood like the porch of some forest temple. He halted, listening to the faint drip-drip of the trees, and as he listened, he thought; and his thoughts, like stones falling through a deep sea, sank down into the depths of him where so little light was that no words came to give them form or substance.

Overhead, the blue lanes of the sky down which the sunlight had poured all day were slowly softening for the coming of the stars; and in himself the plastic depths, he felt, were a-stirring, as though some great change that he could not alter or control were about to take place in him. He was aware of an unwonted undercurrent of excitement in his blood. It seemed to him that there was ‘something afoot,’ although he had no evidence to warrant the suspicion.

‘Something’s up to-night,’ he murmured between the puffs of his pipe. ‘There’s something in the air!’

He blew a long whiff of smoke and watched it melt away over a bed of mignonette among the blue shadows where the dusk gathered beneath the ilex trees. There, for a moment, his eye followed it, and just as it sifted off into transparency he became aware with a start of surprise that behind the bushes something was moving. He looked closer.

‘It’s stopped,’ he muttered; ‘but only a second ago it was moving—moving parallel with myself.’

Paul was well accustomed to watching the motions of wild creatures in the forest; his eye was trained like the eye of an Indian. The gloom at first was too dense for anything to differentiate itself from their general mass, but after a short inspection his sight detected little bits of shadow that were lighter or darker than other little bits. The moving thing began to assume outline.

‘It’s a person!’ he decided. ‘It’s somebody watching—watching me!’

He took a step forward, and the figure likewise advanced, keeping even pace with him. He went faster, and the figure also went faster; it moved very silently, very

softly, ‘like an Indian,’ he thought with admiration. Behind the Blue Summer-house, where they sometimes had tea on wet days, it disappeared.

‘There are no cattle-stealers, or timber-sneaks in this country,’ he reflected, ‘but there are burglars. Perhaps this is a burglar who knows Margaret is away and thinks—’

He had not time to finish what the burglar thought, for at that moment, at the top of the Long Walk, where the moonlight already lay in a patch, the figure suddenly dashed out at full speed from the cover of the bushes, and he beheld, not a burglar, but—a little girl in a blue frock with a broad white collar, and long, black spindle legs.

‘Nixie, my dear child!’ he exclaimed. ‘But aren’t you in bed?’

It was a stupid question of course, and she did not attempt to answer it, but came up close to him, picking her way neatly between the flower-beds. The moon gleamed on her shiny black shoes and on her shiny yellow hair; over her summer dress she wore a red cloak, but it was open and only held to her by two thin bands about the neck. Under the hood he saw her elf-like face, the expression grave, but the eyes bright with excitement, and she moved softly over the grass like a shadow, timidly, yet without hesitation. A small, warm hand stole into his.

Paul put his pipe, still alight, into his pocket like a naughty boy caught smoking, and turned to face her.

‘’Pon my soul, Nixie, I believe you really are a sprite!’

She let go his hand and sprang away lightly over the lawn, laughing silently, her hood dropping off so that her hair flew out in a net to catch the moonlight, and for an instant he imagined he was looking at running water, swift and dancing; but the very next second she was back at his side again, the red hood replaced, the cloak gathered tightly about her slim person, feeling for his big hand again with both of her own.

‘At night I am a sprite,’ she whispered laughing, ‘and mind I don’t bewitch you altogether!’

She drew him gently across the lawn, choosing the direction with evident purpose, and he, curiously and suddenly bereft of all initiative, allowed her to do as she would.

‘But, please, Uncle Paul,’ she went on with vast gravity,’ I want you to be serious now. I’ve something to say to you, and that’s why I’m not in bed when I ought to be. All the other Sprites are about too, you know, so be very careful how you answer.’

The big man allowed himself to be led away. He felt his armour dropping off in great flakes as he went. No light is so magical as in that mingled hour of sun and moon when the west is still burning and the east just a-glimmer with the glory that is to come. Paul felt it strongly. He was half with the sun and half with the moon, and the gates of fantasy seemed somewhere close at hand. Curtains were being drawn aside, veils lifting, doors softly opening. He almost heard the rush of the wind behind, and tasted the keen, sweet excitement of another world.

He turned sharply to look at his companion. But first he put the hood back, for she seemed more human that way.

‘Well, child!’ he said, as gruffly as he could manage, ‘and what is it you have stayed up so late to ask me?’

‘It’s something I have to say to you, not to ask,’ she replied at once demurely. There was a delicious severity about her.

After a pause of twenty seconds she tripped round in front of him and stared full into his face. He felt as though she cried ‘Hands up’ and held a six-shooter to his head. She pulled the trigger that same moment.

‘Isn’t it time now to stop writing all those Reports, and to take off your dressing-up things?’ she asked with decision.

Paul stopped abruptly and tried to disengage his hand, but she held him so tightly that he could not escape without violence.

‘What dressing-up things are you talking about?’ he asked, forcing a laugh which, he admitted himself, sounded quite absurd.

‘All this pretending that you’re so old, and don’t know about things—I mean real things—our things.’

He searched as in a fever for the right words—words that should be true and wise, and safe—but before he could pick them out of the torrent of sentences that streamed through his mind, she had gone on again. She spoke calmly, but very gravely.

‘We are so tired of helping to pretend with you; and we’ve been waiting patiently so long. Even Toby knows it’s only ’sguise you put on to tease us.’

‘Even Toby?’ he repeated foolishly, avoiding her brilliant eyes.

‘And it really isn’t quite fair, you know. There are so very few that care—and understand—’

There came a little quaver in her voice. She hardly came up to his shoulder. He felt as though a whole bathful of happiness had suddenly been upset inside him, and was running about deliciously through his whole being—as though he wanted to run and dance and sing. It was like the reaction after tight boots—collars—or tight armour—and the blood was beginning to flow again mightily. Nothing could stop it. Some keystone in the fabric of his being dropped or shifted. His whole inner world fell into a new pattern. Resistance was no longer possible or desirable. He had done his best. Now he would give in and enjoy himself at last.

‘But, my dear child—my dear little Nixie—’

‘No, really, Uncle, there’s no good talking like that,’ she interrupted, her voice under command again, though still aggrieved, ‘because you know quite well we’re all

waiting for you to join us properly—our Society, I mean—and have our a'ventures with us—'

She called it 'aventures.' She left out all consonants when excited. The word caught him sharply. Nixie had wounded him better than she knew.

'Er—then do you have adventures?' he asked.

'Of course—wonderful.'

'But not—er—the sort—er—I could join in?'

'Of course; very wonderfulindeedaventures. That's what Daddy used to call them—before he went away.'

It was Dick himself speaking. Paul imagined he could hear the very voice. Another, and deeper, emotion surged through him, making all the heartstrings quiver.

He turned and looked about him, still holding the child tightly by the hand....

Behind him he heard the air moving in the larches, combing out their long green hair; the pampas grass rustled faintly on the lawn just beyond; and from the wood, now darkening, came the murmur of the brook. On his right, the old house looked shadowy and unreal. There stood the chimneys, like draped figures watching him, with the first stars peeping over their hunched shoulders. Dew glistened on the slates of the roof; beyond them he saw the clean outline of the hill, darkly sweeping up into the pallor of the sunset. There, too, past the wall of the house, he saw the great distances of heathland moving down through crowds of shadows to the sea. And the moon was higher.

'There's seats in the Blue Summer-house,' the voice beside him said, with insinuation as well as command.

He found it impossible to resist; indeed, the very desire to resist had been spirited away. Slowly they made their way across the silvery patchwork of the lawn to the door of the Blue Summer-house. This was a tumble-down structure with a thatched

roof; it had once been blue, but was now no colour at all. Low seats ran round the inside walls, and as Paul stood at the dark entrance he perceived that these seats were already occupied; and he hesitated. But Nixie pulled him gently in.

‘This is a regular Meeting,’ she said, as naturally as though she had been wholly innocent of a part in the plot. ‘They’ve only been waiting for us. Please come in.’ She even pushed him.

‘It may be regular, but it is most unexpected,’ he said, breathless rather, and curiously shy as he crossed the threshold and peered round at the silent faces about him. Eyes, he saw, were big and round and serious, shining with excitement. Clearly it was a very important occasion. He wondered what an ‘irregular’ meeting would be like.

‘We waited till mother was away,’ explained a candid voice, speaking with solemnity from the recesses.

‘And till Madmerzelle had to go to the dentist and stay to tea,’ added another.

‘So that it would be easier for you to come,’ concluded Nixie, lest he should think all these excuses were only on their own account.

She led him across the cobbled floor to a wooden arm-chair with crooked and shattered legs, and persuaded him to sit down. He did so.

‘There was some sense in that, at any rate,’ he remarked irrelevantly, not quite sure whether he referred to the children, or Mademoiselle, or the chair, and landing at the same instant with a crash upon the rickety support which was much lower than he thought it was. The joints and angles of the wood entered his ribs. He lost all memory of how to be sedate after that. He began to enjoy himself absurdly.

Silvery laughter was heard, followed immediately by the sound of rushing little feet as a dozen small shadows shot out into the moonlight and tore across the lawn at top speed. China and Japan he recognised, and a cohort of furry creatures in their rear.

‘Now you’ve frightened them all away,’ exclaimed the voice that had spoken first.

‘Doesn’t matter,’ replied the other, who evidently spoke with authority; ‘Uncle Paul was in before they left. They saw the introduction. That’s enough. So now,’ it added with decision, ‘if you’re quite ready we’d better begin.’

Paul grasped by this time that he was the central figure in some secret ceremony of the children, that it was of vital importance to them, as well as a profound compliment to himself. The animals formed part of it so long as they could be persuaded to stay. Their own rituals, however, were so vastly more wonderful and dignified—especially the Ritual of the Cats—that they were somewhat contemptuous, and had escaped at the earliest opportunity. It was, of course, his formal initiation into their world of make-believe and imagination. He stood before them on the floor of this tumbled-down Blue Summer-house in the capacity of the Candidate. Strange chills began to chase one another down his long spine. A shy happiness swept through him and made him shiver. ‘Can they possibly guess,’ he wondered, ‘how far more important this is to me than to them?’

‘Are you ready then?’ Nixie asked again.

‘Quite ready,’ he replied in a deep and tremulous voice.

‘Go ahead then,’ said the voice of decision.

A little bell rang, manipulated by some invisible hand in the darkness, and Nixie darted forward and drew a curtain that bore a close resemblance to a carriage rug across the doorway, so that only the faintest gleam of moonlight filtered through the cracks on either side. Then the owner of the voice of authority left his throne on the back wall and stepped solemnly forward in the direction of the candidate. Paul recognised Jonah with some difficulty. He tripped twice on the way.

The stumbling was comprehensible. On his head he wore a sort of mitre that on ordinary occasions was evidently used to keep the tea hot on the schoolroom table; for it was beyond question a tea-cosy. A garment of variegated colours wrapped his

figure down to the heels and trailed away some distance behind him. It was either a table-cloth or a housemaid's Sunday dress, and it invested him with a peculiar air of quaint majesty. He might have been King of the Gnomes. On his hands were large leathern gauntlets—very large indeed; and with loose fingers whose movements were clearly difficult to control, he grasped a stick that once may have been a hunting crop, but now was certainly a wand of office.

In front of Paul he came to a full stop, gathering his robes about him.

He made a little bow, during which the mitre shifted dangerously to one side, and then tapped the candidate lightly with the wand on the head, shoulders, and breast.

'Please answer now,' he said in a low tone, and then went backwards to his seat against the wall. His robe of office so impeded him that he was obliged to use the wand as a common walking-stick. Once or twice, too, he hopped.

'But you've forgotten to ask it,' whispered Nixie from the door where she was holding up the curtains with both hands. 'He's got nothing to answer.'

Quickly correcting his mistake, Jonah then stood up on his seat and said, rather shyly, the following lines, evidently learned by heart with a good deal of trouble:—

You've applied to our Secret Society,

Which is full of unusual variety,

And, in spite of your past,

We admit you at last,

But—we hope you'll behave with propriety.

'Now, stand up and answer, please,' whispered Nixie. 'Daddy made all this up, you know. It's your turn to answer now.'

Paul rose with difficulty. At first it seemed as if the chair meant to rise with him, so tightly did it fit; but in the end he stood erect without it, and bowing to the President, he said in solemn tones—and the words came genuinely from his heart:

‘I appreciate the honour done to me. I am very grateful indeed.’

‘That’s very good, I think,’ Nixie whispered under her breath to him.

Then Toby advanced, climbing down laboriously from her perch on the broken bench, and stalked up to the spot just vacated by her brother. She, too, was suitably dressed for the occasion, but owing to her diminutive size, and the fact that she did not reach up to the patch of moonlight, it was not possible to distinguish more than the white cap pinned on to her hair. It looked like a housekeeper’s cap. She, too, carried a wand of office. Was it a hunting crop or poker, Paul wondered?

Toby, then, with much more effort than Jonah, repeated the formula of admission. She got the lines a little mixed, however:—

You’ve applied to our Secret Society,

Which is full of unusual propriety,

And, in spite of your past,

We admit you at last,

But we hope you’ll behave with variety.

‘I will endeavour to do so,’ said Paul, replying with a low bow.

When he rose again to an upright position, Nixie was standing close in front of him. One arm still held up the curtains, but the other pointed directly into his face.

‘Your ’ficial position in the Society,’ she said in her thin, musical little voice, also repeating words learned by heart, ‘will be that of Recording Secretary, and your principal duties to keep a record of all the Aventures and to read them aloud at Regular Meetings. Any Meeting anywhere is a Regular Meeting. You must further promise on your living oath not to reveal the existence of the Society, or any detail of its proceedings, to any person not approved of by the Society as a whole.’

She paused for his reply.

‘I promise,’ he said.

‘He promises,’ repeated three voices together.

There was a general clatter and movement in the summer-house. He was forced down again into the rickety chair and the three little officials were clambering upon his knees before he knew where he was. All talked breathlessly at once.

‘Now you’re in properly—at last!’

‘You needn’t pretend any more——’

‘But we knew all along you were really trying hard to get in?’

‘I really believe I was,’ said he, getting in a chance remark.

They covered him with kisses.

‘We never thought you were as important as you pretended,’ Jonah said; ‘and your being so big made no difference.’

‘Or your beard, Uncle Paul,’ added Toby.

‘And we never think people old till they’re married,’ Jonah explained, putting the mitre on his uncle’s head.

‘So now we can have our aventures all together,’ exclaimed Nixie, kissing him swiftly, and leaping off his knee. The other two followed her example, and suddenly—he never quite understood how it happened so quickly—the summer-house was empty, and he was alone with the moonlight. A flash of white petticoats and slender black legs on the lawn, and lo, they were gone!

On the gravel path outside sounded a quick step. Paul started with surprise. The very next minute Mlle. Fleury, in her town clothes and hat, appeared round the corner.

‘’Ow then!’ she exclaimed sharply, ‘the little ones zey are no more ’ere? Mr Rivairs...!’ She shook her finger at him.

Paul tried to look dignified. For the moment, however, he quite forgot the tea-cosy still balanced on his head.

‘Mademoiselle Fleury,’ he said politely, ‘the children have gone to bed.’

‘It is ’igh time that they are already in bed, only I hear their voices now this minute,’ she went on excitedly. ‘They ’ide here, do they not?’

‘I assure you, Mademoiselle, they have gone to bed,’ Paul said. The woman stared at him with amazement in her eyes. He wondered why. Then, with a crash, something fell from the skies, hitting his nose on the way down, and bounding on to the ground.

‘Oh, the mitre!’ he cried with a laugh, ‘I clean forgot it was there.’ He kicked it aside and stared with confusion at his companion. She looked very neat and trim in her smart town frock. He understood now why she stared so, and his cheeks flamed crimson, though it was too dark for them to be seen.

‘Meester Reevairs,’ she said at length, the desire to laugh and the desire to scold having fought themselves to a standstill, so that her face betrayed no expression at all, ‘you lead zem astray, I think.’

‘On the contrary, it is they who lead me,’ he said self-consciously. ‘In fact, they have just deprived me of my very best armour——’

‘Armour!’ she interrupted, ‘Armoire! Ah! They ’ide upstairs in the cupboard,’—and she turned to run.

‘Do not be harsh with them,’ he cried after her, ‘it is all my fault really. I am to blame, not they.’

‘’Arsh! Oh no!’ she called back to him. ‘Only, you know, if your seester find them at this hour not in bed——’

Paul lost the end of the sentence as she turned the corner of the house. He gathered up the remnants of the ceremony and followed slowly in her footsteps.

‘Now, really,’ he thought, ‘what a simple and charming woman! How her eyes twinkled! And how awfully nice her voice was!’ He flung down the rugs and wands and tea-cosy in the hall. ‘Out there,’ with a jerk in the direction of the Atlantic

Ocean, ‘the whole camp would make her a Queen.’

Altogether the excitement of the last hour had been considerable. He felt that something must happen to him unless he could calm down a bit.

‘I know,’ he exclaimed aloud, ‘I’ll go and have a hot bath. There’s just time before dinner. That’ll take it out of me.’ And he went up the front stairs, singing like a boy.

CHAPTER X

Everything possible to be believed is an image of truth.—Blake.

For some days after that Paul walked on air. Incredible as it may seem to normally constituted persons, he was so delighted to have found a medium in which he could in some measure express himself without fear of ridicule, that the entire world was made anew for him. He thought about it a great deal. He even argued in his muddled fashion, but he got no farther that way. The only thing he really understood was the plain fact that he had found a region where his companions were about his own age, with his own tastes, ready to consider things that were real, and to let the trivial and vulgar world go by.

This was the fact that stared him in the face and made him happy. For the first time in his life he could play with others. Hitherto he had played alone.

‘It’s a safety-valve at last,’ he exclaimed, using his favourite word. ‘Now I can let myself go a bit. They will never laugh; on the contrary, they’ll understand and love it. Hooray!’

‘And, remember,’ Nixie had again explained to him, ‘you have to write down all the aventures. That’s what keeping the records means. And you must read them out to us at the Meetings.’

And he chuckled as he thought about it, for it meant having real Reports to write at last, reports that others would read and appreciate.

The aventures, moreover, began very quickly; they came thick and fast; and he lived in them so intensely that he carried them over into his other dull world, and sometimes hardly knew which world he was in at all. His imagination, hungry and untamed, had escaped, and was seeking all it could devour.

It was a hot afternoon in mid-June, and Paul was lying with his pipe upon the lawn. His sister was out driving. He was alone with the children and the smaller portion of the menagerie,—smaller in size, that is, not in numbers; cats, kittens, and puppies were either asleep, or on the hunt, all about them. And from an open window a parrot was talking ridiculously in mixed French and English.

The giant cedars spread their branches; in the limes the bees hummed drowsily; the world lay a scented garden around him, and a very soft wind stole to and fro, stirring the bushes with sleepy murmurs and making the flowers nod.

China and Japan lay panting in the shade behind him, and not far off reposed the big grey Persian, Mrs. Tompkyns. Regardless of the heat, Pouf, Zezette, and Dumps flitted here and there as though the whole lawn was specially made for their games; and Smoke, the black cat, dignified and mysterious, lay with eyes half-closed just near enough for Paul to stroke his sleek, hot sides when he felt so disposed. He—Smoke that is—blinked indifferently at passing butterflies, or twitched his great tail at the very tip when a bird settled in the branches overhead; but for the most part he was intent upon other matters—matters of genuine importance that concerned none but himself.

A few yards off Jonah and Toby were doing something with daisies—what it was Paul could not see; and on his other side Nixie lay flat upon the grass and gazed into the sky. The governess was—where all governesses should be out of lesson-time—elsewhere.

‘Nixie, you’re sleeping. Wake up.’

She rolled over towards him. ‘No, Uncle Paul, I’m not. I was only thinking.’

‘Thinking of what?’

‘Oh, clouds and things; chiefly clouds, I think.’ She pointed to the white battlements of summer that were passing very slowly over the heavens. ‘It’s so funny that you can see them move, yet can’t see the thing that pushes them along.’

‘Wind, you mean?’

‘H’mmmmm.’

They lay flat on their backs and watched. Nixie made a screen of her hair and peered through it. Paul did the same with his fingers.

‘You can touch it, and smell it, and hear it,’ she went on, half to herself, ‘but you can’t see it.’

‘I suspect there are creatures that can see the wind, though,’ he remarked sleepily.

‘I ’spect so too,’ she said softly. ‘I think I could, if I really tried hard enough. If I was very, oh very kind and gentle and polite to it, I think——’

‘Come and tell me quietly,’ Paul said with excitement. ‘I believe you’re right.’

He scented a delightful aventure. The child turned over on the grass twice, roller fashion, and landed against him, lying on her face with her chin in her hands and her heels clicking softly in the air.

She began to explain what she meant. ‘You must listen properly because it’s rather difficult to explain, you know’; he heard her breathing into his ear, and then her voice grew softer and fainter as she went on. Lower and lower it grew, murmuring like a distant mill-wheel, softer and softer; wonderful sentences and words all running gently into each other without pause, somewhere below ground. It began to sound far away, and it melted into the humming of the bees in the lime trees.... Once or twice it stopped altogether, Paul thought, so that he missed whole sentences.... Gaps came, gaps filled with no definite words, but only the inarticulate murmur of summer and summer life....

Then, without warning, he became conscious of a curious sinking sensation, as though the solid lawn beneath him had begun to undulate. The turf grew soft like air, and swam up over him in green waves till his head was covered. His ears became muffled; Nixie's voice no longer reached him as something outside himself; it was within—curiously running, so to speak, with his blood. He sank deeper and deeper into a delicious, soothing medium that both covered and penetrated him.

The child had him by the hand, that was all he knew, then—a long sliding motion, and forgetfulness.

'I'm off,' he remembered thinking, 'off at last into a real aventure!'

Down they sank, down, down; through soft darkness, and long, shadowy places, passing through endless scented caverns, and along dim avenues that stretched, for ever and ever it seemed, beneath the gloom of mighty trees. The air was cool and perfumed with earth. They were in some underworld, strangely muted, soundless, mysterious. It grew very dark.

'Where are we, Nixie?' He did not feel alarm; but a sense of wonder, touched delightfully by awe, had begun to send thrills along his nerves.

Her reply in his ear was like a voice in a tiny trumpet, far away, very soft. 'Come along! Follow me!'

'I'm coming. But it's so dark.'

'Hush,' she whispered. 'We're in a dream together. I'm not sure where exactly. Keep close to me.'

'I'm coming,' he repeated, blundering over the roots beside her; 'but where are we? I can't see a bit.'

'Tread softly. We're in a lost forest—just before the dawn,' he heard her voice answer faintly.

'A forest underground——? You mean a coal measure?' he asked in amazement.

She made no answer. ‘I think we’re going to see the wind,’ she added presently.

Her words thrilled him inexplicably. It was as if—in that other world of gross values—some one had said, ‘You’re going to make a million!’ It was all hushed and soft and subdued. Everything had a coating of plush.

‘We’ve gone backwards somewhere—a great many years. But it’s all right. There’s no time in dreams.’

‘It’s dreadfully dark,’ he whispered, tripping again.

The persuasion of her little hand led him along over roots and through places of deep moss. Great spaces, he felt, were about him. Shadows coated everything with silence. It was like the vast primeval forests of his country across the seas. The map of the world had somehow shifted, and here, in little England, he found the freedom of those splendid scenes of desolation that he craved. Millions of huge trees reared up about them through the gloom, and he felt their presence, though invisible.

‘The sun isn’t up yet,’ she added after a bit. He held her hand tightly, as they stumbled slowly forward together side by side. He began to feel extraordinarily alive. Exhilaration seized him. He could have shouted with excitement.

‘Hush!’ whispered his guide, ‘do be careful. You’ll upset us both.’ The trembling of his hand betrayed him. ‘You stumble like an om’ibus!’

‘I’m all right. Go ahead!’ he replied under his breath. ‘I can see better now!’

‘Now look,’ she said, stopping in front of him and turning round.

The darkness lifted somewhat as he bent down to follow the direction of her gaze. On every side, dim and thronging, he saw the stems of immense trees rising upwards into obscurity. There were hundreds upon hundreds of them. His eyes followed their outline till the endless number bewildered him. Overhead, the stars were shining faintly through the tangled network of their branches. Odours of earth and moss and leaves, cool and delicate, rose about them; vast depths of silence stretched away in

every direction. Great ferns stood motionless, with all the magic of frosted window-panes, among their roots. All was still and dark and silent. It was the heart of a great forest before the dawn—prehistoric, unknown to man.

‘Oh, I wonder—I wonder——’ began Paul, groping about him clumsily with his hands to feel the way.

‘Oh, please don’t talk so loud,’ Nixie whispered, pinching his arm; ‘we shall wake up if you do. Only people in dreams come to places like this.’

‘You know the place?’ he exclaimed with increasing excitement. ‘So do I almost. I’m sure this has all happened before, only I can’t remember——’

‘We must keep as still as mice.’

‘We are—still as mice.’

‘This is where the winds sleep when they’re not blowing. It’s their resting-place.’

He looked about him, drawing a deep breath.

‘Look out; you’ll wake them if you breathe like that,’ whispered the child.

‘Are they asleep now?’

‘Of course. Can’t you see?’

‘Not much—yet!’

‘Move like a cat, and speak in whispers. We may see them when they wake.’

‘How soon?’

‘Dawn. The wind always wakes with the sun. It’s getting closer now.’

It was very wonderful. No words can describe adequately the still splendour of that vast forest as they stood there, waiting for the sunrise. Nothing stirred. The trees were carved out of some marvellous dream-stuff, motionless, yet conveying the impression of life. Paul knew it and recognised it. All primeval woods possess that quality—trees that know nothing of men and have never heard the ringing of the

axe. The silence was of death, yet a sense of life that is far beyond death pulsed through it. Cisterns of quiet, gigantic, primitive life lay somewhere hidden in these shadowed glades. It seemed the counterpart of a man's soul before rude passion and power have stirred it into activity. Here all slept potentially, as in a human soul. The huge, sombre pines rose from their beds of golden moss to shake their crests faintly to the stars, awaiting the coming of the true passion—the great Sun of life, that should call them to splendour, to reality, and to the struggle of a bigger life than they yet knew, when they might even try to shake free from their roots in the hard, confining earth, and fly to the source of their existence—the sun.

And the sun was coming now. The dawn was at hand. The trees moved gently together, it seemed. The wood grew lighter. An almost imperceptible shudder ran through it as through a vast spider's web.

'Look!' cried Nixie. His simple, intuitive little guide was nearer, after all, to reality than he was, for all his subtle vision. 'Look, Uncle Paul!'

His attempt to analyse wonder had prevented his seeing it sooner, but as she spoke he became aware that something very unusual was going forward about them. His skin began to tickle, and a strange sense of excitement took possession of him.

A pale, semi-transparent substance he saw hung everywhere in the air about them, clinging in spirals and circles to the trunks, and hanging down from the branches in long slender ribbons that reached almost to the ground. The colour was a delicate pearl-grey. It covered everything as with the softest of filtered light, and hung motionless in the air in painted streamers of thinnest possible vapour.

The silken threads of these gossamer ribbons dropped from the sky in millions upon millions. They wrapped themselves round the very star-beams, and lay in sheets upon the ground; they curled themselves round the stones and crept in among the tiniest crevices of moss and bark; they clothed the ferns with their fairy gauze. Paul could even feel them coiling about his hair and beard and eyelashes. They pervaded

the entire scene as light does. The colour was uniform; whether in sheets or ribbons, it did not vary in shade or in degree of transparency. The entire atmosphere was pervaded by it, frozen into absolute stillness.

‘That’s the winds—all that stuff,’ Nixie whispered, her voice trembling with excitement. ‘They’re asleep still. Aren’t they awful and wonderful?’

As she spoke a faint vibration ran everywhere through the ribbons. Involuntarily he tightened his grasp on the child’s hand.

‘That’s their beginning to wake,’ she said, drawing closer to him, ‘like people moving in sleep.’

The vibration ran through the air again. It quivered as reflections in the surface of a pool quiver to a ghost of passing wind. They seated themselves on a fallen trunk and waited. The trees waited too; as gigantic notes in a set piece, Paul thought, that the coming sun would presently play upon like a hand upon a vast instrument. Then something moved a few feet away, and he jumped in spite of himself.

‘Only Jonah,’ explained his guide. ‘He’s asleep like us. Don’t wake him; he’s having a dream too.’

It was indeed Jonah, wandering vaguely this way and that, disappearing and reappearing, wholly unaware, it seemed, of their presence. He looked like a gnome. His feet made no sound as he moved about, and after a few minutes he lost himself behind a big trunk and they saw him no more. But almost at once behind him the round figures of China and Japan emerged into view. They came, moving fast and busily, blundering against the trees, tumbling down, and butting into everything that came in their path as though they could not see properly. Paul watched them with astonishment.

‘They’re only half asleep, and that’s why they see so badly,’ Nixie told him. ‘Aren’t they silly and happy?’

Before he could answer, something else moved into their limited field of vision, and

he was aware that a silent grey shadow was stalking solemnly by. All dignity and self-confidence it was; stately, proud, sure of itself, in a region where it was at home, conscious of its power to see and move better than any one else. Two wide-open and brilliant eyes, shining like dropped stars, were turned for a moment towards them where they sat on the log and watched. Then, silent and beautiful, it passed on into the darkness beyond, and vanished from their sight.

‘Mrs. Tompkyns!’ whispered Nixie. ‘She saw us all right!’

‘Splendid!’ he exclaimed under his breath, full of admiration.

Nixie pinched his arm. A change had come about in the last few minutes, and into this dense forest the light of approaching dawn began to steal most wonderfully. A universal murmuring filled the air.

‘The sun’s coming. They’re going to wake now!’ The child gave a little shiver of delight. Paul sat up. A general, indefinable motion, he saw, was beginning everywhere to run to and fro among the hanging streamers. More light penetrated every minute, and the tree stems began to turn from black to purple, and then from purple to faint grey. Vistas of shadowy glades began to open up on all sides; every instant the trees stood out more distinctly. The myriad threads and ribbons were astir.

‘Look!’ cried the child aloud; ‘they’re uncurling as they wake.’

He looked. The sense of wonder and beauty moved profoundly in his heart. Where, oh where, in all the dreams of his solitary years had he seen anything to equal this unearthly vision of the awakening winds?

The winds moved in their sleep, and awoke.

In loops, folds, and spirals of indescribable grace they slowly began to unwrap themselves from the tree stems with a million little delicate undulations; like thin mist trembling, and then smoothing out the ruffled surface of their thousand serpentine eddies, they slid swiftly upwards from the moss and ferns, disentangled

themselves without effort from roots and stones and bark, and then, reinforced by countless thousands from the lower branches, they rose up slowly in vast coloured sheets towards the region of the tree-tops.

And, as they rose, the silence of the forest passed into sound—trembling and murmuring at first, and then rapidly increasing in volume as the distant glades sent their voices to swell it, and the note of every hollow and dell joined in with its contributory note. From all the shadowy recesses of the wood they heard it come, louder and louder, leaping to the centre like running great arpeggios, and finally merging all lesser notes in the wave of a single dominant chord—the song of the awakened winds to the dawn.

‘They’re singing to the sun,’ Nixie whispered. Her voice caught in her throat a little and she tightened her grasp on his big hand.

‘They’re changing colour too,’ he answered breathlessly. They stood up on their log to see.

‘It’s the rate they go does that,’ she tried to explain. She stood on tiptoe.

He understood what she meant, for he now saw that as the wind rose in ribbons, streams and spirals, the original pearl-grey changed chromatically into every shade of colour under the sun.

‘Same as metals getting hot,’ she said. ‘Their colour comes ’cording to their speed.’

Many of the tints he found it impossible to name, for they were such as he had never dreamed of. Crimsons, purples, soft yellows, exquisite greens and pinks ran to and fro in a perfect deluge of colour, as though a hundred sunsets had been let loose and were hunting wildly for the West to set in. And there were shades of opal and mother-of-pearl so delicate that he could only perceive them in his bewildered mind by translating them into the world of sound, and imagining it was the colour of their own singing.

Far too rapidly for description they changed their protean dress, moving faster and

faster, glowing fiercely one minute and fading away the next, passing swiftly into new and dazzling brilliancies as the distant winds came to join them, and at length rushing upwards in one huge central draught through the trees, shouting their song with a roar like the sea.

Suddenly they swept up into the sky—sound, colour and all—and silence once more descended upon the forest. The winds were off and about their business of the day. The woods were empty. And the sun was at the very edge of the world.

‘Watch the tops of the trees now,’ cried Nixie, still trembling from the strange wonder of the scene. ‘The Little Winds will wake the moment the sun touches them—the little winds in the tops of the trees.’

As she spoke, the sun came up and his first rays touched the pointed crests above them with gold; and Paul noticed that there were thousands of tiny, slender ribbons streaming out like elastic threads from the tips of all the pines, and that these had only just begun to move. As at a word of command they trooped out to meet the sunshine, undulating like wee coloured serpents, and uttering their weird and gentle music at the same time. And Paul, as he listened, understood at last why the wind in the tree-tops is always more delicately sweet than any other kind, and why it touches so poignantly the heart of him who hears, and calls wonder from her deepest lair.

‘The young winds, you see,’ Nixie said, peering up beneath her joined hands and finding it difficult to keep her balance as she did so. ‘They sleep longer than the others. And they’re not loose either; they’re fastened on, and can only go out and come back.’

And, as he watched, he saw these young winds fly out miles into the brightening sky, making lines of flashing colour, and then tear back with a whirring rush of music to curl up again round the twigs and pine needles.

‘Though sometimes they do manage to get loose, and make funny storms and hurricanes and things that no one expects at all in the sky.’

Paul was on the point of replying to this explanation when something struck against his legs, and he only just saved himself from falling by seizing Nixie and risking a flying leap with her from the log.

‘It’s that wicked Japan again,’ she laughed, clambering back on to the tree.

The puppy was vigorously chasing its own tail, bumping as it did so into everything within reach. Paul stooped to catch it. At the same instant it rose up past his very nose, and floated off through the trees and was lost to view in the sky.

Nixie laughed merrily. ‘It woke in the middle of its silly little dream,’ she said. ‘It was only half asleep really, and playing. It won’t come back now.’

‘All puppies are absurd like that——’

But he did not finish his profound observation about puppies, for his voice at that moment was drowned in a new and terrible noise that seemed to come from the heart of the wood. It happened just as in a children’s fairy tale. It bore no resemblance to the roar the winds made; there was no music in it; it was crude in quality—angry; a sound from another place.

It came swiftly nearer and nearer, increasing in volume as it came. A veil seemed to spread suddenly over the scene; the trees grew shadowy and dim; the glades melted off into mistiness; and ever the mass of sound came pouring up towards them. Paul realised that the frontiers of consciousness were shifting again in a most extraordinary fashion, so that the whole forest slipped off into the background and became a dim map in his memory, faint and unreal—and, with it, went both Nixie and himself. The ground rose and fell under their feet. Her hand melted into something fluid and slippery as he tried to keep his hold upon it. The child whispered words he could not catch. Then, like the puppy, they both began to rise.

The roar came out to meet them and enveloped them furiously in mid air.

‘At any rate, we’ve seen the wind!’ he heard the child’s voice murmuring in his beard. She rose away from him, being lighter, and vanished through the tops of the

trees.

And then the roar drowned him and swept him away in a whirling tempest, so that he lost all consciousness of self and forgot everything he had ever known....

The noise resolved itself gradually into the crunching sounds of the carriage wheels and the clatter of horses' hoofs coming up the gravel drive.

Paul looked about him with a sigh that was half a yawn. China and Japan were still romping on the lawn, Mrs. Tompkyns and Smoke were curled up in hot, soft circles precisely where they had been before, Toby and Jonah were still busily engaged doing 'something with daisies' in the full blaze of the sunshine, and Nixie lay beside him, all innocence and peace, still gazing through the tangle of her yellow hair at the slow-sailing clouds overhead.

And the clouds, he noticed, had hardly altered a line of their shape and position since he saw them last.

He turned with a jump of excitement.

'Nixie,' he exclaimed, 'I've seen the wind!'

She rolled over lazily on her side and fixed her great blue eyes on his own, between two strands of her hair. From the expression of her brown face it was possible to surmise that she knew nothing—and everything.

'Have you?' she said very quietly. 'I thought you might.'

'Yes, but did I dream it, or imagine it, or just think it and make it up?' He still felt a little bewildered; the memory of that strangely beautiful picture-gallery still haunted him. Yonder, before the porch, the steaming horses and the smart coachman on the box, and his sister coming across the lawn from the carriage all belonged to another world, while he himself and Nixie and the other children still stayed with him, floating in a golden atmosphere where Wind was singing and alive.

'That doesn't matter a bit,' she replied, peering at him gravely before she pulled her

hair over both eyes. ‘The point is that it’s really true! Now,’ she added, her face completely hidden by the yellow web, ‘all you have to do is to write it for our next Meeting—write the record of your Aventure——’

‘And read it out?’ he said, beginning to understand.

The yellow head nodded. He felt utterly and delightfully bewitched.

‘All right,’ he said; ‘I will.’

‘And make it a very-wonderfulindeed Aventure,’ she added, springing to her feet. ‘Hush! Here’s mother!’

Paul rose dizzily to greet his sister, while the children ran off with their animals to other things.

‘You’ve had a pleasant afternoon, Paul, dear?’ she asked.

‘Oh, very nice indeed——’ His thoughts were still entangled with the wind and with the story he meant to write about it for the next Meeting.

She opened her parasol and held it over her head.

‘Now, come indoors,’ he went on, collecting himself with an effort, ‘or into the shade. This heat is not good for you, Margaret.’ He looked at her pale, delicate face. ‘You’re tired too.’

‘I enjoyed the drive,’ she replied, letting him take her arm and lead her towards the house. ‘I met the Burdons in their motor. They’re coming over to luncheon one day, they said. You’ll like him, I think.’

‘That’s very nice,’ he remarked again, ‘very nice. Margaret,’ he exclaimed suddenly, ashamed of his utter want of interest in all she was planning for him, ‘I think you ought to have a motor too. I’m going to give you one.’

‘That is sweet of you, Paul,’ she smiled at him. ‘But really, you know, one likes horses best. They’re much quieter. Motors do shake one so.’

‘I don’t think that matters; the point is that it’s really true,’ he muttered to himself,

thinking of Nixie's judgment of his Aventure.

His sister looked at him with her expression of faint amusement.

'You mustn't mind me,' he laughed, planting her in a deck-chair by the shade of the house; 'but the truth is, my mind is full just now of some work I've got to do—a report, in fact, I've got to write.'

He went off into the house, humming a song. She followed him with her eyes.

'He is so strange. I do wish he would see more people and be a little more normal.'

And in Paul's mind, as he raced along the passage to his private study in search of pen and paper, there ran a thought of very different kind in the shape of a sentence from the favourite of all his books:

'Everything possible to be believed is an image of truth.'

CHAPTER XI

It is said that a poet has died young in the breast of the most stolid. It may be contended, rather, that this (somewhat minor bard) in almost every case survives, and is the spice of life to his possessor.—R. L. S.

Now that his first Aventure was an accomplished fact, and that he was writing it out for the Meeting, Paul carried about with him a kind of secret joy. At last he had found an audience, and an audience is unquestionably a very profound need of every human heart. Nixie was helping him to expression.

'I'll write them such an Aventure out of that Wind-Vision,' he exclaimed, 'that they'll fairly shiver with delight. And if they shiver, why shouldn't all the children in the world shiver too?'

He no longer made the mistake of thinking it trivial; if he could find an audience of children all about the world, children known or unknown, to whom he could show his little gallery of pictures, what could be more reasonable or delightful? What

could be more useful and worth doing than to show the adventuring mind some meaning in all the beauty that filled his heart? And the Wind-Vision might be a small—a very small, beginning. It might be the first of a series of modern fairy tales. The idea thrilled him with pleasure. ‘A safety-valve at last!’ he cried. ‘An audience that won’t laugh!’

For, in reality, there was also a queer motherly quality in him which he had always tried more or less successfully to hide, and of which, perhaps, he was secretly half ashamed—a feeling that made him long to give of his strength and sympathy to all that was helpless, weary, immature.

He went about the house like a new man, for in proportion as he allowed his imagination to use its wings, life became extraordinarily alive. He sang, and the world sang with him. Everything turned up little smiling faces to him, whispering fairy contributions to his tale.

‘The more I give out, the more I get in,’ he laughed. ‘I declare it’s quite wonderful,’ as though he had really discovered a new truth all for himself. New forces began to course through his veins like fire. As in a great cistern tapped for the first time, this new outlet produced other little cross-currents everywhere throughout his being. Paul began to find a new confidence. Another stone had shifted in the fabric of his soul. He moved one stage nearer to the final pattern that it had been intended from the beginning of time he should assume.

A world within a world began to grow up in the old grey house under the hill, one consisting of Nixie and her troupe, with Paul trailing heavily in the rear, very eager; and the other, of the grown-up members of the household, with Mlle. Fleury belonging to neither, yet in a sense belonging to both. The cats and animals again were in the former—an inner division of it, so that it was like a series of Chinese boxes, each fitting within the next in size.

And this admission of Paul into the innermost circle produced a change in the

household, as well as in himself. After all, the children had not betrayed him; they had only divined his secret and put him right with himself. But this was everything; and who is there with a vestige of youth in his spirit that will not understand the cause of his mysterious exhilaration?

Outwardly, of course, no definite change was visible in the doings of the little household. The children said little; they made no direct reference to his conversion; but the change, though not easily described, was felt by all. Paul recognised it in every fibre of his being. Every one, he noticed, understood by some strange freemasonry that he had been initiated, for every one, he fancied, treated him a little differently. It was natural that the children should give signs of increased admiration and affection for their huge new member, but there was no obvious reason why his sister, and the servants, and the very animals into the bargain, should regard him with a strain of something that hesitated between tolerance and tenderness.

If truth were told, they probably did nothing of the sort; it was his own point of view that had changed. His imagination was responsible for the rest; yet he felt as though he had been caught into the heart of a great conspiracy, and the silent, unobtrusive way every one played his, her, or its part contrived to make him think it was all very real indeed.

The cats, furry and tender magicians that they are, perhaps interpreted the change more skilfully and easily than any one else. Without the least fuss or ceremony they made him instantly free of their world, and the way their protection and encouragement were extended to him in a hundred gentle ways gave him an extraordinarily vivid impression that they, too, had their plans and conferences just as much as the children had. They made everything seem alive and intelligent, from the bushes where they hunted to the furniture where they slept. They brought the whole world, animate and inanimate, into his scheme of existence. Everything had life, though not the same degree of life. It was all very subtle and wonderful. He, and

the children, and the cats, all had imagination according to their kind and degree, and all equally used it to make the world haunted and splendid.

Formerly, for instance, he had often surprised Mrs. Tompkyns going about in the passages on secret business of her own, perhaps not altogether good, yet looking up with an assumption of innocence that made it quite impossible to chide or interfere. (It was, of course, only an assumption of innocence. A cat's eyes are too intent and purposeful for genuine innocence; they are a mask, a concealment of a thousand plans.) But now, when he met her, she at once stopped and sent her tail aloft by way of signal, and came to rub against his legs. Her eyes smiled—that pregnant, significant smile of the feline, shown by mere blinking of the lids—and she walked slowly by his side with arched back, as an invitation that he might—nay, that he should—accompany her.

On her great, dark journeys he might not of course yet go, but on the smaller, less important expeditions he was welcome, and she showed it plainly every time they met. He was led politely to numerous cupboards, corners, attics, and cellars, whose existence he had not hitherto suspected. There were wonderful and terrible places among the book-shelves and under massive pieces of furniture which she showed to him when no one was about; and she further taught him how to sit and stare for long periods until out of vacancy there issued a series of fascinating figures and scenes of strange loveliness. And he, laughing, obeyed.

All this, and much else besides, they taught him cleverly.

Some of them, too, came to visit him in his own quarters. They came into his study, and into his bedroom, and one of them—that black, thick-haired fellow called Smoke—the one with the ghostly eyes and very furry trousers—even took to tapping at his door late at night (by standing on tiptoe he could just reach the knob), and thus established the right to sleep on the sofa or even to curl up on the foot of the bed.

And all that the kittens, the puppies, and the out-of-door animals did to teach him as

an equal is better left untold, since this is a story and not a work on natural history.

Mlle. Fleury, the little French governess, alone seemed curiously out of the picture. She made difficulties here and there, though not insuperable ones. The fact was, he saw, that she was not properly in either of the two worlds. She wanted to be in both at once, but, from the very nature of her position, succeeded in getting into neither; and to fall between two worlds is far more perplexing than to fall between two stools. Paul made allowances for her just as he might have made allowances for an over-trained animal that had learned too many human-taught tricks to make its presence quite acceptable to its own four-footed circle. The charming little person—he, at least, always thought her voice and her manners and her grace charming after a life where these were unknown—had to justify herself to the grown-up world where his sister belonged, as well as to the world of the children whom she taught. And, consequently, she was often compelled to scold when, perhaps, her soul cried out that she should bless.

His heart always hammered, if ever so slightly, when he made his way, as he now did more and more frequently, to the schoolroom or the nursery. Schoolroom-tea became a pleasure of almost irresistible attractions, and when it was over and the governess was legitimately out of the way, Nixie sometimes had a trick of announcing a Regular Meeting to which Paul was called upon to read out his latest ‘Aventure.’

‘Hulloa! Having tea, are you?’ he exclaimed, looking in at the door one afternoon shortly after the wind episode. This feigned surprise, which deceived nobody, he felt was admirable. It was exactly the way Mrs. Tompkyns did it.

‘Come in, Uncle Paul. Do stay. You must stay,’ came the chorus, while Mlle. Fleury half smiled, half frowned at him across the table. ‘Here’s just the stodgy kind of cake you like, with jam and honey!’

‘Well,’ he said hesitatingly, as though he scorned such things, while Mademoiselle

poured out a cup, and the children piled up a plate for him.

He stayed, as it were, by chance, and a minute later was as earnestly engaged with the cake and tea as if he had come with that special purpose.

‘It’s all very well done,’ was his secret thought. ‘It’s exactly the way Mrs. Tompkyns manages all her most important affairs.’

‘Nous avons réunion après,’ Jonah informed the governess presently with a very grave face. The young woman glanced interrogatively at Paul.

‘Oui, oui,’ he said in his Canadian French, ‘c’est vrai. Réunion régulaire.’

‘Mais qu’elle idée, donc!’

‘Il est le président,’ said Toby indignantly, pointing with a jam sandwich.

‘Voilá vous êtes!’ he exclaimed. ‘There you are! Je suis le président!’ and he helped himself to more cake as though by accident.

For five seconds Mlle. Fleury kept her face. Then, in spite of herself, her lips parted and a row of white teeth appeared.

‘Meester Reevairs, you spoil them,’ she said, ‘and I approve it not. Mais, voyons donc! Quelles maniéres!’ she added as Sambo and Pouf passed from Toby’s lap on to the table and began to sniff at the water cress.... ‘Non, ça c’est trop fort!’ She leaned across to smack them back into propriety.

‘Abominable,’ Paul cried, ‘abominable tout à fait.’

‘Alwaze when you come such things ’appen.’

‘Pas mon faute,’ he said, helping to catch Pouf.

‘They are deeficult enough without that you make them more,’ she said.

‘Uncle Paul doesn’t know his genders,’ cried Jonah; ‘hooray!’

‘Ma faute,’ he corrected himself, pronouncing it ‘fote.’

Then Toby, struggling with Smoke, whose nose she was trying to force into a saucer

of milk which he did not want, upset the saucer all over her dress and the table, splashing one and all. Jonah sprang up and knocked his chair over backwards in the excitement. Mrs. Tompkyns, wakening from her sleep upon the piano stool, leaped on to the notes of the open keyboard with a horrible crash. A pandemonium reigned, all talking, laughing, shouting at once, and the governess scolding. Then Paul trod on a kitten's tail under the table and extraordinary shrieks were heard, whereupon Jonah, stooping to discover their cause, bumped his head and began to cry. Moving forward to comfort him, Paul's sleeve caught in the spout of the tea-pot and it fell with a clatter among the cups and plates, sending the sugar-tongs spinning into the air, and knocking the milk-jug sideways so that a white sea flooded the whole tray and splashed up with white spots on to Paul's cheeks.

The cumulative effect of these disasters reached a culminating point, and a sudden hush fell upon the room. The children looked a trifle scared. Paul, with milk drops trickling down his nose, blushed and looked solemn. Very guilty and awkward he felt. Mlle. Fleury in fluent, rattling French explained her view of the situation, at first, however, without effect. At such moments mere sound and fury are vain; subtle, latent influences of the personality alone can calm a panic, and these the little person did not, of course, possess.

To Paul the whole picture appeared in very vivid detail. With the simplicity of the child and the larger vision of the man he perceived how closely tears and laughter moved before them; and it really pained him to see her confused and rather helpless amid all the debris. She was pretty, slim, and graceful; futile anger did not sit well upon her.

There she stood, little more than a girl herself, staring at him for a moment speechless, the dainty ruffles of her neat grey dress sticking up about her pretty throat, he thought, like the bristles of an enraged kitten. The hair, too, by her ears and neck suddenly seemed to project untidily and increased the effect. The sunlight

from the window behind her spread through it, making it cloud-like.

‘C’est tout mon—ma faute,’ he said, stretching out both hands impulsively, ‘tout!’ in his villainous Quebec French. ‘Scold me first, please.’

There was milk on his left eyebrow, and a crumb of cake in his beard as well. The governess stared at him, her eyes still blazing ominously. Her lips quivered. Then, fortunately, she laughed; no one really could have done otherwise. And that laugh saved the situation. The children, who had been standing motionless as statues awaiting their doom, sprang again into life. In a trice the milk had been mopped up, the tongs replaced, and the tea-pot put to bed under its ornamented cosy.

‘I forgeeve—this time,’ she said. ‘But you are vairy troublesome.’

In future, none the less, she forgave always; her hostility, never quite sure of itself, vanished from that moment.

‘Blue Summer’ouse,’ whispered Jonah in his ear, ‘and bring your Wind-Vision to read to us at the Meeting.’

‘But not too much Wind-Vision, please, Meester Reevairs,’ she said, overhearing the whisper. ‘They think of nothing else.’

Paul stared at her. The thought in his mind was that she ought to come too, only he knew the children would not approve.

‘Then I must moderate their enthusiasm,’ he said gravely at last.

Mlle. Fleury laughed in his face. ‘You are worst of ze lot, I know—worst of all. Your Aventures and plays trouble all their lesson-time.’

‘It is my education,’ he said, as Jonah tugged at his coat from behind to get him out of the room. ‘You educate them; they educate me; I improve slowly. Voilá!’

‘But vairy slowly, n’est-ce pas? And you make up all such expériences like ze Wind-Vision to fill their minds.’

Nixie had told him that all their aventures filtered through to her, and that she kept a

special cahier in her own room, where she wrote them all out in her own language. ‘Another soul, perhaps, looking about for a safety-valve,’ he thought swiftly.

‘But, Mademoiselle, why not translate them into French? That’s a good idea, and excellent practice for them.’

‘Per’aps,’ she laughed, ‘per’aps we do that. C’est une idée au moins.’

She wanted so much, it was clear, to come into their happy little world of imagination and adventure. He realised suddenly how lonely her life might be in such a household.

‘You write them, and I will correct them for you,’ he said.

‘Come on, do come on, Uncle,’ cried the voices urgently from the door. The children were already in the passage. The little governess looked rather wistfully after them, and on a sudden impulse Paul did a thing he had never before done in his life. He took her hand and kissed the tips of her fingers, but so boyishly, and with such simple politeness and sincerity that there was hardly more in the act than if Jonah had done the same to Nixie in an aventure of another sort.

‘Au revoir then,’ he said laughingly; ‘chacun a son devoir, don’t they? And now I go to do mine.’

His sentence was somewhat mixed. He just had time to notice the pretty blush of confusion that spread over her face, and to hear her laugh ‘You are weecked children—vairy weecked—and you, Meester Reevairs, the biggest of all,’ when Nixie and Jonah had him by the hand and they were off out of the house to their Meeting in the Blue Summer-house.

Thus Mlle. Fleury ceased to be a difficulty in the household so far as his proceedings with the children were concerned. On the contrary, she became a helpful force, and often acted as a sort of sentry, or outpost, between one world and the other. Herself, she never came into their own private region, but hovered only along the borders of it. For though little over twenty years of age, she was French, and she understood

exactly how much interest she might allow herself to take in the Society without endangering her own position,—or theirs—or his. She knew that she could not enter their world freely and still maintain authority in the other; but, meanwhile, she managed Paul precisely as though he were one of her own charges, and saw to it that he did nothing which could really be injurious to the responsibilities for which she was answerable.

Thus Paul, thundering along with his belated youth, enjoyed himself more and more, while he enjoyed, also learned, marked, and read.

CHAPTER XII

It haunted him a good deal, this Vision of the Winds. Now he never heard the stirring of the woods without thinking of those delicately brilliant streamers flying across the sky.

The satisfaction of spinning a fairy tale out of it for the children's Society was only equalled by the pleasure of the original inspiration. Here, too, was a means of expressing himself he had never dreamed of; the relief was great. Moreover, it brought him into close touch with the inexhaustible reservoirs which children draw upon for their endless world of Make-Believe, and he understood that the child and the poet live in the same region. His feet were now set upon that secret path trodden by the feet of children since the world began; and, for all his burden of years, there was no telling where it might lead him. For the springs of perennial youth have their sources in that region—the youth of the spirit, with the constant flow of enthusiasm, the touch of simple, ever-living beauty, and the whole magic of vision. No one with imagination can ever become blasé, perhaps need ever grow old in the true sense.

By this means he might at last turn his accumulated stores to some useful account. The great geysers of imagination that dry up too soon with the majority might keep bubbling for ever; and provided the pipes kept open for smaller visions, they might

with time become channels for inspiration of a still higher order. His audience might grow too.

‘I’m getting on,’ he observed to Nixie a few days later; ‘getting on pretty well for an old man!’

‘I knew you would,’ she replied approvingly. ‘Only you wasted a lot of time over it. When you came you were so old that Toby thought you were going to die, you know.’

‘So bad as all that, was it?’

‘H’mmmmm,’ she nodded, her blue eyes faintly troubled; ‘quite!’

Paul took her on his knee and stared at her. The world of elemental wonder came quite close. There was something of magic about the atmosphere of this child’s presence that made it possible to believe anything and everything. She embodied exquisitely so many of his dreams—those dreams of God and Nature he had lived with all those lonely years in Canadian solitudes.

‘You know, I think,’ he said slowly as he watched with delight the look of tender affection upon her face, ‘that, without knowing it, you’re something of a little magician, Nixie. What do you think?’

But she only laughed and wriggled on his knee.

‘Am I really?’ she said presently. ‘Then what are you, I wonder?’

‘I used to be a Wood Cruiser,’ he replied gravely; ‘but what I am now it’s rather difficult to say. You ought to know,’ he added, ‘as you’re the magician who’s changing me.’

‘I’ve not changed you,’ she laughed. ‘I only found you out. The day you came I saw you were simply full of our things—and that you’d be a sort of Daddy to us. And we shall want a lot more Aventures, please, as soon as ever you can write them out——’

She was off his knee and half-way to the house the same second, for the voice of Mlle. Fleury was heard in the land. He watched her flitting through the patches of sunshine across the lawn, and caught the mischievous glance she turned to throw at him as she disappeared through the open French window—a vision of white dress, black legs, and flying hair. And only when she was gone did his heavier machinery get to work with the crop of questions he always thought of too late.

'A beginning, at any rate!' he said to himself, thinking of all the things he was going to write for them. 'Only I wish we were all in camp out there among the cedars and hemlocks on Beaver Creek, instead of boxed up in this toy garden where there are no wild animals, and you mayn't cut down trees for a big fire, and there are silly little Notice Boards all over the place about trespassers being prosecuted....'

The thought touched something in the centre of his being. He travelled; laughing and sighing as he went. 'My wig!' he thought aloud, 'but it's really extraordinary how that child brings those big places over here for me, and makes them seem alive with all kinds of things I could never have dreamed of—alone!'

'Paul, dear, what are you thinking about, here all by yourself—and without a hat on too, as usual? If the gardeners hear you talking aloud like this they will think—! Well, I hardly know quite what they will think!'

'Something Blake said—to be honest,' he laughed, turning to his sister who had come silently down the path, dressed, as on the day he had first seen her, in white serge with a big flower-hat. Languid she looked, but delicate and wholly charming; she wore brown garden gauntlets over hands and wrists, and a red parasol she held aloft, shed a becoming pink glow upon her face.

'Maurice Blake!' she exclaimed. 'Joan's cousin with the big farm on the Downs? But you don't know him!'

'Not that Blake,' he laughed again; 'and Joan, if you mean Joan Nicholson, Dick's niece who took up that rescue work, or something, in London, I have never seen in

my life.'

'Then it's a book you mean—one of those books you are always poring over in the library,' she murmured half reproachfully.

'One of Dick's books, yes,' he replied gently, linking his arm through hers and leading the way in the direction of the cedars. 'One of my "treasures,"' he added slyly, 'that you once shamelessly imagined to be in petticoats.'

She rather liked his teasing. The interests they shared were uncommonly small, perhaps, and the coinage of available words still smaller. Yet their differences never took on the slightest 'edge.' A genuine affection smoothed all their little talks.

'You do read such funny old books, Paul,' she observed, as though somewhere in her heart lurked a vague desire to make him more modern. 'Don't you ever try books of the day—novels, for instance?' She had one under her arm at the moment. He took it to carry for her.

'I have tried,' he admitted, a little ashamed of his backwardness, 'but I never can make out what they're driving at—half the time. What they described has never happened to me, or come into my world. I don't recognise it all as true, I mean—' He stopped abruptly for fear he might say something to wound her.

'One can always learn, though, and widen one's world, can't one? After all, we are all in the same world, aren't we?'

He realised the impossibility of correcting her; the invitation to be sententious could not catch him; his nature was too profound to contain the prig.

'Are we?' he said gently.

'Oh, I think so—more or less, Paul. There's only one nice world, at least.' She arranged her hat and parasol to keep the sun off, for she was afraid of the sun, even the shy sun of England.

He pulled out the deck-chair for her, and opened it.

‘Here,’ she said pointing, ‘if you don’t mind, dear; or perhaps over there where it looks drier; or just there under that tree, perhaps, is better still. It’s more sheltered, and there’s less sun, isn’t there?’

‘I think there is, yes,’ he replied, obeying her. The phrase ‘there’s less sun’ seemed to him so neatly descriptive of the mental state of persons without imagination.

‘She’ll come here for her summer holidays soon,’ his sister resumed, going back to Joan. ‘She works very hard at that “Home” place in town, and Dick always liked her to use us here as if the place were her own. I promised that.’ She dropped gracefully into the wicker chair, and Paul sat down for a moment beside her on the grass. ‘He spent a lot of capital, you know, in the thing and made her superintendent or something. She has a sort of passion for this rescuing of slum children, and, I believe, works herself to death over it, though she has means of her own. So you will be nice to her when she comes, won’t you, and look after her a bit? I do what I can, but I always feel I’m rather a failure. I never know what to talk to her about. She’s so dreadfully in earnest about everything.’

Paul promised. Joan sounded rather attractive, to tell the truth. He remembered something, too, of the big organisation his old friend had founded in London for the rescue and education of waif-boys. A thrill of pride ran through him, and close at its heels a secret sense of shame, that he himself did nothing in the great world of action—that his own life was a mass of selfish dreaming and refined self-seeking, that all his yearning for God and beauty was after all, perhaps, but a spiritual egoism. It was not the first time this thought had come to trouble and perplex. Of late—especially since he had begun to find these safety-valves of self-expression, and so a measure of relief—his mind had turned in the direction of some bigger field to work in outside self, perhaps more than he quite knew or realised.

‘Paul,’ his sister interrupted his reflections, after a prolonged fidgeting to make herself comfortable so that the parasol should shade her, the hat not tickle her, and

the novel open easily for reading; ‘you are happy here, aren’t you? You’re not too dull with us, I mean?’

‘It’s quite delightful, Margaret,’ he answered at once. ‘In one sense I have never been so happy in my life.’ He looked straight at her, the sun catching his brown beard and face. ‘And I love the children; they’re just the kind of companions I need.’

‘I’m so glad, so glad,’ she said genuinely. ‘And it’s very kind and good-natured of you to be with them such a lot. You really almost fill Dick’s place for them.’ She sighed and half closed her eyes. ‘Some day you may have children of your own; only you would spoil them quite atrociously, I’m sure.’

‘Am I spoiling yours?’ he asked solemnly.

‘Dreadfully,’ she laughed; ‘and turning little Mademoiselle’s head into the bargain.’

It was his turn to burst out laughing. ‘I think that young lady can take care of herself without difficulty,’ he exclaimed; ‘and as for my spoiling the children, I think it’s they who are spoiling me!’

And, presently, with some easy excuse, he left her side and went off into the woods. Margaret watched him charge across the lawn. A perplexed expression came into her face as she picked up her novel and settled down into the cushions, balancing the red parasol over her head at a very careful angle. Admiration was in her glance, too, as she saw him go. Evidently she was proud of her brother—proud that he was so different from other people, yet puzzled to the verge of annoyance that he should be so.

‘What a strange creature he is,’ was her somewhat indefinite reflection; ‘I thought but one Dick could exist in the world! He’s still a boy—not a day over twenty-five. I wonder if he’s ever been in love, or ever will be? I think—I hope he won’t; he’s rather nice as he is after all.’

She sighed faintly. Then she dipped again into her novel, wherein the emotions, from love downwards, were turned on thick and violent as from so many taps in a

factory; got bored with it; looked on to the last chapter to see what happened to everybody; and, finally—fell asleep.

CHAPTER XIII

To me alone there came a thought of griefs

A timely utterance gave that thought relief,

And I again am strong:

. . . . .

I hear the echoes through the mountains throng,

The winds come to me from the fields of sleep,

And all the earth is gay....

Ode, W. W.

For the rest of the day Paul was in peculiarly good spirits; he went about the place full of bedevilment of all kinds, to the astonishment of the household in general and of his sister in particular. The oppressive heat seemed to have no effect upon him. There was something in the air that excited him, and he was very busy getting rid of the excitement.

With bedtime came no desire to sleep. ‘I feel all worked-up, Margaret,’ he said as he lit her candle in the hall. ‘I think it must be an “aventure” coming,’—though, of course, she had no idea what he meant.

‘There’s thunder about,’ she replied. ‘It’s been so very close all day.’

‘Sleep well,’ Paul said when he left her at the top of the stairs; and the last thing he heard as he went down the long winding passage to his bedroom in the west wing was her voice faintly assuring him ‘One always does here, I’m glad to say.’

Once inside, and the door shut, he gave himself up to his mood. It was a mood

apparently that came from nowhere. A soft and mysterious excitement, all delicious, stirred in the depths of his being, rising slowly to the surface. Perhaps it was growing-pains somewhere in the structure of his personality, engineered subconsciously by his imagination; perhaps only ‘weather.’ He always followed the barometer like a strip of dried seaweed.

But on this particular night something more than mere ‘weather’ was abroad; his nerves sent a succession of swift faint warnings to his brain. To begin with, the night herself claimed definite attention. Some nights are just ordinary nights; others touch the soul and whisper ‘I am the night. Look at me. Listen!’

He obeyed the summons and went to the window, leaning out as his habit was. The darkness pressed up in a solid wall, charged to the brim with mysteries waiting to reveal themselves. No trees were visible, no outline of moor or hill or garden. The sky was pinned down to the horizon more tightly than usual—keeping back all manner of things. Very little air crept beneath the edges, so that the atmosphere was oppressive. The day had been cloudless, but with the sunset whole continents of vapour had climbed upon the hills of the evening wind, driven slowly by high currents that had not yet come near enough the earth to be heard and felt.

He coughed—gently. The least noise, he felt, would shatter some soft and delicate structure that rose everywhere through the darkness—some web-like shadow-scaffolding that reared upwards, supporting the night.

‘Something’s going to happen,’ he said low to himself. ‘I can feel it coming.’

He became very imaginative, enjoying his mood enormously, letting it act as a mental purge. Aventures that he would discover for the next Meeting swept through him. The stress and fever of creative fancy, stirred by the deep travailing of the elements behind that curtain of night, was upon him. Then, sleep being far away, he went to the writing-table, where Nixie’s deft hands had everything prepared, lit a second candle, and began to write.

‘I’ll write “How I climbed the Scaffolding of the Night,”’ he murmured; ‘for I feel it true within me. I feel as if I were part of the night—part of all this beautiful soft darkness.’

But, before he had written a dozen lines, he stopped and fell to listening again, staring past the steady candle-flames out into the open. The stillness was profound. A single ivy-leaf rattled sharply all by itself on the wall outside his window. He felt as if that leaf tapped faintly upon his own brain. By a curious process known only to the poetic temperament, he passed on to feel with everything about him—as though some portion of himself actually merged in with the silence, with the perfumes of trees and garden, with the voice of that little tapping leaf. And, in proportion as he realised this, he transferred the magic of it to his tale. He found the words that fitted his conception like a natural skin. He knew in some measure the satisfaction and relief of expression.

‘A year ago—a month ago,’ he thought with delight, ‘this would have been impossible to me. Nixie has taught me so much already!’

What he really wanted, of course, were the living, flaming words of poetry. But this he knew was denied him; perhaps the fire of inspiration did not burn steadily enough; perhaps the intellectual foundation was not there. At any rate, he could only do his best and struggle with the prose, and this he did with intense pleasure.

After a time he laid his pen down and fell to thinking again—the kind of reverie that dramatises a mood before the inner vision. And another inspiration came upon him with its sudden little glory; he realised vividly that within himself a region existed where all that he desired might find fulfilment; where yearnings, dreams, desires might come true. There existed this inner place within where he might visualise all he most wished for into a state of reality. The workshop of the creative imagination was its vestibule....

Whether or not he could put it into words for others to realise was merely a question

of craft....

He must have sat thinking in this way much longer than he knew, for the candles had burnt down quite low when at length he bestirred himself with a mighty yawn and rose to go to bed. But hardly had he begun to unfasten his crumpled black tie when something made him pause.

Far away, through the hush that covered the world, that ‘something’ was astir—coming swiftly nearer. He stepped back into the middle of the room and waited. Smoke, the sleeping black cat on the sofa, sat up and waited too. Looking about it with brilliant green eyes, wide open, and whiskers twitching backwards and forwards, it understood even better than he did that a change in all that world of darkness had come to pass. The animal stared alternately at the window and the door.

For another minute the stillness held supreme. Then, from the silent reaches beyond, this new sound came suddenly close, dropping down through leagues of night. It began with a faint roar in the chimney; a tree outside uttered a soft, rushing cry; a thousand leaves, instead of one, rattled on the wall.

A Messenger, running headlong through the darkness, was calling aloud a warning as it ran, for all to understand who could. And, among the few who were awake and understood, Paul and his four-footed companion were certainly the first.

A sudden movement of the vast fabric of darkness came next. That scaffolding of shadows trembled, as though the same moment it would fall and let in—Light. In front of the bow window the muslin curtain that so long had hung motionless, now bellied out slowly into the room. The movement, mysterious and suggestive, claimed attention significantly. Paul and Smoke, watching it, exchanged glances. Then, with a long, sighing sound, it floated back again to its original position. It hung down straight and still as before.

But in that moment something had entered the room. Borne by this messenger of the

coming storm, this stray Wind had left its warning—and was gone!

Smoke leapt softly down and padded over to sniff the curtain, and having done so, blinked up at Paul with eloquent eyes, and sat back to wait and—wash! No apparatus of speech ever said more plainly ‘Look out! Something’s coming! Better be prepared as I am!’

And something did come—almost the same minute. The forces that had so long been trying to upset the tent of darkness, did upset it, and from one uplifted corner there rushed down upon the world a blue-white sheet of light that was utterly gorgeous. For one instant trees, moor, hill leaped into vivid outline. The hands that held the sheet of brilliance shook it from the four corners, and all the sky shook with it; and, immediately after, the scaffolding of night fell with a prodigious crash, as the true storm, following upon its herald, descended with a hundred thunders and the roar of ten hundred trumpets.

The true wind rushed headlong into the room and extinguished both candles. Smoke rubbed against Paul’s feet in the darkness, thoroughly aroused; but Paul himself stood still, as the thrill and splendour of it all entered his heart and filled him with delight. Thunder, lightning, wind—all passed mysteriously into his blood till he was almost conscious of a desire to add the sound of his own voice and shout aloud. The excitement of the elemental forces swept into himself. He understood now the signs of preparation that had been going forward in him during the day.

Splendid sensations, the most splendid he ever knew, raced to and fro in his being, till it almost seemed as if his consciousness transferred itself to the tempest. Surely, that great wind tore out of his heart, that lightning sprang from his brain, that river of rain washed, not merely out of the sky, but out of himself. The edges of his personality became fluid and melted off into the very nature of the elements....

‘Now,’ he exclaimed aloud, pacing to and fro while Smoke followed him in the darkness and tried to play with the bows on his pumps, ‘had I but the means of

expression, what a message I could give to the world, of beauty, splendour, power!' He laughed in his excitement. 'If only the strings of my poor instrument had been tuned——!'

Sighing a little to himself at the thought, he went to the window. The first fury of the storm had passed; there was a sudden deep lull broken only by the rushing drip of rain; he smelt the wet foliage and soaking grass. Close to the window, it chanced, there was a dead tree, and in its leafless branches, outlined sharply by the lightning against the black sky, he traced what seemed the huge letters of some elemental alphabet; and at that moment, the returning wind passed through them like a hand on giant strings. It drew forth a wonderful sound in response, a sound that pierced as a two-edged sword to the centre of his being. It was a true singing wind—a Wind of Inspiration.

And, as he heard it, the great wave that fought for utterance rose within him and began to force and tear its way out in spite of everything. Words came pouring through him—like the stammering of torn strings upon a fiddle—clipped wings trying to fly—sparks streaming towards flame yet never achieving it. Similes and metaphors rushed, mixed and headlong, through his mind. In a moment he had dashed across the floor; the candles were again alight; and Paul, pencil in hand, was sitting at the table before a sheet of blank foolscap, the storm crashing about him, and Smoke watching him calmly with eyes full of expectant wonder.

And then was enacted a little drama—tragedy if ever there was one—that must often enough take place in the secret places of the world's houses, where the dumb poet seeks to transfer his genuine passion into the measure of halting and inadequate verse. Poignantly dramatic the spectacle must be, though never witnessed mercifully by an audience of more than one. Paul wrote fast, setting the words down almost as they came. It was that little passionate Wind of Inspiration that was the cause of all the trouble. Smoke jumped up on the table to watch the motion of the pencil across

the paper. For some reason he hardly thought it worth while to play with it:

The Winds of Inspiration blow,

Yet pass me ever by;

And songs God taught me long ago,

Unuttered burn and—die.

He read the verse over, and with an impatient motion altered ‘burn’ into ‘fade.’ Then he shook his head and continued:

From all the far blue hills of heaven

The dews of beauty rain;

Yet unto me no drops are given

To quench the ancient pain.

He scratched out ‘ancient’ and wrote over the top ‘undying.’ Then he scratched out ‘undying’ and put ‘ancient’ back in its place. This time Smoke stretched out a long black paw with a velvet end to it and gave the pencil a deliberate dab. Paul either ignored, or did not notice it; but Smoke left the paw thrust forward upon the paper so as to be ready for the next dab.

I know the passion of the night,

Full of all days unborn,—

Full of the yearning of the light

For one undying Morn.

Smoke caught the tip of the pencil with a swift and accurate stroke, and the ‘M’ of ‘Morn’ was provided with an irregular tail Paul had not intended. Very quickly, however, without further interruption, he wrote on to the end.

Above the embers of my heart,

Waiting the Living Breath;

The sparks fly listlessly apart—

Then circle to their death.

Dead sparks that gathered ne’er to flame,

Nor felt the kiss of fire!

Dead thoughts that never found the name

To spell their deep desire!

Is then this instrument so poor

That it may never sound

Songs that must pass for evermore

Unuttered and uncrowned?

O soul that fain would’st steal heaven’s fire,

Who clipped thy golden wings?

Who made so passionate a lyre,

Then never tuned the strings?

The Winds of Inspiration blow,

Yet pass me ever by;

And songs God taught me long ago,

Lost in the silence—die.

He rose from the table with a gesture of abrupt impatience and read the entire effusion through from beginning to end. First he laughed, then he sighed. He wondered for a moment how it was that so little of his passion had crept into the poor words. He crumpled up the paper and tossed it into the drawer; and then, blowing out the candles, moved over to the big arm-chair and dropped down into it. Again, as he sat there, his thoughts fell to dramatising his mood. He imagined that region within himself where all might come true, and all yearnings find adequate

expression. The idea got more and more mingled with the storm. He pictured it to himself with extraordinarily vivid detail.

‘There is such a place, such a state,’ he murmured, ‘and it is, it must be accessible.’

He heard the clock in the stables—or was it the church—strike the quarter before midnight.

As he sat in the big chair, Smoke left the table and curled up again on the mat at his feet.

CHAPTER XIV

Vision or imagination is a representation of what actually exists, really and unchangeably. He who does not imagine in stronger and better lineaments, and in stronger and better light, than his perishing mortal eye can see, does not imagine at all.—W. B.

It was Smoke who first drew his attention to something near the door by ‘padding’ slowly across the carpet and staring up at the handle. Paul’s eyes, following him, perceived next that the brass knob was silently turning. Then the door opened quickly and on the threshold stood—Nixie. The open door made such a draught that the twenty winds tearing about inside the room almost lifted the mat at his feet. Behind her he saw the shadowy outline of a second figure, which he recognised as Jonah.

‘Shut the door—quick!’ he said, but they had done so and were already beside him almost before the words were out of his mouth. In spite of the darkness a very faint radiance came with them so that he could distinguish their faces plainly; and his amazement on seeing them at all at this late hour was instantly doubled when he perceived further that they were fully dressed for going out. At the same time, however, so deep had he been in his reverie, and so strongly did the excitement of it yet linger in his blood, that he hardly realised how wicked they were to be parading

the house at such a time of the night, and that his obvious duty was to bundle them back to bed. In a strange, queer way they almost seemed part of his dream, part of his dramatised mood, part of the region of wonder into which his thoughts had been leading him. Moreover, he felt in some dim fashion that they had come with a purpose of great importance.

‘It’s awfully late, you know,’ he exclaimed under his breath, peering into their faces through the darkness.

‘But not too late, if we start at once,’ Jonah whispered. For a moment Paul had almost thought that they would melt away and disappear as soon as he spoke to them, or that they would not answer at all. But now this settled it; these were no figures in a dream. He felt their hands upon his arms and neck; the very perfume of Nixie’s hair and breath was about him. She was dressed, he noticed, in her red cloak with the hood over her head, and her eyes were popping with excitement. The expression on her face was earnest, almost grave. He saw the faint gleam of the gold buckle where the shiny black belt enclosed her little waist.

‘If we start at once, I said,’ repeated Jonah in a nervous whisper, pulling at his hand.

Paul started to his feet and began fumbling with his black tie, feeling vaguely that either he ought to tie it properly or take it off altogether, and that it was a sort of indecent tinsel to wear at such a time. But he only succeeded in pricking his finger with the pin sticking out of the collar. He felt more than a little bewildered, if the truth were told.

‘I’ll do that for you,’ Nixie said under her breath; and in a twinkling her deft fingers had whipped the strip of satin from his neck.

‘You don’t want a tie where we’re going,’ she laughed softly.

‘Or a hat either,’ added Jonah. ‘But I wish you’d hurry, please.’

‘I’d better put on another coat or a dressing-gown, or something,’ he stammered.

‘Coat’s best,’ Jonah told him, and in a moment he had changed into a tweed Norfolk jacket that lay upon the chair.

They pulled him towards the door, Nixie holding one hand, Jonah the other, and Smoke following so closely at his heels that he almost seemed to be prodding him gently forward with his velvet padded boots. Paul understood that tremendous forces, elemental in character like the wind and rain and lightning, somehow added their immense suasion to the little hands that pulled his own. He made no resistance, but just allowed himself to go; and he went with a wild and boyish delight tearing through his mind.

‘Are we going out then?’ he asked, ‘out of doors?’

‘What’s the exact time, the very exact time?’ Nixie asked hurriedly, ignoring his question; and though Paul had looked a few minutes before they came in, he had quite forgotten by now. She helped herself to his watch, burrowing under his coat to find it, and peering closely to read the position of the hands.

‘Five minutes to twelve!’ she exclaimed, addressing Jonah in excited whispers. ‘Oh, I say! We must be off at once, or we shall miss the crack altogether. Come on, Uncle, or your life won’t be safe a minute.’

‘Then what will it be a month, I should like to know?’ he laughed as he was swept along through the darkness, not knowing what to say or think.

‘The crack! The crack! Quick, or we shall miss it!’ cried the children in the same sentence, urging him heavily forward.

‘What crack? Where are we going to? What does it all mean?’ he asked breathlessly, trying to avoid treading on their toes and the toes of Smoke who flew beside them with tail held swiftly aloft as though to guide them.

They brought him up with a sudden bump just outside the door, and Nixie turned up a serious face to explain, while Jonah waited impatiently in front of them.

‘Quick!’ she whispered, ‘listen and I’ll tell you. We’re going to find the crack between Yesterday and To-morrow, and then—slip through it.’

His heart leaped with excitement as he heard.

‘Go on,’ he cried. ‘Tell me more!’

‘You see, Yesterday really begins just after Midnight when To-day ends’; she said, ‘and To-morrow begins there too.’

‘Of course.’

‘After Midnight, To-morrow jumps away again a whole day, and is as far off as ever. That’s the nearest you can get to To-morrow.’

‘I see.’

‘And Yesterday, which has been a whole day away, suddenly jumps up close behind again. So that Yesterday and To-morrow,’ she went on, eager with excitement, ‘meet at Midnight for a single second before flying off to their new places. Daddy told us that long ago.’

‘Exactly. They must.’

‘But now the world is old and worn. There’s a tiny little crack between Yesterday and To-morrow. They don’t join as they once did, and, if we’re very quick, we can find the crack and slip through——’

‘Bless my Timber Limits!’ he exclaimed; ‘what a glorious notion!’

‘And, once inside there, there’s no time, of course,’ she went on, more and more hurriedly. ‘Anything may happen, and everything come true.’

‘The very region I was thinking about just now!’ thought Paul. ‘The very place! I’ve found it!’

‘Do hurry up, oh do!’ put in Jonah with a loud whisper that echoed down the corridor, for his patience was at length exhausted by all this explanation. ‘You are so slow getting started.’

‘Ready!’ cried Paul and Nixie in the same breath.

They were off! Down the dark and silent stairs on tiptoe, through the empty halls, past the hat-racks and the stuffed deer heads that grinned down upon them from the walls, along the stone passage to the kitchen region, where the row of red fire-buckets gleamed upon the shelves, and so, past the ghostly pantry, to the back door. This they found open, for Jonah had already run ahead and unlocked it. Another minute and they had crossed the yard by the stables, where the pump stood watching them like a figure with an outstretched arm, and soon were well out on to the lawn at the back of the house. The rain had ceased, but the wind caught them here with such tremendous blows and shouting that they could hardly hear themselves speak, and had to keep closely together in a bunch to make their way at all. It was pitch dark and the stars were hidden. Paul stumbled and floundered, treading incessantly on the toes of the more nimble children. Smoke ran like a black shadow, now in front, now behind.

‘We’re nearly there,’ Nixie cried encouragingly, as he made a false step and landed with a crash in the middle of some low laurel bushes. ‘But do be more careful, Uncle, please,’ she added, helping him out again.

‘There’s the clock striking!’ Jonah called, a little in front of them. ‘We’re only just in time!’

Paul recovered himself and pulled up beside them under the shadows of the big twin cedars that stood like immense sentries at the end of the lawn. He came rolling in, swaying like a ship in a heavy sea. And, as he did so, the sound of a church bell striking the hour came to their ears through the terrific uproar of the elements, blown this way and that by the wind.

It was midnight striking.

At the same instant he heard a peculiar sharp sound like whistling—the noise wind makes tearing through a narrow opening.

‘The crack, the crack!’ cried his guides together. ‘That’s the air rushing. It’s coming. Look out!’ They seized him by the hands.

‘But I shall never get through,’ shouted Paul, thinking of his size for the first time.

‘Yes you will,’ Nixie screamed back at him above the roar. ‘Between the sixth and seventh strokes, remember.’

The fifth stroke had already sounded. The wind caught it and went shrieking into the sky.

Six! boomed the distant bell through the night. They held his hands in a vice.

There was a sound like an express train tearing through the air. A quick flash of brilliance followed, and a long slit seemed to open suddenly in the sky before them, and then flash past like lightning. Nixie tugged at one hand, and Jonah tugged at the other. Smoke scampered madly past his feet.

A wild rush of wind swept him along, whistling in his ears; there was a breathless and giddy sensation of dropping through empty space that seemed as though it could never end—and then Paul suddenly found himself sitting on a grassy bank beside a river, Nixie and Jonah on either side of him, and Smoke washing his face in front of them as though nothing in the whole world had ever happened to disturb his equanimity. And a bright, soft light, like the light of the sun, shone warmly over everything.

‘Only just managed it,’ Nixie observed to Jonah. ‘He is rather wide, isn’t he?’

‘Everybody’s thin somewhere,’ was the reply.

‘And the crack is very stretchy’—she added,—‘luckily.’

Paul drew a long breath and stretched himself.

‘Well,’ he said, still a little breathless and dizzy, ‘such things were never done in my day.’

‘But this isn’t your day any more,’ explained Nixie, her blue eyes popping with

laughter and mischief, ‘it’s your night. And, anyhow, as I told you, there’s no time here at all. There’s no hurry now.’

CHAPTER XV

The imagination is not a state; it is the human existence itself.—W. B.

Paul, looking round, felt utterly at peace with himself and the world; at rest, he felt. That was his first sensation in the mass. He recovered in a moment from his breathless entrance, and a subtle pleasure began to steal through his veins. It seemed as if every yearning he had ever known was being ministered to by competent unseen Presences; and, obviously, the children and the cats—Mrs. Tompkyns had somehow managed to join Smoke—felt likewise, for their countenances beamed and blinked supreme contentment.

‘Ah!’ observed Jonah, sitting contentedly on the grass beside him. ‘This is the place.’ He heaved a happy little sigh, as though the statement were incontrovertible.

‘It is,’ echoed Paul. And Nixie’s eyes shone like blue flowers in a field of spring.

‘The crack’s smaller than it used to be though,’ he heard her murmuring to herself. ‘Every year it’s harder to get through. I suppose something’s happening to the world—or to people; some change going on——’

‘Or we’re getting older,’ Jonah put in with profounder wisdom than he knew.

Paul congratulated himself upon his successful entrance. He felt something of a dog! The bank on which he lay sloped down towards a river fledged with reeds and flowers; its waters, blue as the sky, flowed rippling by, and a soft wind, warm and scented, sighed over it from the heart of the summer. On the opposite shore, not fifty yards across, a grove of larches swayed their slender branches lazily in the sun, and a little farther down the banks he saw a line of willows drooping down to moisten their tongue-like leaves. The air hummed pleasantly with insects; birds flashed to

and fro, singing as they flew; and, in the distance, across miles of blue meadowlands, hills rose in shadowy outline to the sky. He feasted on the beauty of it all, absorbing it through every sense.

‘But where are we?’ he asked at length, ‘because a moment ago we were in a storm somewhere?’ He turned to Nixie who still lay talking to herself contentedly at his side. ‘And what really happens here?’ he added with a blush. ‘I feel so extraordinarily happy.’

They lay half-buried among the sweet-scented grasses. Jonah burrowed along the shore at some game of his own close by, and the cats made a busy pretence of hunting wild game in a dozen places at once, and then suddenly basking in the sun and washing each other’s necks and backs as though wild-game hunting were a bore.

‘Nothing ’xactly—happens,’ she answered, and her voice sounded curiously like wind in rushes—‘but everything—is.’

It seemed to him as though he listened to some spirit of the ages, very wise with the wisdom of eternal youth, that spoke to him through the pretty little mouth of this rosy-faced child.

‘It’s like that river,’ she went on, pointing to the blue streak winding far away in a ribbon through the landscape, ‘which flows on for ever in a circle, and never comes to an end. Everything here goes on always, and then always begins again.’

For the river, as Paul afterwards found out, ran on for miles and miles, in the curves of an immense circle, of which the sea itself was apparently nothing but a widening of certain portions.

‘So here,’ continued the child, making a pattern with daisies on his sleeve as she talked, ‘you can go over anything you like again and again, and it need never come to an end at all. Only,’ she added, looking up gravely into his face, ‘you must really, really want it to start with.’

‘Without getting tired?’ he asked, wonderingly.

‘Of course; because you begin over and over again with it.’

‘Delightful!’ he exclaimed, ‘that means a place of eternal youth, where emotions continually renew themselves.’

‘It’s the place where you find lost things,’ she explained, with a little puzzled laugh at his foolish long words, ‘and where things that came to no proper sort of end—things that didn’t come true, I mean, in the world, all happen and enjoy themselves——’

He sat up with a jerk, forgetting the carefully arranged daisies on his coat, and scattering them all over the grass.

‘But this is too splendid!’ he cried. ‘This is what I’ve always been looking for. It’s what I was thinking about just now when I tried to write a poem and couldn’t.’

‘We found it long ago,’ said the child, pointing to Jonah and Mrs. Tompkyns, Smoke having mysteriously disappeared for the moment. ‘We live here really most of the time. Daddy brought us here first.’

‘Things life promised, but never gave, here come to full fruition,’ Paul murmured to himself. ‘You mean,’ he added aloud, ‘this is where ideals that have gone astray among the years may be found again, and actually realised? A kingdom of heaven within the heart?’ He was very excited, and forgot for the moment he was speaking to a child.

‘I don’t know about all that,’ she answered, with a puzzled look. ‘But it is life. We live-happily-ever-after here. That’s what I mean.’

‘It all comes true here?’

‘All, all, all. All broken things and all lost things come here and are happy again,’ she went on eagerly; ‘and if you look hard enough you can find ’xactly what you want and ’xactly what you lost. And once you’ve found it, nothing can break it or lose it again.’

Paul stared, understanding that the voice speaking through her was greater than she knew.

‘And some things are lost, we think,’ she added, ‘simply because they were wanted—wanted very much indeed, but never got.’

‘Yet these are certainly the words of a child,’ he reflected, wonder and delight equally mingled, ‘and of a child tumbling about among great spiritual things in a simple, intuitive fashion without knowing it.’

‘All the things that ought to happen, but never do happen,’ she went on, picking up the scattered daisies and making the pattern anew on a different part of his coat. ‘They all are found here.’

‘Wishes, dreams, ideals?’ he asked, more to see what answer she would make than because he didn’t understand.

‘I suppose that’s the same thing,’ she replied. ‘But, now please, Uncle Paul, keep still a minute or I can’t possibly finish this crown the daisies want me to make for them.’

Paul stared into her eyes and saw through them to the blue of the sky and the blue of the winding river beyond; through to the hills on the horizon, a deeper blue still; and thence into the softer blue shadows that lay over the timeless land buried in the distances of his own heart, where things might indeed come true beyond all reach of misadventure or decay. For this, of course, was the real land of wonder and imagination, where everything might happen and nothing need grow old. The vision of the poet saw ... far—far....

All this he realised through the blue eyes of the child at his side, who was playing with daisies and talking about the make-believe of children. His being swam out into the sunshine of great distances, of endless possibilities, all of which he might be able afterwards to interpret to others who did not see so far, or so clearly, as himself. He began to realise that his spirit, like the endless river at his feet, was without end or

beginning. Thrills of new life poured into him from all sides.

‘And when we go back,’ he heard the musical little voice saying beside him, ‘that church will be striking exactly where we left it—the sixth stroke, I mean.’

‘Of course; I see!’ cried Paul, beginning to realise the full value of his discovery, ‘for there’s no time here, is there? Nothing grows old.’

‘That’s it,’ she laughed, clapping her hands, ‘and you can find all the lost and broken things you want, if you look hard and—really want them.’

‘I want a lot,’ he mused, still staring into the little wells of blue opposite; ‘the kind that are lost because they’ve never been “got,”’ he added with a smile, using her own word.

‘For instance,’ Nixie continued, hanging the daisies now in a string from his beard, ‘all my broken things come here and live happily—if I broke them by accident; but if I broke them in a temper, they are still angry and frighten me, and sometimes even chase me out again. Only Jonah has more of these than I have, and they are all on the other side of the river, so we’re quite safe here. Now watch,’ she added in a lower voice, ‘Look hard under the trees and you’ll see what I mean perhaps. And wish hard, too.’

Paul’s eyes followed the direction of her finger across the river, and almost at once dim shapes began to move to and fro among the larches, starting into life where the shadows were deepest. At first he could distinguish no very definite forms, but gradually the outlines grew clearer as the forms approached the edges of the wood, coming out into the sunshine.

‘The ghosts! The ghosts of broken things!’ cried Jonah, running up the bank for protection. ‘Look! They’re coming out. Some one’s thinking about them, you see!’

Paul, as he gazed, thought he had never seen such an odd collection of shapes in his life. They stalked about awkwardly like huge insects with legs of unequal length, and with a lop-sided motion that made it impossible to tell in which direction they

meant to go. They had brilliant little eyes that flashed this way and that, making a delicate network of rays all through the wood like the shafts of a hundred miniature search-lights. Their legs, too, were able to bend both forwards and backwards and even sideways, so that when they appeared to be coming towards him they really were going away; and the strange tumbling motion of their bodies, due to the unequal legs, gave them an appearance that was weirdly grotesque rather than terrifying.

It was, indeed, a curious and delightful assortment of goblins. There were dolls without heads, and heads without dolls; milk jugs without handles, china teapots without spouts, and spouts without china teapots; clocks without hands, or with cracked and wounded faces; bottles without necks; broken cups, mugs, plates, and dishes, all with gaping slits and cracks in their anatomy, with half their faces missing, or without heads at all; every sort of vase imaginable with every sort of handle unimaginable; tin soldiers without swords or helmets, china puppies without tails, broken cages, knives without handles; and a collection of basins of all sizes that would have been sufficient to equip an entire fleet of cross-channel steamers: altogether a formidable and pathetic army of broken creatures.

‘What in the world are they trying to do?’ he asked, after watching their antics for some minutes with amazement.

‘Looking for the broken parts,’ explained Jonah, who was half amused, half alarmed. ‘They get out of shape like that because they pick up the first pieces they find.’

‘And you broke all these things?’

The boy nodded his head proudly. ‘I reckernise most of them,’ he said, ‘but they’re nearly all accidents. I said “sorry” for each one.’

‘That, you see,’ Nixie interrupted, ‘makes all the difference. If you break a thing on purpose in a temper, you murder it; but the accidents come down here and feel

nothing. They hardly know who broke them. In the end they all find their pieces. It's the heaven of broken things, we call it. But now let's send them away.'

'How?' asked Paul.

'By forgetting them,' cried Jonah.

They turned their faces away and began to think of other things, and at once the figures began to fade and grow dim. The lights went out one by one. The grotesque shapes melted into the trees, and a minute later there was nothing to be seen but the slender larch stems and the play of sunlight and shadow beneath their branches.

'You see how it works, at any rate,' Nixie said. 'Anything you've lost or broken will come back if you think hard enough—nice things as well as nasty things—but they must be real, real things, and you must want them in a real, real way.'

It was, indeed, he saw, the region where thoughts come true.

'Then do broken people come here too?' Paul asked gravely after a considerable pause, during which his thoughts went profoundly wandering.

'Yes; only we don't happen to know any. But all our dead animals are here, all the kittens that had to be drowned, and the puppies that died, and the collie the Burdons' motor killed, and Birthday, our old horse that had to be shot. They're all here, and all happy.'

'Let's go and see them then,' he cried, delighted with this idea of a heaven of broken animals.

In a moment they were on their feet and away over the springy turf, singing and laughing in the sunshine, picking flowers, jumping the little brooks that ran like crystal ribbons among the grass, Nixie and Jonah dancing by his side as though they had springs in their feet and wings on their shoulders. More and more the country spread before them like a great garden run wild, and Paul thought he had never seen such fields of flowers or smelt such perfumes in the wind.

‘What’s the matter now?’ he exclaimed, as Jonah stopped and began to stare hard at an acre of lilies of the valley by the way.

‘He’s calling some things of his own,’ Nixie answered. ‘Stare and think—and they’ll all come. But we needn’t bother about him. Come along!’ And he only had time to see the lilies open in an avenue to make way for a variety of furry, four-legged creatures, when the child pulled him by the hand and they were off again at full speed across the fields.

A sound of neighing made him turn round, and before he could move aside, a large grey horse with a flowing tail and a face full of gentle beneficence came trotting over the turf and stopped just behind him, nuzzling softly into his shoulder.

‘Nice, silly-faced old thing,’ said Nixie, running up to speak to it, while a brown collie trotted quietly at her heels. A little further off, peeping up through a tangled growth of pinks and meadow-sweet, he saw the faces of innumerable kittens, watching him with large and inquisitive eyes, their ears just topping the flowers like leaves of fur. Such a family of animals Paul thought he had never even dreamed of.

‘This is the heaven of the lost animals,’ Nixie cried from her seat on the back of the grey horse, having climbed up by means of a big stone. On her shoulder perched a small brown owl, blinking in the light like the instantaneous shutter of a photographic camera. It had fluffy feathers down to its ankles like trousers, and was very tame. ‘And they are always happy here and have plenty to eat and drink. They play with us far better here than outside, and are never frightened. Of course, too, they get no older.’

Paul climbed up behind her on the horse’s back.

‘Now we’re off!’ he cried; and with Jonah and a dozen animals at their heels, they raced off across the open country, holding on as best they could to mane and tail, laughing, shouting, singing, while the wind whistled in their ears and the hot sun poured down upon their bare heads.

Then, suddenly, the horse stopped with a jerk that sent them sprawling forward upon his neck. He turned his head round to look at them with a comical expression in his big, brown eyes. Paul slid off behind, and Nixie saved herself by springing sideways into a bed of forget-me-nots. The owl fluttered away, blinking its eyes more rapidly than ever in a kind of surprised fury, shaking out its fluffy trousers, and Jonah arrived panting with his dogs and rabbits and puppies.

‘Come,’ exclaimed Nixie breathlessly, ‘he’s had enough by now. No animal wants people too long. Let’s get something to eat.’

‘And I’ll cook it,’ cried the boy, busying himself with sticks and twigs upon the ground. ‘We’ll have stodgy-pudding and cake and jam and oyster-patties, and then more stodgy-pudding again to finish up with.’

Paul glanced round him and saw that all the animals had disappeared—gone like thoughts forgotten. In their place he soon saw a column of blue smoke rising up among the fir trees close behind him, and the children flitting to and fro through it looking like miniature gypsies. The odour of the burning wood was incense in his nostrils.

‘But can’t I see something too—something of my own?’ he asked in an aggrieved tone.

Nixie and Jonah looked up at him with surprise. ‘Of course you can,’ they exclaimed together. ‘Just stare into space as the cats do, and think, and wish, and wait. Anything you want will come—with practice. People you’ve lost, or people you’ve wanted to find, or anything that’s never come true anywhere else.’

They went on busily with their cooking again, and Paul, lying on his back in the grass some distance away, sent his thoughts roaming, searching, deeply calling, far into the region of unsatisfied dreams and desires within his heart....

For what seemed hours and hours they wandered together through the byways of this vast, enchanted garden, finding everything they wished to find, forgetting

everything they wished to forget, amusing themselves to their heart's content; till, at last, they stood together on a big boulder in the river where the spray rose about them in a cloud and painted a rainbow above their heads.

'Get ready! Quick!' cried Jonah. 'The Crack's coming!'

'It's coming!' repeated Nixie, seizing Paul's hand and urging him to hold very tight.

He had no time to reply. There was a rushing sound of air tearing through a narrow opening. The sky grew dark, with a roaring in his ears and a sense of great things flying past him. Again came the sensation of dropping giddily through space, and the next minute he found himself standing with the two children upon the lawn, darkness about them, and the storm howling and crashing over their heads through the branches of the twin cedars.

'There's the clock still striking,' Nixie cried. 'It's only been a few seconds altogether.'

He heard the church clock strike the last six strokes of midnight.

For some minutes he realised little more than that he felt rather stiff and uncomfortable in his bedroom chair, and that he was chilly about the legs. Outside the wind still roared and whistled, making the windows rattle, while gusts of rain fell volleying against the panes as though trying to get in. A roll of distant thunder came faintly to his ear. He stretched himself and began to undress by the light of a single candle.

On the table lay a sheet of paper headed 'How I climbed the Scaffolding of the Night,' and he read down the page and then took his pen and wrote the heading of something else on another sheet: 'Adventure in the Land between Yesterday and To-morrow.' With a mighty yawn he then blew out his candle and tumbled into bed.

And with him, for all the howling of the elements, came a strange sense of peace and happiness. Out of the depths rose gradually before his inner eye in a series of delightful pictures the scenes he had just left, and he understood that the pathway to

that country of dreams fulfilled and emotions that never die, lay buried far within his own being.

‘Between Yesterday and To-morrow’ was to be the children’s counterpart of that timeless, deathless region where the spirit may always go when hunted by the world, fretted by the passion of unsatisfied yearnings, plagued by the remorseless tribes of sorrow and disaster. There none could follow him, just as none—none but himself—could bring about its destruction. For he had found the mystical haven where all lost or broken things eternally reconstruct themselves.

The ‘Crack,’ of course, may be found by all who have the genuine yearning to recreate their world more sweetly, provided they possess at the start enough imagination to repay the trouble of training—also that Wanderlust of the spirit which seeks ever for a resting-place in the great beyond that reaches up to God.

Paul as yet had but discovered the entrance, led by little children who dreamed not how wondrous was the journey; but the rest would follow. For it is a region mapped gradually out of a thousand impulses, out of ten thousand dreams, out of the eternal desires of the soul. It is not discovered in a day, nor do the ways of entrance always remain the same. A thousand joys contribute to its fashioning, a thousand frustrated hopes describe its boundaries, and ten thousand griefs bring slowly, piece by piece, the material for its construction, while every new experience of the soul, successful or disastrous, adds something to its uncharted geography. Slowly it gathers into existence, becoming with every sojourn more real and more satisfying, till at length from the pain of all possible disillusionment the way opens to the heart of relief, to the peaceful place of hopes renewed, of purposes made fruitful and complete.

And from this deathless region, too, flow all the forces of the soul that make for hope, enthusiasm, courage, and delight. The children might call it ‘Between Yesterday and To-morrow,’ and find their little broken dreams brought back to life; but Paul understood that its rewards might vary immensely according to the courage

and the need of the soul that sought it.

CHAPTER XVI

But one man loved the pilgrim soul in you.

Yeats.

Thus, led delicately by the animals and the children, and guided to a certain extent, too, by the curious poesy of his own soul, Paul Rivers came gradually into his own. Once made free of their world, he would learn next that the process automatically made him free of his own. This simple expedient of having found an audience did wonders for him, for it not only loosened his tongue and his pen, but set all the deeper parts of him running into speech, and the natural love and poetry of the man began to produce a delightful, if somewhat extraordinary, harvest.

He understood—none better—that fantasy, unless rooted in reality, leads away from action and tends to weakness and insipidity; but that, grounded in the common facts of life, and content with idealising the actual, it might become an important factor for good, lending wings to the feet and lifting the soul over difficult places. His education advanced by leaps and bounds.

And in some respects he showed himself possessed of a wisdom that could only have belonged to him because at heart he was still a child, and the ordinary ‘knowledge of the world’ had not come to spoil him in his life of solitude among the trees.

For instance, that ‘Between Yesterday and To-morrow’ bore some curious relation to reverie and dreams, he dimly discerned, yet, with this simple and profound wisdom of his, he refused to pry too closely into the nature of such relationship. He did not seek to reduce the delightful experience to the little hard pellet of an exact fact. For that, he felt, would be to lose it. Exact knowledge, he knew, was often merely a great treachery, and ‘fact’ a dangerous weapon that deceived, and might

even destroy, its owner. If he analysed too carefully, he might analyse the whole thing out of existence altogether, and such a contingency was not to be thought of for a single moment.

Moreover, the attitude of the children confirmed his own. They never referred to their adventures until he had given them form and substance in his reports as recording secretary of the society. No word passed their lips until they had heard them read out, and then they talked of nothing else. During the day they maintained a sublime ignorance of his ‘aventures of the night,’ as though nothing of the kind had ever happened; and this tended still further to relegate it all to a region untouched by time, beyond the reach of chance, beyond the destruction of mere talk, eternal and real in the great sense.

Meanwhile, as this hidden country he had discovered yielded to exploration, becoming more and more mapped out, and its springs of water tapped, Paul was conscious that the power from these vital sources began to modify his character, and to enlarge his outlook upon life. Imagination, released and singing, provides the greatest of all magics—belief in one’s self. The rivers of feeling carve their own channels, which are ever the shortest way to the ocean of fulfilment. The effects spread gradually to the remotest corner of his being.

One rainy day he found himself alone in the schoolroom with Nixie, for it was Saturday afternoon, and Mlle. Fleury had carried off Jonah and Toby in their best clothes, and to their acute dismay, to have tea with the children—they were dull children—at the vicarage.

Dressed in blue serge, with a broad white collar over her shoulders and a band of gold about her waist that matched the colour of her hair, she darted about the room with her usual effect of brightness, so that he found himself continually thinking the sun had burst through the clouds. She was busily arranging cats and kittens in various positions in which they showed no inclination to remain, till the

performance had somewhat the air of the old-fashioned game of ‘general post.’ Paul sat lazily at the ink-stained table, dividing his attentions between watching the child’s fascinating movements and pecking idly into the soft wood with his little gold penknife.

‘Aren’t you very glad we found you out so soon, Uncle Paul?’ she asked suddenly, looking up at him over a back of glossy and wriggling yellow fur. ‘Aren’t you very glad indeed, I mean?’

He went on picking at the soft ditches between the ridges of dirty brown without answering for a moment.

‘Yes,’ he said presently, in the slow manner of a man who weighs his words; ‘very glad indeed. It’s increased my interest in life. It’s made me happier, and healthier, and wealthier, and all the rest of it—and wiser too.’ He bent, frowning, over the ditches.

‘It was all your own fault, you know, that we didn’t get you sooner. Oh, years ago—ever so many.’

‘But I was in the backwoods, Nixie.’

‘That made no difference,’ she answered promptly. ‘If you had written to us, as mother often asked, we should have noticed at once what you were.’

‘How could that possibly be?’ he objected, still without looking up.

‘Of course!’ was the overwhelming reply.

‘Oh, come now,’ he said, staring at her solemnly over the table; ‘I admit your penetration is pretty keen, but I doubt that.’

She returned his gaze with an expression of grave, almost contemptuous surprise, tossing her hair back impatiently with a jerk from her face. She had finally established the kittens, Zezette and Sambo, in a sleepy heap just where she wanted them on the top of the squirrel’s cage.

‘But, Uncle,’ she exclaimed, ‘between yesserdayantomorrow you can meet people even after they’ve gone altogether. So America wouldn’t have been difficult. How can you think such things?’

Not knowing exactly how it was he could think such things, Paul made no immediate reply.

‘Anyhow,’ she resumed, ‘it didn’t take long once you were here. We saw in a second in the drawinroom what you were—the day you arrived.’

‘But I acted so well! I’m sure now I behaved—’

‘You behaved just like Jonah,’ she interrupted him with swift decision, ‘—only bigger!’

Paul laughed to himself. His inquisitor shot across the room to establish Pouf, another kitten, on the piano top. She moved lightly, with a dancing motion that flung her hair behind her through the air, again producing the effect of a sunlight gleam. Paul continued to destroy the table with his blunt penknife, chuckling inwardly at the figure he must have cut that summer afternoon in the ‘drawinroom’ before these mercilessly observant eyes.

‘You stood about shyly just like him and Toby—in lumps,’ she went on presently, ‘saying things in a sudden, jerky way—’

‘In lumps!’ cried Paul. ‘That’s a nice way to talk to your Uncle!’

Nixie burst out laughing. ‘Oh, I don’t mean that quite,’ she explained; ‘but you stood about as if you found it hard to balance, and were afraid to move off the mat. Just as Jonah does at a party when he’s shy. I copied you exactly when I got upstairs.’

‘Did I indeed? Did you indeed, I mean?’ said he, wondering whether he ought to feel offended or pleased at the picture.

‘Yes, rather,’ declared the child emphatically, darting up with Pouf who had

definitely rejected the top of the piano, and planting it on the table under his nose, where it immediately sat down, purring loudly and staring into his face. ‘I should think you did! You see, Pouf says so too; he’s purring his agreement. Listen to him! That’s fur language.’

He listened as he was bid, gazing first into the green eyes of the kitten that opened so wide they seemed to have no lids at all, and then into the mischievous blue eyes of his other tormentor. He decided that on the whole he felt pleased.

‘Then I wasted a lot of time,’ he observed presently, ‘about joining, I mean—coming into your world.’

‘H’mmmm, you did.’

‘Only, remember, you were all very young when I was in America, weren’t you?’ he added by way of excuse.

Nixie nodded her head approvingly.

‘And you, I expect,’ she replied thoughtfully, ‘were too hard then. I hadn’t thought of that. You might never have squeezed through the Crack, mightn’t you? You’re much softer now,’ she decided after a second’s reflection, ‘ever so much softer!’

‘I have improved, I think,’ he admitted, blushing like a pleased schoolboy. ‘I am decidedly softer!’

He made a violent dig with his penknife, breaking down the hard barrier between two ditches, whereupon Pouf, thinking the resultant splinter was a plaything specially contrived for its happiness, opened its eyes wider than ever, and stretched out a paw that looked huge compared with the splinter and the penknife. Paul put the weapon away, and Pouf fixed its eyes intently on the pocket where it had vanished, leaving its paw absent-mindedly lying on the splinter which it had already wholly forgotten. It purred louder than ever, trying to give the impression that it was really a big cat.

Outside the rain fell softly. A blue-bottle buzzed noisily about the room, banging the ceiling and the walls as though it were exceedingly angry. Through the open window floated the smell of the English garden soaked in rain, odours of soused trees and lawns, and wet air—exquisitely fragrant.

A hush fell over the room; only the purring of the kittens broke it. Paul thought it was the most soothing sound in the whole world; something began to purr within himself. His head, and Nixie's head, and little Pouf's head—all lay very close together over that schoolroom table, each full of its own busy dreams. These queer, gentle talks with the child were very delightful to him, all his shyness and self-consciousness gone, and the spirit of true wonder, simple and profound, awake in his heart.

Together, for a long time, they listened in silence to these sounds of purring and breathing and the murmur of rain falling outside: deep, velvety breathing it was, almost inaudible. Everything in life, Paul caught himself reflecting, tragedy or comedy, goes on against a background of this deep, hidden, purring sound of life. Breathing is the first manifestation of life; it is the music of the world, the soft, continuous hum of existence. His thoughts travelled far....

'Yes, on the whole,' he muttered at length inconsequently, 'I think I may consider myself softer than before—kinder, gentler, more alive!'

But neither Nixie, nor Pouf, nor, for that matter, Sambo and Zezette either, paid the smallest attention to his remark; he was soon lost again in further reflections.

It was the child's voice that presently recalled him.

'Uncle Paul,' she said very softly, her mind still busy with thoughts of her own, 'do you know that sometimes I have heard the earth breathing too—akchilly breathing?'

Paul, coming back from a long journey, turned and gazed at the eager little face beside him in silence.

'The earth is alive, I'm sure,' she went on with an air of great mystery. 'It breathes

and whispers, and even purrs; sometimes it cries. It's a great body, alive—just like you and the other stars——'

'Nixie!'

'They are all bodies, though; heavenly bodies, Daddy called them. Only we, I suppose, are too small to see it that way perhaps.'

Paul listened, stroking Pouf slowly. The child's voice was low and somewhat breathless with the excitement of what she was saying. She believed every word of it intensely. Only a very small part of what she was thinking found expression in her words. Her ideas beckoned her beyond; and mere words could not overtake them at her age.

'The earth,' she went on, seeing that he did not laugh, 'is somebody's big round body rolling down the sky. It simply must be. Daddy always said that a fly settling on our bodies didn't know we were, alive, so we can't understand that the earth is alive either. Only I know it. Oh!' she cried out with sudden enthusiasm, 'how I would love to hear its real out-loud voice. What a t'riffic roar it must be. I only wish my ears were further——'

'Sharper, you mean.'

'But, all the same, I have heard it breathing,' she added more quietly, lifting Pouf suddenly and wrapping its sleeping body round her neck like a boa, 'just like this.' She put her head on one side, so that her cheek was against the kitten's lips, and the faint stream of its breathing tickled her ear. 'Only the breathing of the earth is much, ever so much, longer and deeper. It's whole months long.'

Paul was listening now with his undivided attention. He was being admitted to the very heart of an imaginative child's world, and the knowledge of it charmed him inexpressibly. His eyes were almost as bright, his cheeks as pink with excitement, as her own. Only he must be very careful indeed. The least mistake on his part would close the door.

‘Months, Nixie?’

‘Oh, yes, a single breath is months long,’ she whispered, her eyes growing in size, and darkening with wonder and awe. ‘Pouf lies on me and breathes twice to my once, but I breathe millions of times—ever so many millions—as I lie on the earth’s body. And it breathes in and out just as Pouf and I do. Winter is breathing in, and summer is breathing out, you see.’

‘So the equinoctial gales are the changes from one breath to the other?’ he put in gravely.

‘I hadn’t thought about the—the gales,’ she said, putting her face closer and lowering her voice, ‘but I know that in the summer I often hear the earth breathing out—’specially on still warm nights when everything lies awake and listens for it.’

‘Then do “Things” really listen as we do?’ he asked gently.

‘Not ’xactly as we do. We only listen in one place—our ears. They listen all over. But they’re alive just the same, though so much quieter. Oh, Uncle Paul, everything is alive; everything, I know it!’ She fixed a searching look on him. ‘You knew that, didn’t you?’

There was a trace of real surprise and disappointment in her voice.

‘Well,’ he answered truthfully, ‘I had often and often thought about it, and wondered sometimes—whether——’

But the child interrupted him almost imperiously. He realised sharply how the knowledge that the years bring—little, exact, precise knowledge—may kill the dreams of the naked soul, yet give nothing in their place but dust and ashes. And, by the same token, he recognised that his own heart was still untouched, unspoiled. The blood leaped and ran within him at the thought.

‘The winds, too, are alive,’—she spoke with a solemn excitement that made her delicate face flush as though a white fire glowed suddenly beneath the skin and

behind the charming eyes—‘they run about, and sleep, and sing, and are full of voices. The wind has hundreds of voices—just like insects with such a lot of eyes.’ (Even her strange simile did not make him smile, so real was the belief and enthusiasm of her words.) ‘We (with scorn) have only one voice; but the wind can laugh and cry at the same time!’

‘I’ve heard it,’ he put in, secretly thrilled.

‘I know its angry voice as well as its pretended-angry voice, when it’s very loud but means nothing in particular. Its baby-voice, when it comes through the keyhole at night, or down the chimney, or just outside the window in the early morning, and tells me all its little very-wonderful-indeed aventures, makes me so happy I want to cry and laugh at once.’

She paused a moment for breath, dimly conscious, perhaps, that her description was somewhat confused. Her excitement somehow communicated itself to Pouf at the same time, for the kitten suddenly rose up with an arched back and indulged in a yawn that would have cracked the jaws of any self-respecting creature. After a prolonged stare at Paul, it proceeded inconsequently to wash itself with an air that plainly said, ‘You won’t catch me napping again. I want to hear this too.’

Paul, meanwhile, stared at the child beside him, thinking that the gold-dust on her hair must surely come from her tumbling journeys among the stars, and wondering if she understood how deeply she saw into the heart of things with those dreamy blue eyes of hers.

‘Listen, Nixie, you fairy-child, and I’ll tell you something,’ he said gently, ‘something you will like very much’; and, while she waited and held her breath, he whispered softly in her ear:

Our birth is but a sleep and a forgetting:

The soul that rises in us, our life’s star

Hath had elsewhere its setting,

And cometh from afar:

Not in entire forgetfulness,

And not in utter nakedness,

But trailing clouds of glory do we come

From God who is our home.

CHAPTER XVII

And snatches of thee everywhere

Make little heavens throughout a day.

Alice Meynell.

‘That’s very pretty, I think,’ she said politely, staring at him, with a little smile, half puzzled. The music of the words had touched her, but she evidently did not grasp why he should have said it. She waited a minute to see if he had really finished, and then went on again with her own vein of thought.

‘Then please tell me, Uncle,’ she asked gravely, with deep earnestness, ‘what is it people lose when they grow up?’

And he answered her with equal gravity, speaking seriously as though the little body at his side were habited by an old, discriminating soul.

‘Simplicity, I think, principally—and vision,’ he said. ‘They get wise with so many little details called facts that they lose the great view.’

The child watched his face, trying to understand. After a pause she came back to her own thinking—the sphere where she felt sure of herself.

‘They never see things properly once they’re grown up,’ she said sadly. ‘They all walk into a fog, I believe, that hides all the things we know, and stuffs up their eyes and ears. Daddy called it the cotton-wool of age, you know. Oh, Uncle, I do hope,’

she cried with the sudden passion of the child, ‘I do hope I shall never, never get into that horrid fog. You haven’t, and I won’t, won’t, won’t!’ Her voice rose to a genuine cry. Then she added with a touch of child-wonder that followed quite naturally upon the outburst, ‘How did you ever stop yourself, I wonder!’

‘I lived with the fairies in the backwoods,’ he answered, laughing softly.

She stared at him with complete admiration in her blue eyes.

‘Then I shall grow up ’xactly like you,’ she said, ‘so that I can always get out of the cage just as you do, even if my body is big.’

‘Every one’s thin somewhere,’ Paul said, remembering her own explanation. ‘And the Crack into Yesterday and To-morrow is always close by when it’s wanted. That’s the real way of escape.’

She clapped her hands and danced, shaking her hair out in a cloud and laughing with happiness. Paul took her in his arms and kissed her. With a gesture of exquisite dignity, such as animals show when they resent human interference, the child tumbled back into her chair by the table, an expression of polite boredom—though the faintest imaginable—in her eyes. Many a time had he seen the kittens behave exactly in the same way.

‘But how do you know all these things, Nixie, and where do all your ideas come from?’ he asked.

‘They just come to me when I’m thinking of nothing in particular. They float into my head of their own accord like ships, little fairy ships, I suppose. And I think,’ she added dreamily after a moment’s pause, ‘some of them are trees and flowers whispering to me.’ She put her face close to his own across the table, staring into his very brain with her shining eyes. ‘Don’t you think so too, Uncle?’

‘I think I do,’ he answered honestly.

‘Though some of the things I hear,’ she went on, ‘I don’t understand till a long time

afterwards.’

‘What kind of things, for instance?’

She hesitated, answering slowly after a pause:

‘Things like streams, and the dripping of rain, and the rustling of wet leaves, perhaps. At the time I only hear the noise they make, but afterwards, when I’m alone, doing nothing, it all falls into words and stories—all sorts of lovely things, but very hard to remember, of course.’

She broke off and smiled up into his face with a charm that he could never have put into words.

‘You’ll grow up a poet, Nixie,’ he said.

‘Shall I really? But I could never find the rhymes—simply never.’

‘Some never do,’ he answered; ‘and some—the majority, I think—never find the words even!’

‘Oh, how dreadful!’ she exclaimed, her face clouding with a pain she could fully understand. ‘Poets who can’t talk at all. I should think they would burst.’

‘Some of them nearly do,’ he exclaimed, hiding a smile; ‘they get very queer indeed, these poor poets who cannot express themselves. I have known one or two.’

‘Have you? Oh, Uncle Paul!’ Her tone expressed all the solemn sympathy the world could hold.

He nodded his head mysteriously.

The child suddenly sat up very erect. An idea of importance had come into her head.

‘Then I wonder if Pouf and Smoke, and Zezette and Mrs. Tompkyns are like that,’ she cried, her face grave as a hanging judge—‘poets who can’t express themselves, and may burst and get queer! Because they understand all that sort of thing—scuttling leaves and dew falling, and tickling grasses and the dreams of beeties, and things we never hear at all. P’raps that’s why they lie and listen and

think for such ages and ages. I never thought of that before.'

'It's quite likely,' he replied with equal solemnity.

Nixie sprang to her feet and flew round the room from chair to chair, hugging in turn each kitten, and asking it with a passionate earnestness that was very disturbing to its immediate comfort in life: 'Tell me, Pouf, Smoke, Sambo, this instant! Are you all furry little poets who can't tell all your little furry poems? Are you, are you, ARE YOU?'

She kissed each one in turn. 'Are you going to burst and get queer?' She shook them all till, mightily offended, they left their thrones and took cover sedately under tables and sofas well out of reach of this intimate and public cross-examination. And there they sat, looking straight before them, as though no one else existed in the entire world.

'I believe they are, Uncle.'

A silence fell between them. Under the furniture, safe in their dark corners, the cats began to purr again. Paul got up and strolled to the open window that looked out across lawns and shrubberies to the fringe of oaks and elms that marked the distant hayfields. The rain still fell gently, silently—a fine, scented, melancholy rain; the rain of a minor key. Tinged with a hundred delicate odours from fields and trees—ghostly perfumes far more subtle than the perfumes of flowers—the air seemed to brush the surface of his soul, dropping its fragrance down into his heart like the close presence of remembered friends.

The evening mode invaded him softly, soothingly; and out of it, in some way he scarcely understood, crept something that brought a vague disquiet in its train. A little timid thought stole to the threshold of his heart and knocked gently upon the door of its very inmost chamber. And the sound of the knocking, faint and muffled though it was, woke echoes in this secret chamber that proclaimed in a tone of reproach, if not almost of warning, that it was still empty and unfurnished. A deep,

infinite yearning, and a yearning that was new, stirred within him, then suddenly rose to the surface of his mind like a voice calling to him from far away out of mist and darkness.

‘If only I had children of my own...!’ it called; and the echo whispered afterwards ‘of my very own, made out of my very thoughts...!’

He turned to Nixie who had followed, and now leaned beside him on the window-sill.

‘So the language of wind and trees and water you translate afterwards into stories, do you?’ he asked, taking up the conversation where they had left it. It was hardly a question; he was musing aloud as he gazed out into the mists that gathered with the dusk. ‘It’s all silent enough now, at any rate there’s not a breath of air moving. The trees are dreaming—dreaming perhaps of the Dance of the Winds, or of the love-making of the snow when their leaves are gone and the flakes settle softly on the bare twigs; or perhaps dreaming of the humming of the sap that brings their new clothes with such a rush of glory and wonder in the spring——’

Again the child looked up into his face with shining eyes. The magic of her little treasured beliefs had touched the depths of him, and she felt that they were in the same world together, without pretence and without the barriers of age. She was radiantly happy, and rather wonderful into the bargain, a fairy if ever there was one.

‘They’re just thinking,’ she said softly.

‘So trees think too?’

She nodded her head, leaning her chin on her hands as she gazed with him into the misty air.

‘I wonder what their thoughts are like,’ he said musingly, so that she could take it for a question or not as she chose.

‘Like ours—in a way,’ she answered, as though speaking of something she knew

beyond all question, ‘only not so small, not so sharp. Our thoughts prick, I think, but theirs stroke, all running quite smoothly into each other. Very big and wonderful indeed thoughts—big as wind, I mean, and wonderful as sky or distance. And the streams—the streams have long, winding thoughts that run down their whole length under water——’

‘And the trees, you were saying,’ he said, seeing that her thought was wandering.

‘Yes, the trees,’ she repeated, ‘oh! yes, the trees are different a little, I think. A wood, you see, may have one big huge thought all at once——’

‘All at once!’

‘I mean all at the same time, every tree thinking the same thought for miles. Because, if you lie in a wood, and don’t think yourself, but just wait and wait and wait, you gradgilly get its great thought and know what it’s thinking about exactly. You feel it all over instead of—of——’

‘Instead of getting a single little sharp picture in your mind,’ Paul helped her, grasping the wonder of her mystical idea.

‘I think that’s what I mean,’ she went on. ‘And it’s exactly the same with everything else—the sea, and the fields, and the sky—oh! and everything in the whole world.’ She made a sweeping gesture with her arm to indicate the universe.

‘Oh, Nixie child!’ he cried, with a sudden enthusiasm pouring over him from the strange region where she had unknowingly led him, ‘if only I could take you out to the big woods I know across the sea, where the trees stretch for hundreds of miles, and the moss is everywhere a foot thick, and the whole forest is such a conspiracy of wonder and beauty that it catches your heart away and makes you breathless with delight! Oh, my child, if only you could hear the thoughts and stories of woods like that—woods untouched since the beginning of the world——!’

‘Take me! Take me! Uncle Paul, oh! take me!’ she cried as though it were possible to start next day. ‘These woods are such little woods, and I know all their stories.’

She danced round him with a wild and eager delight.

‘Such stories, yes, such stories,’ Paul continued, his face shining almost as much as hers as he thought of his mighty and beloved forests.

‘Please tell me, take me, tell me!’ she cried. ‘All, all, all! Quick!’

‘I can’t. I never understood them properly; only the old Indians know them now,’ he said sadly, leaning out of the window again with her. ‘They are tales that few people in this part of the world could understand; in a language old as the wind, too, and nearly forgotten. You see, the trees are different there. They stand in thousands—pine, hemlock, spruce, and cedar—mighty, very tall, very straight, very dark, pouring day and night their great balsam perfumes into the air so that their stories and their thoughts are sweet as incense and very mysterious.’

Nixie took the lapels of his coat in her hands and stared up into his face as though her eyes would pop out. She looked through his eyes. She saw these very woods he was speaking of standing in dim shadows behind him.

‘No one ever comes to disturb their lives, and few of them have ever heard the ringing of the axe. Only giant moose and caribou steal silently beneath their shade, and Indians, dark and soft-footed as things of their own world, make camp-fires among their roots. They know nothing of men and cities and trains, and the wind that sings through their branches is a wind that has never tasted chimney-pots, and hot crowds, and pretty, fancy gardens. It is a wind that flies five hundred miles without taking breath, with nothing to stop its flight but feathery tree-tops, brushing the heavens, and clean mountain ridges thrusting great shoulders to the stars. Their thoughts and stories are difficult to understand, but you might understand them, I think, for the life of the elements is strong in your veins, you fairy daughter of wind and water. And some day, when you are stronger in body—not older though, mind, not older—I shall take you out there so that you may be able to learn their wonder and interpret it to all the world.’

The words tore through him in such curious, impersonal fashion, that he hardly realised he was giving utterance to a longing that had once been his own, and that he was now seeking to realise vicariously in the person of this little poet-girl beside him. He stroked her hair as she nestled up to him, breathing hard, her eyes glistening like stars, speechless with the torrent of wonder with which her big uncle had enveloped her.

‘Some day,’ she murmured presently, ‘some day, remember. You promise?’

‘I promise.’

‘And—and will you write that all out for me, please?’

‘All what?’

‘About the too-big woods and the too-old language and the winds that fly without stopping, and the stories——’

‘Oh, oh!’ he laughed; ‘that’s another matter!’

‘Yes, oh you must, Uncle! Make a story of it—an aventure. Write it out as a verywonerfulindeedaventure, and put you and me in it!’ She forgot the touch of sadness and clapped her hands with delight. ‘And then read it out at a Meeting, don’t you see?’

And in the end Paul promised that too, making a great fuss about it, but in his heart secretly pleased and happy.

‘I’ll try,’ he said, with portentous gravity.

The child stared up at him with the sure knowledge in her eyes that between them they held the key to all that was really worth knowing.

He stooped to kiss her hair, but before he could do so, with a laugh and a dancing step he scarcely heard, she was gone from his side and half-way down the passage, so that he kissed the empty air.

‘Bless her mighty little heart!’ he exclaimed, straightening himself up again. ‘Was

there ever such a teacher in the world before?'

He became aware that the world held powers, gentle yet immense, that were urging him in directions hitherto undreamed of. With such a fairy guide he might find—he was already finding—not merely safety-valves of expression, but an outlet into the bargain for his creative imagination.

'And a little child shall lead them,' he murmured in his beard, as he went slowly down the passage to his room to dress for dinner. Again he felt like singing.

CHAPTER XVIII

The tree which moves some to tears of joy is in the eyes of others

only a green thing standing in the way.—W.B.

Thus, gradually, the grey house under the hills changed into a palace; the garden stretched to include the stars; and Paul, the retired Wood Cruiser, walked in a world all new and brilliant. For to find the means of self-expression is to build the foundations of spiritual health, and an ideal companionship, unvexed by limitations of sense, holds potentialities that can change earth into heaven. His accumulated stores of imagination found wings, and he wrote a series of Aventures that delighted his audience while they healed his own soul.

'I wish they'd go on for ever and ever,' observed Toby solemnly to her brother. 'Perhaps they do really, only——'

'Of course they do,' Jonah said decisively, 'but Uncle Paul only tells bits of them to us—bits that you can understand.'

Toby was too much in earnest to notice the masculine scorn.

'He does know a lot, doesn't he?' she said. 'Do you think he sees up into heaven? They're not a bit like made-up aventures.' She paused, deeply puzzled; very grave indeed.

‘He’s a man, of course,’ replied Jonah. ‘Men know big things like that.’

‘The Aventures are true,’ Nixie put in gently. ‘That’s why they’re so big, and go on for ever and ever.’

‘It’s jolly when he puts us in them too, isn’t it?’ said Jonah, forgetting the masculine pose in his interest. ‘He puts me in most,’ the boy added proudly.

‘But I do the funniest things,’ declared Toby, slightly aggrieved. ‘It was me that rode on the moose over the tree-tops to the North Pole, and understood all it said——’

‘That’s nothing,’ cried her brother, making a huge blot across his copy-book. ‘He had to get me to turn on the roarer boryalis.’

‘Nixie’s always leader, anyhow,’ replied the child, losing herself for a moment in the delight of that tremendous blot. She often borrowed Nixie in this way to obliterate Jonah when her own strength was insufficient.

‘Of course she is,’ was the manly verdict. ‘She knows all those things almost as well as Uncle Paul. Don’t you, Nixie?’

But Nixie was too busy cleaning up his blot with bits of torn blotting-paper to reply, and the arrival of Mlle. Fleury put an end to the discussion for the moment.

And Paul himself, as the big child leading the littler children, or following their guidance when such guidance was clear, accepted his new duties with a happy heart. His friendship with them all grew delightfully, but especially, of course, his friendship with Nixie. This elemental child slipped into his life everywhere, into his play, as into his work; she assumed the right to look after him; with charming gravity she positively mothered him; and Paul, whose life hitherto had known little enough of such sympathy and care, simply loved it.

If her native poesy won his imagination, her practical interest in his welfare and comfort equally won his heart. The way she ferreted about in his room and study, so

serious, so thoughtful, attending to so many little details that no one else ever thought of,—all this came into his life with a seductive charm as of something entirely new and strange to him. It was Nixie who always saw to it that his ink-pot was full and his quill pens trimmed; that flowers had no time to fade upon his table; and that matches for his pipes never failed in the glass match-stands. He used up matches, it seemed, almost by the handful.

'You're far worse than Daddy used to be,' she reproved him. 'I believe you eat them.' And when he assured her that he did nothing of the sort, she only shook her head darkly, and said she couldn't understand then what he did with them all.

A hundred services of love and kindness she did for him that no one else would have thought of. On his mantelpiece she put mysterious little bottles of medicine.

'For nettle-stings and scratches,' she explained. 'Your poor hands are always covered with them both when you've been out with us.' And it was she, too, who bound up his fingers when wounds were more serious, and saw to it that he had a clean rag each day till the sore was healed. She put the new red riband on his straw hat after it fell (himself with it) into the Gull Pond; and one service especially that earned her his eternal respect was to fasten his evening black tie for dinner. This she did every night for him. Such tasks were for magical fingers only. He had never yet compassed it himself. He would run to the nursery to say good-night, and Nixie, looking almost unreal and changeling in her white nightgown, with her yellow hair top-knotted quaintly for sleep, would deftly trim and arrange the strip of satin that he never could manage properly himself. It was a regular little ritual, Toby watching eagerly from the bed across the room.

'You ought to be ashamed of yourself, Uncle Paul,' she said another time, holding up a mysterious garment, 'I never saw such holes—never!' And then she darned the said socks with results that were picturesque if not always entirely satisfactory. And once she sewed the toes so tightly across with her darning that he could not get his

foot into them. She allowed no one else to touch them, however. Little the child guessed that while she patched his clothes, she wove his life afresh at the same time.

And with all the children he took Dick's place more and more. His existence widened, filled up; he felt in touch with real things as of old in the woods; the children replaced the trees.

But it was Nixie in particular who crept close to his unsatisfied heart and tied him to her inner life with the gossamer threads of her sand-coloured hair. This elfin little being, with her imagination and tenderness, brought to him something he had never known before, never dreamed of even; a perfect companionship; a companionship utterly unclouded.

And the other children understood it; there was no jealousy; it was not felt by them as favouritism. Natural and right it seemed, and was.

'You must ask Nixie,' Jonah would say in reply to any question concerning his uncle's welfare or habits. 'She's his little mother, you know.'

For, truth to tell, they were born, these two, in the same corner of the world of fantasy, bred under the same stars, and fathered by the same elemental forces. But for the trick of the years and the accident of blood, they seemed made for one another ideally, eternally.

Things he could speak of to no one else found in her a natural and easy listener. To grown-ups he had never been able to talk about his mystic longings; the very way they listened made such things instantly seem foolish. But Nixie understood in her child-way, not because she was sympathetic, but because she was in and of them. He was merely talking the language of her own world. He no longer felt ashamed to 'think aloud.' Most people were in pursuit of such stupid, clumsy things—fame, money, and other complicated and ugly things—but this child seemed to understand that he cared about Realities only; for, in her own simple way, this was what she cared about too.

To talk with her cleared his own mind, too, in a way it had never been cleared before. He came to understand himself better, and in so doing swept away a great deal of accumulated rubbish; for he found that when his thought was too confused to make clear to her, it was usually false, wrong—not real.

'I can't make that out,' she would say, with a troubled face. 'I suppose, I'm not old enough yet.' And afterwards Paul would realise that it was himself who was at fault, not the child. Her instinct was unerring; whereas he, with those years of solitude behind him, sometimes lost himself in a region where imagination, self-devouring, ran the risk of becoming untrue, possibly morbid. Her wholesome little judgments brought sanity and laughter.

For, like other mystical temperaments, what he sought, presumably, was escape from himself, yet not—and herein he differed healthily from most of his kidney—so much from his Real Inner Self, as from its outer pettiness and limitations. True, he sought union with something larger and more perfect, and in so far was a mystic; but this larger 'something,' he dimly understood, was the star of his own soul not yet emancipated, and in so far he remained a man of action. His was the true, wholesome mysticism; hysteria was not—as with most—its chief ingredient. Moreover, this other, eternal part of him touched Eternity. To be identified with it meant to be identified with God, but never for one instant to lose his own individuality.

And to express himself through the creative imagination, to lose his own smallness by interpreting beauty, he had always felt must be a half-way house to the end in view. His inability, therefore, to find such means of expression had always meant something incalculably grave, something that hindered growth. But now this child Nixie, in some extraordinary yet utterly simple fashion, had come to show him the way. It was wonderful past finding out. He hardly knew himself how it had come about. Yet, there she was, ever by his side, pointing to ways that led him out into

expression.

No woman could have done it. His two longings, he came to realise, were actually one: the desire to express his yearnings grew out of the desire to find God.

And so it was that the thought of her growing up was horrid to him. He could not bear to think of her as a ‘young woman’ moving in a modern world where she would lose all touch with the elemental forces of vision and simplicity whence she drew half her grace and wonder. Already for him, in some mystical fashion of spiritual alchemy, she had become the eternal feminine, exquisitely focused in the little child. With the advance of years this must inevitably pass from her, as she increased the distance from her source of inspiration.

‘Nixie, you must promise never to grow up,’ he would say, laughing.

‘Because Aventures stop then, don’t they?’ she asked.

‘Partly that,’ he answered.

‘And I should get tired, like mother; or stupid, like the head gardener,’ she added. ‘I know. But I don’t think I ever shall, somehow. I think I am meant to be always like this.’

The serious way she said this last phrase escaped him at the time. He remembered it afterwards, however.

It was so delightful, too, to read out his stories and aventures to her; they laughed over them, and her criticisms often improved them vastly. He even read her his first poem without shyness, and they discussed each verse and talked about ‘stealing Heaven’s fire,’ and the poor ‘sparks’ that never grew into flames. The ‘kiss of fire’ she thought must be wonderful. She also asked what a ‘lyre’ was. They made up other verses together too. But though they laughed and she asked odd questions, on the whole she grasped the sadness of the poem perfectly.

‘Let’s go and cry a bit somewhere,’ she remarked quietly, her eyes very wistful. ‘It

helps it out awfully, you know.'

He reminded her, however, of a sage remark of Toby's, to the effect that when men grew beards they lost the power to cry. Quick as a flash, then, she turned with one of her exquisite little bits of unconscious poetry.

'Let's go to the Gwyle then, and make the stream cry for us instead,' she said gravely, with a profound sympathy, 'because everybody's tears must get into the water some time—and so to the sea, mustn't they?'

And on their way, what with jumping ditches and flower-beds, they forgot all about the crying. On the edge of the woods, however, she raced up again to his side, her blue eyes full of a new wonder. 'I know that wind of inspiration that your poetry said never blew for you,' she cried. 'I know where it blows. Quick! I'll show you!' The pace made him pant a bit; he almost regretted he had mentioned it. 'I know where it blows, we'll catch it, and you shall see. Then you can always, always get it when you want it.'

And a little farther on, after wading through deep bracken, they stopped, and Nixie took his hand. 'Come on tiptoe now,' she whispered mysteriously. 'Don't crack the twigs with your feet.' And, smiling at this counsel of perfection, he obeyed to the best of his ability, while she pretended not to notice the series of explosions that followed his tread.

It was a curve in the skirts of the wood where they found themselves; a small inlet where the tide of daylight flowed against the dark cliffs of the firs, and then fell back. The thick trees held it at bay so that only the spray of light penetrated beyond, as from advancing waves. 'Thus far and no farther,' very plainly said the pine trees, and the sunshine lay there collected in the little hollow with the delicious heat of all the summer. It was a corner hitherto undiscovered by Paul; he saw it with the pleasure of a discovery.

And there, set brightly against the sombre background, stood the slender figure of a

silver birch tree, all sweet and shining, its branches sifting the sunshine and the wind; while behind it, standing forth somewhat from the main body of the wood, a pine, shaggy and formidable, grew close as though to guard it. The picture, with its striking contrast, needed no imagination to make it more appealing. It was patent to any eye.

‘That’s my tree,’ said Nixie softly, with both arms linked about his elbow and her cheek laid against the sleeve of his coat. ‘My fav’rite tree. And that’s where your winds of inspiration blow that you said you couldn’t catch. So now you can always come and hear them, you see.’

Paul entered instantly into the spirit of her dream. The way her child’s imagination seized upon inanimate objects and incorporated them into the substance of her own life delighted him, for it was also his own way, and he understood it.

‘Then that old pine,’ he answered, pointing to the other, ‘is my tree. See! It’s come out of the wood to protect the little birch.’

The child ran from his side and stood close to them. ‘Yes, and don’t you see,’ she cried, her eyes popping with excitement, ‘this is me, and that’s you!’ She patted the two trunks, first the birch and then the pine. ‘It’s us! I never thought of that before, never! It’s you looking after me and taking care of me, and me dancing and laughing round you all the time!’ She ran back to his side and hopped up to plant a kiss in his beard. He quite forgot to correct her a’venturous grammar.

‘Of course,’ he cried, ‘so it is. Look! The branches touch too. Your little leaves run up among my old needles!’

Nixie clapped her hands and ran to and fro, laughing and talking, on errands of further discovery, while Paul sat down to watch the scene and think his own thoughts. It was just the picture to appeal strongly to him. At any time the beauty of the tree would have seized him, but with no one else could he have enjoyed it in the same way, or spoken of his enjoyment. While Nixie flitted here and there in the

sunshine, the little birch behind her bent down and then released itself with a graceful rush of branches as the pressure of the wind passed. Against the blue sky she tossed her leafy hands; then, with a passing shiver, stood still.

‘I wonder,’ ran his thought, ‘why poets need invent Dryads when such an incomparable revelation lies plain in one of the commonest of trees like this?’ And, at the same moment, he saw Nixie dart past between the fir trees and the birch, as though the very Dryad he was slighting had slipped out to chide him. Her hair spread in the sunshine like leaves. In the world of trees here, surely, was the very essence of what is feminine caught and imprisoned. Whatever of grace and wonder emanate from the face and figure of a young girl to enchant and bewitch here found expression in the silver stem and branches, in the running limbs so slender, in the twigs that bent with their cataracts of flying hair. Seen against the dark pine-wood, this little birch tree laughed and danced; over that silver skin ran, positively, smiles; from the facets of those dainty leaves twinkled mischief and the joys of innocence. Here, in a word, was Nixie herself in the terms of tree-dom; and, as he watched, the wind swept out the branches towards him in a cluster of rustling leaves,—and at the same instant Nixie shot laughing to his side.

For a second he hardly knew whether it was the child or the silver birch that nestled down beside him and began to murmur in his ear.

‘This is it, you see,’ she was saying; ‘and there’s your wind of inspiration blowing now.’

‘We shall have to alter the first verse then,’ he said gravely:

‘The winds of inspiration blow,

Yet never pass me by.’

‘Of course, of course,’ she whispered, listening half to her uncle, half to the rustle in the branches. ‘And now,’ she added presently, ‘you can always come and write your poetry here, and it will be very-wonderfulindeed poetry, you see. And if you leave a

bit of paper on the tree you'll find it in the morning covered with all sorts of things in very fine writing—oh, but very very fine writing, so small that no one can see it except you and me. One of the Little Winds we saw, you know, will twine round it and leave marks. And the big pine is you and the birch is me, isn't it?' she ended with sudden conviction.

The game, of course, was after her own heart. Up she sprang then suddenly again, picked a spray of leaves from a hanging branch, and brought it back to him.

'And here's a bit of me for a present, so that you can't ever forget,' she said with a gravity that held no smile. And she fastened it with much tugging and arranging in his buttonhole. 'A bit of my tree, and so of me.'

'Then I might leave a bit of paper in the water too,' he remarked slyly on their way home, 'so as to get the thoughts of the stream.'

'Easily,' she said, 'only it must be wrapped up in something. I'll get Jonah's sponge-bag and lend it you. Only you must promise faithfully to return it in case we go to the seaside in the summer.'

'And perhaps some of those tears we were talking about will stick on it and leave their marks before they go on to the sea,' he suggested.

'Oh, but they'd be too sad,' she answered quickly. 'They're much better lost in the sea, aren't they?'

Thus the poetry in his soul that he could not utter, he lived.

Without any conscious effort of the imagination, the instant Nixie, or the thought of her, stood beside him—lo, he was in Fairyland. It was so real that it was positively bewildering.

And the rest of that quiet household, without knowing it, contributed to its reality. For, to begin with, the place was delightfully 'out of the world'; and, after that, the gradations between the two regions seemed so easy and natural: the shadowy

personality of his sister; the dainty little French governess flitting everywhere with her plaintive voice in the wake of the elusive children; then the children themselves—Jonah, the mischievous; Toby with her shining face of onion skin; and, last of all, the host of tumbling animals, the mysterious cats, the kittens, all fluff and wonder; and the whole of it set amid the scenery of flowers, hills, and sea. It was impossible to tell exactly where the actual threshold lay, this shifting, fluid threshold dividing the two worlds; but there can be no question that Paul passed it day by day without the least difficulty, and that it was Nixie who knew all the quickest short-cuts.

And to all who—since childhood—have lived in Fairyland and tasted of its sweet innocence and loveliness, comes sooner or later the desire to transfer something of these qualities to the outer world. Paul felt this more and more as the days passed. The wish to beautify the lives of others grew in him with a sudden completeness that proved it to have been there latent all the time. Through the voices of Nixie, Jonah, and Toby, as it were, he heard the voices—those myriad, faint, unhappy voices—of the world's neglected children a-calling to him: 'Tell us the Aventures too!'—'Take us with you through that Crack!'—'Show us the Wind, and let us climb with you the Scaffolding of Night.'

And Paul, listening in his deep heart, began to understand that Nixie's education of himself was but a beginning: all unconsciously that elfin child was surely becoming also his inspiration. This first lesson in self-expression she had taught him was like the trickle that would lead to the bursting of the dam. The waters of his enthusiasms would presently pour out with the rush of genuine power behind them. What he had to say, do, and live—all forms of self-expression—were to find a larger field of usefulness than the mere gratification of his personal sense of beauty.

As yet, however, the thought only played dimly to and fro at the back of his mind, seeking a way of escape. The greater outlet could not come all at once. The germ of

the desire lay there in secret development, but the thing he should do had not yet appeared.

So, for the time being, he continued to live in Fairyland and write Aventures.

It was really incalculable the effect of enchantment this little yellow-haired girl cast upon him—hard to believe, hard to realise. So true, so exquisite was it, however, that he almost came to forget her age, and that she was actually but a child. To him she seemed more and more an intimate companion of the soul who had existed always, and that both he and she were ageless. It was their souls that played, talked, caressed, not merely their minds or bodies. In her flower-like little figure dwelt assuredly an old and ripened soul; one, too, it seemed to him sometimes, that hardly belonged to this world at all.

There was that about their relationship which made it eternal—it always had been somewhere, it always would be—somewhere. No confinings of flesh, no limitations of mind and sense, no conditions of mere time and space, could lay their burden upon it for long. It belonged most sweetly to the real things which are conditionless.

Moreover, one of the chief effects of the world of Faery, experts say, is that Time is done away with; emotions are inexhaustible and last for ever, continually renewing themselves; the Fairies dance for years instead of only for a night; their minds and bodies grow not old; their desires, and the objects of their desires, pass not away.

‘So, unquestionably,’ said Paul to himself from time to time as he reflected upon the situation, ‘I am bewitched. I must see what there is that I can do in the matter to protect myself from further depredations!’

Yet all he did immediately, so far as can be ascertained among the sources of this veracious history, was to collect the ‘Aventures’ already written and journey with them one fine day to London, where he had an interview of some length with a publisher—Dick’s publisher. The result, at any rate, was—the records prove it—that some time afterwards he received a letter in which it was plainly stated that ‘the

success of such a book is hard to predict, but it has qualities, both literary and imaginative, which entitle it to a hearing'; and thus that in due course the said 'Adventures of a Prisoner in Fairyland' appeared upon the book-stalls. For the publishers, being the foremost in the land, took the high view that seemed almost independent of mercenary calculations; and it is interesting to note that the years justified their judgment, and that the 'Adventures' may now be found upon the table of every house in England where there dwells a true child, be that child seven or seventy.

And any profits that Paul collected from the sale went, not into his own pocket, but were put aside, as the sequel shall show, for a secret purpose that lay hidden at this particular stage of the story among the very roots of his heart and being.

The summer, meanwhile, passed quickly away, and August melted into September, finding him still undecided about his return to America.

For the rest, there was no hurry. There was another six months in which to make up his mind. Meanwhile, also, he made frequent use of the 'Crack,' and the changes in his soul went rapidly forward.

CHAPTER XIX

There was a Being whom my spirit oft

Met on its visioned wanderings, far aloft,

In the clear golden prime of my youth's dawn,

Upon the fairy isles of sunny lawn,

Amid the enchanted mountains, and the caves

Of divine sleep, and on the air-like waves

Of wonder-level dream, whose tremulous floor

Paved her light steps;—on an imagined shore

Under the grey beak of some promontory

She met me, robed in such exceeding glory,

That I beheld her not

Epipsychidion

One afternoon in late September he made his way alone across the hills. Clouds blew thinly over a sky of watery blue, driven by an idle wind the roses had left behind. It seemed a day strayed from out the summer that now found itself, thrilled and a little confused, in the path of autumn—and summer had sent forth this soft wind to bring it back to the fold.

The ‘Crack’ was always near at hand on such a day, and Paul slipped in without the least difficulty. He found himself in a valley of the Blue Mountains hitherto unknown, and, so wandering, came presently to a bend of the river where the sand stretched smooth and inviting.

For a moment he stopped to watch the slanting waves and listen, when to his sudden amazement he saw upon the shore, half concealed by the reeds near the bank—a human figure. A second glance showed him that it was the figure of a young girl, lying there in the sun, her bare feet just beyond reach of the waves, and her yellow hair strewn about the face so as to screen it almost entirely from view. A white dress covered her body; she was slim, he saw, as a child. She was asleep.

Paul stood and stared.

‘Shall I wake her?’ was his first thought. But his second thought was truer: ‘Can I help waking her?’ And then a third came to him, subtle and inexplicable, yet scarcely shaping itself in actual language: ‘Is she after all a stranger?’

Flying memories, half-formed, half-caught, ran curiously through his brain. What was it in the turn of the slender neck, in the lines of the little mouth, just visible where he stood, that seemed familiar? Did he not detect upon that graceful figure

lying motionless in repose some indefinable signature that recalled his outer life? Or was it merely that fancy played tricks, and that he reconstructed a composite picture from the galleries of memory, with the myriad expression and fugitive magic of dream or picture—ideal figures he had conjured with in the past and set alive in some inner frame of his deepest thoughts? He was conscious of a delicious bewilderment. A singular emotion stirred in his heart. Yet the face and figure he sought utterly evaded him.

Then, the first sharp instinct to turn aside passed. He accepted the adventure. Stooping down for a stone, he flung it with a noisy splash into the river. The girl opened her eyes, threw her hair back in a cloud, and sat up.

At once a wave of invincible shyness descended upon Paul, rendering words or action impossible; he felt ridiculously embarrassed, and sought hurriedly in his mind for ways of escape. But, before any feasible plan for undoing what was already done suggested itself, he became aware of a very singular thing—the face of the girl was covered! He could not see it clearly. Something, veil-like and misty, hung before it so that his eyes could not focus properly upon the features. The recognition he had half anticipated, therefore, did not come.

And this helped to restore his composure. It was, in any case, futile to pretend he did not see her. For one thing, he realised that she was staring at him just as hard as he was staring at her. The very next instant she rose and came across the hot sand towards him, her hair flying loose, and both hands outstretched by way of greeting. Again, the half-recognition that refused to complete itself swept confusingly over him.

But this spontaneous and unexpected action had an immediate effect upon him of another kind. His embarrassment vanished. What she did seemed altogether right and natural, and the beauty of the girl drove all minor emotions from his mind. His whole being rose in a wave of unaffected delight, and almost before he was aware of

it, he had stepped forward and caught both her hands in his own.

This strange golden happiness at first troubled his speech.

‘But surely I know you!’ he cried. ‘If only I could see your face——!’

‘You ought to know me,’ she replied at once with a laugh as of old acquaintance, ‘for you have called for me often enough, I’m sure!’ Her voice was soft; curiously familiar accents rang in it; yet, as with the face, he knew not whose it was.

She looked up at him, and though he could not make out the features, he discerned the expression they wore—an expression of peace and confidence. The girl trusted him delightfully.

‘Then what hides you from me?’ he insisted.

She answered him so low that he hardly caught the words. Certainly, at the moment he did not understand them, for happiness still confused him. ‘The body,’ she murmured; ‘the veil of the body.’

She returned the firm and equal pressure of his hands, and allowed him to draw her close. Their faces approached, and he looked searchingly down upon her, trying to pierce the veil in vain. The hot sunshine fell in a blaze upon their uncovered heads. The next moment the girl raised her lips to his, and almost before he knew it they had kissed.

Yet that kiss seemed the most natural thing in the world; at a stroke it killed the last vestige of shyness. Youth ran in his veins like fire.

‘Now, tell me exactly who you are, please,’ he cried, standing back a little for an inspection, but still holding her hands. They swung out at arm’s length like children.

‘I think first you should tell me who you are,’ she laughed. ‘I want to be a mystery a little longer. It’s so much more interesting!’

Leaning backwards with her hair tumbling down her neck, she looked at him out of eyes that he half imagined, half knew. Laughter and gentleness played over her like

sunlight. Standing there, framed against the reeds of the river bank, with the blue waters behind and the wind and sky about her head, Paul thought that never till this moment had he understood the whole magic of a woman's beauty. Yet at the same time he somehow divined that she was as much child as woman, and that something of eternal youthfulness mingled exquisitely with her suggestion of maturity.

'Of course,' he laughed in return, like a boy in mid-mischief, 'that's your privilege, isn't it? My name, then, is——'

But there he stuck fast. It seemed so foolish to give the name he owned in that other tinsel world; it was merely a disguise like a frock-coat or evening dress, or the absurd uniform he had once assumed to deceive the children with. He almost felt ashamed of the name he was known by in that world!

'Well?' she asked slyly, 'and have you forgotten it quite?'

'I'm the Man who saw the Wind, for one thing,' he said at length; 'and, after that, well—I suppose I'm the man who's been looking for you without knowing it all his life! Now do you know me?' he concluded triumphantly.

'You foolish creature! Of course I know you!'

She came closer; the sunshine and the odour of the flowers seemed to come with her. 'It's you who couldn't find me! I've been waiting for you to claim me ever since—either of us can remember.'

A queer, faint rush of memory rose upon him from the depths—and was gone. For an instant it seemed that her face half cleared.

'Then, in the name of beauty,' he cried, starting forward, 'why can't I see your face and eyes? Why do I only see you partly——?'

She hesitated an instant and drew back; she lowered her eyes—he felt that—and the voice dropped very low again as she answered:

'Because, as yet, you only know me—partly.'

‘As through a glass, darkly, you mean?’ he said, half grave, half laughing.

The girl took both his hands and pressed them silently for a moment.

‘When you know me as I know you,’ she whispered softly, ‘then—we shall know one another—see one another—face to face. But even now, in these few minutes, you have come to know me better than you ever did before. And that is something, isn’t it?’

She moved quite close, passing her hands down his bronzed cheeks and shaking his head playfully as one might do to a loved child.

‘You take my breath away!’ gasped the delighted man, too bewildered in his new happiness to let the strangeness of her words perplex him long. ‘But, tell me again,’ he added, slowly releasing himself, ‘how it is that you know me so well? Tell me again and again!’

She replied demurely, standing before him like a teacher before a backward pupil. ‘Because I have always watched, studied, and loved you—from within yourself. It was not my fault that you failed to know me when I spoke. Perhaps, even now, you would not have found me unless—in certain ways—through the children—you had begun to come into your own——’

Paul interrupted her, taking her in his arms, while she made no effort to escape, but only laughed. ‘And I’ll take good care I never lose you again after this!’ he cried.

‘You know, I wasn’t really asleep just now on the sand,’ she told him a little later. ‘I heard you coming all the time; only I wanted to see if you would pass me by as you always did before.’

‘It’s very odd and very wonderful,’ he said, ‘but I never noticed you till to-day.’

‘And very natural,’ she added under her breath, so low that he did not hear.

And Paul, moving beside her, murmured in his beard, ‘If she’s not my Ideal, set mysteriously somehow into the framework of one I already love—I swear I don’t

know who she is!’

They made their way along the sandy shores of the river, the waves breaking at their feet, the wind singing among the reeds; never had the sunlight seemed so brilliant, the day so wonderful and kind. All nature helped them; playing their great game as if it was the only game worth playing in the whole world—the game loved from one eternity to another.

‘So the children have told you about me, have they?’ he whispered into the ear that came just level with his lips.

‘And all you love, as well. Your dreams and thoughts more than anything else—especially your thoughts. You must be very careful with those; they mould me; they make me what I am. If you didn’t think nicely of me—verynicelyindeed——’

‘But I shall always think nicely, beautifully, of you,’ he broke in eagerly, not noticing the familiar touch of language.

‘You have so far, at any rate,’ she replied, ‘for the yearning and desire of your imagination have created me afresh.’ And he discerned the smile upon her veiled face as one may see the sun only through troubled glass, yet know its warmth and brilliance.

‘Then it is because you are part and parcel of my inner self that you seem so real and intimate and—true?’ he asked passionately.

‘Of course. I am in your very blood; I beat in your heart; I understand your every passion and emotion, because I am present at their birth. The most fleeting of your dreams finds its reflection in me; your spirit’s faintest aspiration runs through me like a trumpet call; and, now that you have found me, we need never, we can never, separate!’

The passion of her words broke over his heart like a wave. He felt himself trembling.

‘But it is all so swift and wonderful that it makes me almost afraid—afraid it cannot last,’ he objected, knowing all the time that his words were but a common device to make his pleasure the more real.

‘If only, oh, if only I could carry you away with me into that outer world——!’

She laughed deliciously in his face. ‘It is from that very “outer world” that you have carried me in here,’ she told him softly, ‘for I am always with you.’ And with the words came that fugitive trick of voice and gesture that made him certain he knew her—then was gone again. ‘In the house with your sister and the children,’ she continued; ‘when you write your Aventures and your verses; in your daily round of duties, small and great; and when you lie down at night—ah! especially then—I curl up beside you in your heart, and fly with you through all your funny dreamland, and wake your dear eyes with a kiss so soft you never know it. In your early morning rambles, as in your reveries of the dusk, I never leave you—because I cannot. All day long I am beside you, though you little realise my presence. I share half your pleasures and all your pains. And in return you hand over to me half that soul whose unuttered prayers have thus created me afresh for your salvation.’

‘But it must be my own voice speaking,’ he cried inwardly, satisfied and happy beyond belief. ‘It is the words of my own thoughts that I hear!’

‘Because I am your own thoughts speaking,’ she replied instantly, as though he had uttered aloud. ‘I lie, you see, behind your inmost thoughts!’

They walked through sunny meadows, picking their way among islands of wild flowers. There was no sound but the murmur of wind and river, and the singing of birds. Fleecy clouds, here and there in the blue, hung cool and white, watching them. The whole world, Paul felt, listened without shyness.

‘And so it is that you love me without shyness,’ she went on, marvellously linking in with his thought; ‘I am intimate with you as your own soul, and our relations are pure with the purity that was before man. There can be no secrets between us, or

possibility of secrets, for your most hidden dreams are also mine. So mingled with your ultimate being am I, in fact, that sometimes you dare not recognise me as separate, and all that appears on the surface of your dear mind must first filter through myself. Why!' she cried, with a sudden rush of mischievous laughter, 'I even know what you are made of; why your queer heart has never been able to satisfy itself—to "grow up," as you call it; and all about this endless desire you have to find God, which is really nothing but the search to find your true inner Self.'

'Tell me! tell me!' he cried.

'Besides the sun,' she went on with a strange swiftness of words, 'there's the wind and the rain in you; yes, and moon and stars as well. That's why the fire and restlessness of the imagination for ever tear you. No mere form of expression can ever satisfy that, but only increase it; for it means your desire to know reality, to know beauty, to know your own soul; to know—God! Your blood has kinship with those tides that flow through all space, even to the gates of the stars; dawns and sunsets, moonrise and meteors haunt your thoughts with their magic lights; wild flowers of the fields and hillside nod beside you while you sleep; and the winds, laughing and sighing, lift your dreams upon vast wings and flash with them beyond the edges of the universe!'

'Stop,' he cried with passion, 'you are telling all my secrets.'

'I am telling them only to myself,' she laughed, 'and therefore to you. For I know all the fevers of your soul. The wilderness calls you and the great woods. You are haunted by the faces of the world's forgotten places. Your imagination plays with the lightning about the mountain tops, and seeks primeval forests and the shores of desolate seas....'

Paul listened spellbound while she put some of the most intangible of his fancies into the language of poetry. Yet she spoke with the quiet simplicity of true things. The man felt his soul shake with delight to hear her. Again and again, while she

spoke, the feeling came to him that in another moment her face must clear and he would know her; yet the actual second of recognition never appeared. The girl's true identity continued to evade him. The enticing uncertainty added enormously to her charm. It evoked in him even the sense of worship.

'And this shall be the earnest of our ideal companionship,' she whispered, holding up a spray of leaves which she proceeded to fasten into the buttonhole of his coat; 'the symbol by which you shall always know me—the sign of my presence in your heart.'

The top of her head, as she bent over the task, was on a level with his lips, and when he stooped to kiss it the perfumes of the earth—flowers, trees, wind, water—rose about her like a cloud. Her hair was hot with sunshine, all silken with the air of summer. They were one being, growing out of the earth that he loved—the old, magical, beautiful earth that fed so great a part of his secret life from perennial springs.

As she drew away again from his caress he glanced down and saw that what she had pinned into his coat was a little cluster of leaves from the branch of a silver birch tree.

'Then I, too, shall give you a sign,' he said, 'that shall mean the same as yours.' And he picked a twig of pine needles from a tree beside them and twined it through a coil of her hair. Then, seizing her hands, he swung her round in a dance till they fell upon the river bank at last, tired out, and slept the sleep of children.

And after that, for a whole day it seemed, they wandered through this summer landscape, following the river to its source in the mountains, and then descending on the farther side to the shores of a blue-rimmed sea.

'There are the ships,' she cried, pointing to the shining expanse of water; 'and, see, there is our ship coming for us.'

And as she stood there, laughing with excitement like a child, a barque with painted

figure-head and brown sails yielding to the wind, came towards them over the waves, the bales of fruit upon her decks scenting the air, the smell of rope and tar and salty wood enticing them to distance and adventure. Through the cordage the very sound of the wind called to them to be off.

‘So at last we start upon our long, long voyage together,’ she said mysteriously, blushing with pleasure, and leading him down towards the ship.

‘And where are we to sail to?’ he asked; for the flap of the sails and the waves beating against the sides made resistance impossible. The sea-smells were in his nostrils. He glanced down at the veiled face beside him.

‘First to the Islands of the Night,’ she whispered so low that not even the wind could carry it away; ‘for there we shall be alone.’

‘And then——?’

‘And then to the Islands of Delight,’ she murmured more softly still; ‘for there we shall find the lost children of the world—our children, and so be happy with them ever after, like the people in the fairy tales.’

With something like a shock he realised that some one else was walking beside him, talking of things that were real in a very different sense. He had been out walking longer than he knew, and had reached the house again. The autumnal mist already drew its gauze curtains about the old building. The smoke rose in straight lines from the chimneys, melting into dusk. That other place of sunshine and flowers had faded—sea, ship, islands, had all sunk beneath the depths within him. And this other person had been saying things for some minutes....

‘I don’t believe you’ve been listening to a single word, Paul. You stand there with your eyes fixed on vacancy, and only nod your head and grunt.’

‘I assure you, Margaret, dear,’ he stammered, coming to the surface as from a long swim under water, ‘I rarely miss anything you say. Only the Crack came so very suddenly. You were saying that Dick’s niece was coming to

us—Joan—er—Thingumybob, and——’

‘So you heard some of it,’ she laughed quietly, relenting. ‘And I hope the Crack you speak about is in your head, not in mine.’

‘It’s everywhere,’ he said with his grave humour. ‘That’s the trouble, you see; one never knows——’ Then, seeing that she was looking anxiously at the walls of the house and at the roof, he dropped his teasing and came back to solid earth again. ‘And how soon do you expect her?’ he asked in his most practical voice. ‘When does she arrive upon the scene?’

‘Why, Paul, I’ve already told you twice! You really are getting more absent-minded every day. Joan comes to-morrow, or the day after—she’s to telegraph which—and stays here for as long as she can manage—a fortnight or so, I expect. She works herself to death, I believe, in town with those poor children, and I want her to get a real rest before she goes back.’

‘Waifs, aren’t they?’ he asked, picking up the thread of the discourse like a thing heard in a dream, ‘lost children of the slums?’

‘Yes. You’ll see them for yourself probably, as she has some of them down usually for a day in the country. One can be of use in that way—and it’s so nice to help. Dick, you know, was absorbed in the scheme. You will help, won’t you, when the time comes?’

He promised; and they went in together to tea.

CHAPTER XX

‘This is him,’ cried Jonah breathlessly, pointing with a hand that wore ink like a funeral glove. ‘I’ve got him this time. Look!’ And he waved a half-sheet of paper in his uncle’s face.

‘I’ve made one too—oh, a beauty!’ echoed Toby; ‘and I haven’t made half such a

mess as you.' Three of her fingers were in mourning. A crape-like line running from the nose to the corner of the mouth, lent her a certain distinction. She, too, waved a bit of paper in the air.

'Mine's the real Jack-of-the-Inkpot though, isn't he, Uncle Paul?' exclaimed the boy, leaving the schoolroom table, and running up to show it.

'They're all real—as real as your awful fingers,' decreed Paul.

He had been explaining how to make the figure of the Ink Sprite that leaves blots wherever he goes, blackens penholders and fingers, and leaves his crawly marks across even the neatest page of writing. Two blots and a line-then fold the paper. Open it again and the ink has run into the semblance of an outlandish figure with countless legs and arms, and a fantastic head; something between a spider, a centipede, and a sprite.

'It's Jack-of-the-Inkpot,' he told them. 'Half the time he does his dirty work invisibly, and if he touches blotting-paper—he vanishes altogether.'

Jonah skipped about the room, waving his hideous creation in the air. Toby, in her efforts to make a still better one, almost climbed into the ink-stand. Nixie sat on the window-sill, dangling her legs and looking on.

'Very little ink does it,' explained Paul, frightened at the results of his instruction. 'You needn't pour it on! He works with the smallest possible material, remember!' His own fingers were no longer as spotless as they might have been.

'Look!' shouted Jonah, standing on a chair and ignoring the rebuke. 'There he goes—just like a black spider flying!' He let his half-sheet drop through the air, ink running down its side as it fell, while Toby watched with the envy of despair.

Paul pounced upon the wriggling figure just in time to prevent further funeral trappings. He turned it face downwards upon the blotting-paper.

'Oh, oh!' cried the children in the same breath; 'it's drank him up!'

‘Drunk him up,’ corrected Paul, relieved by the success of his manœuvre. ‘His feet touched the blotting-paper, you see.’

A pause followed.

‘You promised to tell us his song, please,’ observed Nixie from her perch on the window-sill.

‘This is it, then,’ he answered, looking round at the smudged and solemn faces, instantly grown still. ‘To judge by appearances you know this Sprite better than I do!

I dance on your paper,

I hide in your pen,

I make in your ink-stand

My black little den;

And when you’re not looking

I hop on your nose,

And leave on your forehead

The marks of my toes.

When you’re trying to finish

Your “i” with a dot,

I slip down your finger

And make it a blot;

And when you’re so busy

To cross a big “T,”

I make on the paper

A little Black Sea.

I drink blotting-paper,

Eat penwiper-pie,

You never can catch me,

You never need try!

I hop any distance,

I use any ink!

I’m on to your fingers

Before you can wink.’

Paul’s back was to the door. He was in the act of making up a new verse, and declaiming it, when he was aware that a change had come suddenly over the room. It was manifest from the faces of the children. Their attention had wandered; they were looking past him—beyond him.

And when he turned to discover the cause of the distraction he looked straight into the grey eyes of a woman—grave-faced, with an expression of strength and sweetness. As he did so the opening words of verse four slipped out in spite of themselves:—

‘I’m the blackest of goblins,

I revel in smears—’

He smothered the accusing statement with a cough that was too late to disguise it, while the grey eyes looked steadily into his with a twinkle their owner made no attempt to conceal. The same instant the children rushed past him to welcome her.

‘It’s Cousin Joan!’ they cried with one voice, and dragged her into the room.

‘And this is Uncle Paul from America——’ began Nixie.

‘And he’s crammed full of sprites and things, and sees the wind and gets through our Crack, and—and climbs up the rigging of the Night——’ cried Jonah, striving to say everything at once before his sisters.

‘And writes the aventures of our Secret S’iety,’ Toby managed to interpolate by speaking very fast indeed.

‘He’s Recording Secre’ry, you see,’ explained Nixie in a tone of gentle authority that brought order into the scene. ‘Cousin Joan, you know,’ she added, turning gravely to her uncle, ‘is Visiting I’spector.’

‘Whose visits, however, are somewhat rare, I fear,’ said the new arrival, with a smile. Her voice was quiet and very pleasant. ‘I hope, Mr. Rivers, you are able to keep the Society in better order than I ever could.’

The introduction seemed adequate. They shook hands. Paul somehow forgot the signs of mourning he wore in common with the rest.

‘Cousin Joan has a real Society in London, of course,’ Nixie explained gravely, ‘a Society that picks up real lost children.’

‘A-filleted with ours, though,’ cried Jonah proudly.

‘’ffiliated, he means,’ explained Nixie, while everybody laughed, and the boy looked uncertain whether to be proud, hurt, or puzzled, but in the end laughing louder than the rest.

When Paul was alone a few minutes later, the children having been carried off shouting to receive the presents their ‘Cousin’ always brought them on her rare visits from London, he was conscious first of a curious sense of disappointment. That strong-faced woman, grave of expression, with the low voice and the rather sad grey eyes, he divined was the cause; though, for the moment, he could not trace the feeling to any definite detail. In his mind he still saw her standing in the doorway—a woman no longer in her first youth, yet comely with a delicate, strong beauty that bore the indefinable touch of high living. It was peculiar to his intuitive temperament to note the spirit before he became aware of physical details; and this woman had left something of her personality behind her. She had spoken little, and that little ordinary; had done nothing in act or gesture that was striking. He did not

even remember how she was dressed, beyond that she looked neat, soft, effective. Yet, there it was; something was in the room with him that had not been there before she came.

At first he felt vaguely that his sense of disappointment had to do with herself. Not that he had expected anything dazzling, or indeed had given her consciously any thought at all. The male creature, of course, hearing the name of a girl he is about to meet, instinctively conjures up a picture to suit her name. He cannot help himself. And Joan Nicholson, apart from any deliberate process of thought or desire on his part, hardly suited the picture that had thus spontaneously formed in his mind. The woman seemed too big for the picture. He had seen her, perhaps, hitherto, only through his sister's eyes. It puzzled him. About her, mysteriously as an invisible garment, was the atmosphere of things bigger, grander, finer than he had expected; nobler than he quite understood.

Ah, now, at last, he was getting at it. The vague sense of disappointment was not with her; it was with himself. Tested by some new standard her mere presence had subtly introduced into the room—into his intuitive mind—he had become suddenly dissatisfied with himself. His play with the children, he remembered feeling, had seemed all at once insignificant, unreal, almost unworthy—compared to another larger order of things her presence had suggested, if not actually revealed.

Thus, in a flash of vision, the truth came to him. It was with himself and not with her that he was disappointed. He recalled scraps of the conversation. It was, after all, nothing Joan Nicholson had said; it was something Nixie had said. Nixie, his little blue-eyed guide and teacher, had been up to her wizard tricks again, all unconsciously.

'Cousin Joan has a real Society in London, you know—a Society that picks up real lost children.'

That was the sentence that had done it. He felt certain. Combined with the spiritual

presentment of the woman, this apparently stray remark had dropped down into his heart with almost startling effect—like the grain of powder a chemist adds to his test tube that suddenly changes the colour and nature of its contents. As yet he could not determine quite what the change meant; he felt only that it was there—disappointment, dissatisfaction with himself.

‘Cousin Joan has a real Society.’ She was in earnest.

‘Real lost children’—perhaps potential Nixies, Jonahs, Tobys, all waiting to be ‘picked up.’

The thoughts ran to and fro in him like some one with a little torch, lighting up corners and recesses of his soul he had so far never visited. For thus it sometimes is with the chemistry of growth. The changes are prepared subconsciously for a long while, and then comes some trivial little incident—a chance remark, a casual action—and a match is set to the bonfire. It flames out with a sudden rush. The character develops with a leap; the soul has become wiser, advanced, possessed of longer, clearer sight.

Paul was certainly aware of a new standard by which he must judge himself; and, for all the apparent slightness of its cause, a little reflection will persuade of its truth. Real, inner crises of a soul are often produced by causes even more negligible.

The desire, always latent in him, to be of some use in the world, and to find the things he sought by losing himself in some Cause bigger than personal ends, had been definitely touched. It now rose to the surface and claimed deliberate attention.

What in the world did it matter—thus he reflected while dressing for dinner—whether his own personal sense of beauty found expression or not? Of what account was it to the world at large, the world, for instance, that included those ‘lost children’ who needed to be ‘picked up’? To what use did he put it, except to his own gratification, and the passing pleasure of the children he played with? Were there no bigger uses, then, for his imagination, uses nobler and less personal?...

The thoughts chased one another through his mind in some confusion. He felt more and more dissatisfied with himself. He must set his house in order. He really must get to work at something real!

Other thoughts, too, played with him while he struggled with his studs and tie. For he noticed suddenly with surprise that he was taking more trouble with his appearance than usual. That black tie always bothered him when he could not get the help of Nixie's fingers, and usually he appeared at the table with the results of carelessness and despair plainly visible in its outlandish shape. But to-night he tied and re-tied, determined to get it right. He meant to look his best.

Yet this process of beautifying himself was instinctive, not deliberate. It was unconscious; he did not realise what he had been about until he was half-way downstairs. And then came another of those swift, subtle flashes by which the soul reveals herself—to herself. This 'dressing up,' what was it for? For whom? Certainly, he did not care a button what Joan Nicholson thought of his personal appearance. That was positive. Then, for whom, and for what, was it? Was it for some one else? Had the arrival of this 'woman' upon the scene somehow brought the truth into sudden relief?...

A delightful, fairy thought sped across his mind with wings of gold, waving through the dusk of his soul a spray of leaves from a silver birch tree that he knew, and disappearing into those depths of consciousness where feelings never clothe themselves in precise language. A line of poetry swam up and took its place mysteriously—

My heart has thoughts, which, though thine eyes hold mine,

Flit to the silent world and other summers,

With wings that dip beyond the silver seas.

Could it be, then, that he had given his heart so utterly, so exquisitely, into the keeping of a little child?...

At any rate, before he reached the drawing-room, he understood that what he had been so busy dressing up was not anything half so trumpery as his mere external body and appearance. It was his interior person. That black tie, properly made for once, was an outward and visible sign of an inward and spiritual grace; only, having forgotten, or possibly never heard the phrase, he could not make use of it!

‘It’s that little, sandy-haired witch after all!’ he thought to himself. ‘Joan’s coming—a woman’s coming—has made me realise it. I must behave my best, and look my best. It’s my soul dressing up for Nixie, I do declare!’

CHAPTER XXI

Persons with real force of purpose carry about with them something that charges unconsciously the atmosphere of others. Paul ‘felt’ this woman. The first impact of her presence, as has been seen, came almost as a shock. The ‘shocks,’ however, did not continue—as such. Her influence worked in him underground, as it were.

She slipped easily and naturally into the quiet routine of the little household in the Grey House under the hill, till it seemed as if she had been there always. Margaret had insisted at once that there could be no ‘Missing’ and ‘Mistering’; Dick’s niece must be Joan, and her brother Paul; and the more familiar terms of address were adopted without effort on both sides.

The children helped, too. They were all in the same Society, and before a week had passed she had heard all the ‘aventures,’ and entered into the discovery of new ones, even contributing some herself with a zest that delighted Paul, and made him feel wholly at his ease with her. It was all real to her; she could not otherwise have shown an interest; for sham had no part in her nature, and her love for these fatherless children was as great as his own, and similar in kind.

‘You have given their “Society” a new lease of life,’ she told him; ‘you are an enormous addition to it.’

‘Enormous—yes!’ he laughed.

‘Enormously useful at the same time,’ she laughed in return, ‘because you not only increase their imagination; you train it, and show them how to use it.’

‘To say nothing of the indirect benefits I receive myself,’ he added.

And, after a pause, she said: ‘For myself, too, it’s the best kind of holiday I could possibly have. To come down here into all this, straight from my waifs in London, is like coming into that Crack-land you have shown them. I wish—I wish I could introduce it all to my big sad world of unwashed urchins. They have so few chances.’ A sudden flash of enthusiasm ran over her face like sunlight. ‘Perhaps, when they come down here next week for a day’s outing, we might try!—if you will help me, that is?’ She looked up. Something in the simple words touched him; her singleness of aim stirred the depths in him.

He promised eagerly.

‘When it’s out,’ she added presently, ‘I’m going to give copies of your book of aventures to some of them. A good many will understand——’

‘You shall have as many as you can use,’ he put in quickly, with a thrill of pleasure he hardly understood. ‘I’m only too delighted to think they could be of any use—any real use, I mean.’

There was something in the simple earnestness of this woman, in the devotion of her life to an unselfish Cause, that increased daily his dissatisfaction with himself. She never said a word that suggested self-sacrifice. A call had come to her, turning her entire life into an instrument for helping others—others who might never realise enough to say, ‘Thank you’—and she had accepted it. Now she lived it, that was all. The Scheme that had provided the call, too, was Dick’s. It was all conceived originally in that big practical, imaginative heart of the one intimate friendship he had known. Moreover, it concerned children, lost children. The appeal to the deepest in himself was thus reinforced in several ways. More and more, beside this quiet,

determined woman, with her singleness of aim and her practical idealism, his own life seemed trivial, cheap, selfish. She had found a medium of expression, self-expression, compared to which his own mind was insignificant.

From the ‘Man who splashed on the Deck’ to Joan Nicholson was a far cry; as far almost as from the amœba to the dog—yet both the man and the woman knew the relief of Outlet. And, now, he too was learning in his own time and place the same truth. Nixie had brought him far. Joan, perhaps, was to bring him farther still.

Yet there was nothing about her that was very unusual. There are scores and scores of unmarried women like her sprinkled all along the quiet ways of life, noble, unselfish, unrecognised, often, no doubt, utterly unappreciated, turning the whole current of their lives into work for others—the best they can find. The ordinary man who, for the mother of his children seeks first of all physical beauty, or perhaps some worldly standard of attractiveness, passes them by. Their great force, thus apparently neglected by Nature for her more obvious purposes, runs along through more hidden channels, achieving great things with but little glory or reward. To Paul, who knew nothing of modern types, and whose knowledge of women was abstract rather than concrete, she appeared, of course, simply normal. For all women he conceived as noble and unselfish, capable naturally of sacrifice and devotion. To him they were all saints, more or less, and Joan Nicholson came upon the scene of his life merely as an ordinarily presentable specimen of the great species he had always dreamt about.

But it was the first time he had come into close contact with a living example of the type he had always believed in. Here was a woman whose interests were all outside herself. The fact thrilled and electrified him, just as the peculiar nature of her work made a powerful and intimate appeal to his heart.

As the days passed, and they came to know one another better, she told him frankly about the small beginnings of her work, and then how Dick’s idea had caught her up

and carried her away to where she now was.

‘There was so much to be done, and so much help needed, that at first,’ she admitted, ‘my own little efforts seemed absurd; and then he showed me that if everybody talked like that nothing would ever be accomplished. So I got up and tried. It was something definite and practical. I let my bigger dreams go——’

‘Well done,’ he interrupted, wondering for a moment what those ‘bigger dreams’ could have been.

‘——and chose the certainty. And I have never regretted it, though sometimes, of course, I am still tempted——’

‘That was fine of you,’ he said. He realised vaguely that she would gladly, perhaps, have spoken to him of those ‘other dreams,’ but it was not quite clear to him that his sympathy could be of any avail, and he did not know how to offer it either. To ask direct questions of such a woman savoured to his delicate mind of impertinence.

‘There was nothing “fine” about it,’ she laughed, after an imperceptible pause; ‘it was natural, that’s all. I couldn’t help myself really. Human suffering has always called to me very searchingly. Au fond, you see, it was almost selfishness.’

He suddenly felt unaccountably small with this slip of a woman at his side, tired, overworked, giving all her best years so gladly away, and even in her ‘holidays’ thinking of her work more than of herself. He noticed, too, the passing flames that lit fires in her eyes and illumined her entire face sometimes when she spoke of her London waifs. Pity and admiration ran together in his thoughts, the latter easily predominating.

‘But you must make the most of your holiday,’ he said presently; ‘you will use up your forces too soon——’

‘Perhaps,’ she laughed, ‘perhaps. Only I get restless with the feeling that I’m wanted elsewhere. There’s so little time to do anything. The years pass so quickly—after thirty; and if you always wait till you’re “quite fit,” you wait for ever, and nothing

gets done.'

Paul turned and looked steadily at her for a moment. A sudden beauty, like a white and shining fire, leaped into her face, flashed about the eyes and mouth, and was gone. Paul never forgot that look to the end of his days.

'By Jove,' he said, 'you are in earnest!'

'Not more than others,' she said simply; 'not as much as many, even, I'm afraid. A good soldier goes on fighting whether he's "fit" or not, doesn't he?'

'He ought to,' said Paul—humbly, for some reason he could hardly explain.

They had many similar talks. She told him a great deal about her rescue work in London, and he, for his part, became more and more interested. From a distance, meanwhile, his sister observed them curiously,—though nothing that was in Margaret's thoughts ever for a single instant found its way either into his mind or Joan's. It was natural, of course, that Margaret, the reader of modern novels, should have formed certain conclusions, and perhaps it would have been the obvious and natural thing for Joan and Paul to have fallen in love and been happy ever afterwards with children of their own. It would also, no doubt, have been 'artistic,' and the way things are made to happen in novels.

But in real life things are not cut always so neatly to measure, and whether real life is artistic or not as a whole cannot be judged until the true, far end is known. For the perspective is wanting; the scale is on a vaster loom; and of the threads that weave into the pattern and out again, neither end nor beginning are open to inspection.

The novels Margaret delighted in, with their hotch-potch of duchesses and valets, Ministers of State and footmen, libertines and snobs, while doubtless portraying certain phases of modern life with accuracy, could in no way prepare her for the Pattern that was being woven beneath her eyes by the few and simple characters in this entirely veracious history. And it may be assumed, therefore, that Joan had come into the scenery of Paul's life with no such commonplace motive—since the

high Gods held the threads and wove them to their own satisfaction—as merely to marry off the hero.

And if Paul did not fall in love with Joan Nicholson, as he might, or ought, to have done, he at least did the next best thing to it. He fell head over ears in love with her work. And since love seeks ever to imitate and to possess, he cast about in his heart for means by which he might accomplish these ends. Already he possessed her secret. Now he had only to imitate her methods.

He was finding his way to a bigger and better means of self-expression than he had yet dreamed of; while Nixie, the dea ex machina, for ever flitted on ahead and showed the way.

It remained a fairy tale of the most delightful kind. That, at least, he realised clearly.

CHAPTER XXII

Among the branches of the ilex tree, whose thick foliage rose like a giant swarm of bees at the end of the lawn, there were three dark spots visible that might have puzzled the most expert botanist until he came close enough to examine them in detail. The fact that the birds avoided the tree at this particular hour of the evening, when they might otherwise have loved to perch and sing, hidden among the dense shiny leaves, would very likely have furnished a clue, and have suggested to him—if he were a really intelligent man of science—that these dark spots were of human origin.

In the order in which they rose from the ground towards the top they were, in fact, Toby, Joan Nicholson, Paul, Nixie and, highest of all, Jonah. Paul felt safer in the big fork, Joan in the wide seat with the back. In the upper branches Jonah perched, singing and chattering. Toby hummed to herself happily nearer the ground, and Nixie, her legs swinging dizzily over a serpentine branch immediately above Paul’s head, was really the safest of the lot, though she looked ready to drop at any

moment.

They were all at rest, these wingless human birds, in the tree where Paul had long ago made seats and staircases and bell-ropes.

‘I wish the wind would come,’ said Nixie. ‘It would make us all swing about.’

‘And Jonah would lose his balance and bring the lot of us down like ripe fruit,’ said Paul.

‘On the top of Toby at the bottom,’ added Joan.

‘But my house is well built,’ Paul objected, ‘or it would never have held such a lot of visitors as it did yesterday.’

‘Look out! I’m slipping!’ cried Jonah suddenly overhead. ‘No! I’m all right again now,’ he added a second later, having thoroughly alarmed the lodgers on the lower floors, and sent down a shower of bark and twigs.

‘It’s certainly more solid than your “Scaffolding of Night,”’ Joan observed mischievously as soon as the shower was past; ‘though, perhaps, not quite as beautiful.’ And presently she added, ‘I think I never saw boys enjoy themselves so much in my life. They’ll remember it as long as they live.’

‘It was your idea,’ he said.

‘But you carried it out for me!’

They were resting after prolonged labours that had been, at the same time, a prolonged delight. At three o’clock that afternoon, after twenty-four hours of sunshine among woods and fields, the party of twenty urchins had been seen safely off the premises into the London train. Two large brakes had carried them to the station, and the gardens of the grey house under the hill were dropping back again into their wonted peace and quiet.

There is nothing unusual—happily—in the sight of poor town-children enjoying an afternoon in the country; but there was something about this particular outing that

singled it out from the majority of its kind. Paul had entered heart and soul into it, and the combination of woods, fields, and running water had made possible certain details that are not usually feasible.

Margaret had given Paul and her cousin carte blanche. They had planned the whole affair as generals plan a battle. The children had proved able lieutenants; and the weather had furnished the sun by day and the moon by night, to show that it thoroughly approved. For it was Paul's idea that the entire company of boys should camp out, cook their meals over wood fires in the open, bathe in the pools he had contrived long ago by damming up the stream, and that not a single minute of the twenty-four hours should they be indoors or under cover.

With a big barn close at hand in case of necessity, and with four tents large enough to hold five apiece, erected at the far end of the Gwyle woods, where the stream ran wide and full, he had no difficulty in providing for all contingencies. Each boy had brought a little parcel with his things for the night; and blankets, bedding of hay and pillows of selected pine branches—oh, he knew all the tricks for making comfortable sleeping-quarters in the woods!—were ready and waiting when the party of urchins came upon the scene.

And every astonished ragamuffin had a number pinned on to his coat the moment he arrived, and the same number was to be found at the head of his place in the tent. Each tent, moreover, was under the care of a particular boy who was responsible for order; while, midway in the camp, by the ashes of the fire where they had roasted potatoes and told stories till the moonlight shamed them into sleep, Paul himself lay all night in his sleeping-bag, the happiest of the lot, sentinel and guardian of the troop.

The place for the main fire, where meals were cooked, had been carefully chosen beforehand, and wood collected by the busy hands of Nixie & Co. The boys sat round it in a large ring; and Paul in the middle, stirring the stew he had learned to

make most deliciously in his backwoods life, ladled it out into the tin plates of each in turn, while Joan saw to the bread and cake, and watched the huge kettle of boiling water for tea that swung slowly from the iron tripod near by.

And that circle of happy urchin faces, seen through the blue smoke against the background of crowding tree stems, flushed with the hours of sunshine, the mystery of happiness in all their eyes, remained a picture in Paul's memory to the end of his life. The boys, certainly, were not all good, but they were at least all merry. They forgot for the time the heat of airless brick lanes and the clatter of noisy traffic. The perfumes of the wood banished the odour of ill-ventilated rooms. Dark shadows of the streets gave place to veils of a very different kind, as the rising moon dropped upon their faces the tracery of pine branches. And, instead of the roar of a city that for them meant hardship, often cruelty, they heard the singing of birds, the rustle of trees, and the murmur of the stream at their very feet.

And Paul, as he paced to and fro softly between the sleeping crew, the tents all ghostly among the trees, had long, long thoughts that went with him into his sleeping-bag later and mingled with dreams that were more inspired than he knew, and destined to bear a great harvest in due course....

The branches of big forest trees shifted noiselessly forwards from the scenery that lay ever in the background of his mind, and pressed his eyelids gently into sleep. With feathery dark fingers they brushed the surface of his thoughts, leaving the perfume of their own large dreams about his pillow. The shadowy figures that haunt all ancient woods peered at him from behind a million stems and, while they peered, beckoned; whispering to his soul the secrets of the wilderness, and renewing in him the sources of strength, simplicity, and joy they had erstwhile taught him.

All that afternoon he had spent with the romping boys, organising their play, seeing to it that they enjoyed utter freedom, yet did no mischief. Joan seconded him everywhere, and Nixie flitted constantly between the camp and the source of

supplies in the kitchen. And, to see their play, came as a revelation to him in many ways. While the majority were content to shout and tumble headlong with excess of animal spirits let loose, here and there he watched one or two apart, all aghast at the beauty they saw at close quarters for the first time; dreaming; apparently stunned; drinking it all in with eyes and ears and lips; feeling the moss and branches as others feel jewels and costly lace; and on some of the little faces an expression of grave wonder, and of joy too deep for laughter.

‘This ain’t always ’ere, is it, Guv’nor?’ one had asked. And another, whom Paul watched fingering a common fern for a long time, looked up presently and inquired if it was real—‘because it isn’t ’arf as pretty as what we use!’ He was the son of a sceneshifter at an East End theatre.

And a detail that made peculiarly keen appeal to his heart, a detail not witnessed by Joan or the children, was the morning ablutions in the stream, when the occupants of each tent in turn, went into the water soon after sunrise, their pinched bodies streaked by the shadow and sunlight of the dawn, their laughter and splashing filling the wood with unwonted sounds. Soap, towels, and water in plenty! Water perfumed from the hills! Faces flushed and almost rosy after the sleep in the open, and the inexhaustible draughts of air to fan them dry again!

And then the eager circle for breakfast, hatless, eyes all fixed upon the great stew-pot where he mixed the jorum of porridge! And the noise—for noise, it must be confessed, there was—as they smothered it in their tin plates with quarts of milk hot from the cow, and busily swallowed it.

‘You took them straight into the Crack, you know,’ Joan said from her seat below.

‘Everything came true,’ Nixie’s voice was heard overhead among the branches.

Jonah clattered down past them and scampered across the lawn with Toby at his heels, for their bedtime was close at hand. The other three lay there, half hidden, a little longer, while the shadows crept down from the hills and gathered underneath.

They could no longer see each other properly. For a time there was silence, stirred only by the faint rustle of the ilex leaves. Each was thinking long, deep thoughts.

‘Next week,’ said Joan quietly, as though to herself, ‘the other lot will come. Your sister’s as good as gold about it all.’

Then, after a pause, Nixie’s voice dropped down to them again:

‘And had some of them really never seen a wood before?’ she asked. ‘Fancy that! When I grow up I shall have a big wood made specially for them—the “Wood for Lost Children” I shall call it. And you’ll see about the tents and cooking, won’t you, Uncle Paul? Or, perhaps,’ she added, ‘by that time I shall know how to make a real proper stew and porridge, and be able to tell them stories round the fire as you did. Don’t you think so?’

‘I think you know most of it already,’ he answered gently. ‘It seems to me somehow that you have always known all the important things like that.’

‘Oh, do you really? How splendid if I really did!’ There was a slight break in her voice—ever so slight. ‘I should so dreadfully like to help—if I could. It’s so slow getting old enough to do anything.’

Paul turned his head up to her. It was too dim to see her body lying along the bough, but he could just make out her eyes peering down between the dark of the leaves, a yellow mist where her hair was, and all the rest hidden. Very eerie, very suggestive it was, to hear this little voice amid the dusk of the branches, putting his own thoughts into words. Were those tears that glistened in the round pools of blue, or was it the reflection of sunset and the coming stars that filtered past her through the thinning tree-top? Again he thought of that silver birch standing under the protection of the shaggy pine.

‘Sing us something, Nixie,’ rose the voice of Joan from below.

‘What shall I sing?’

‘That thing about the two trees Uncle Paul made up.’

‘But he hasn’t given me the tune yet!’

‘The tune’s still lost,’ murmured the deep voice from the shadows of the big fork. ‘I must go into the Crack and find it. That’s where I found the words, at least——’ The sound of his voice melted away.

‘Of course,’ Joan was heard to say faintly, ‘all lost things are in there, aren’t they?’

And then something queer happened that was never explained. Perhaps they all slipped through the Crack together; or perhaps Nixie’s funny little singing voice floated down to them through such a filter of listening leaves that both words and tune were changed on the way into something sweeter than they actually were in themselves.

Who told the Silver Birch tree

The stories that we made?

And how can she remember

The very games we played?

Who told her heart of silver

That, almost from her birth,

The roots of that old Pine tree

Had sought hers under earth?

For always when the wind blows

Her hair about the wood,

It blows across my eyes too

Her pictured solitude.

And then Aventures gather

On little hidden feet,

And mystery and laughter

The magic things repeat.

For, O my Silver Birch tree,

Full half the ‘things’ we do,

We did—or e’er you sweetened

The starlight and the dew!

They stood there, all in order,

Ready and waiting even,

Before the sunlight kissed you,

Or you, the winds of heaven.

Who told you, then, O Birch Tree,

The ’Ventures that we play?

And how can you remember

The wonder—and the Way?

CHAPTER XXIII

Panthea. Look, sister, where a troop of spirits gather

Like flocks of cloud in spring’s delightful weather,

Thronging in the blue air!

Ione. And see! More come.

Like fountain-vapours when the winds are dumb,

That climb up the ravines in scattered lines.

And hark! Is it the music of the pines?

Is it the lake? Is it the waterfall?

Panthea. ’Tis something sadder, sweeter far than all.

Prometheus Unbound.

‘It’s all very well for you two to play at being trees,’ the voice of Joan was heard to object, ‘but I should like to know what part I——’

‘Hush! Hush! I hear them coming,’ Nixie said quickly with a new excitement.

She had apparently floated up higher into the ilex to the place vacated by Jonah. Her voice had a ring of the sky in it.

‘Come up to where I am, and we can all see. They’re rising already——’

‘Who—what’s rising?’ called Joan from below; ‘I’m not!’

‘There’s something up, I expect,’ said Paul quickly. ‘I’ll help you.’ He knew by the child’s voice there was aventure afoot. ‘Give me your hand, Joan. And put your feet where I tell you. We’re all in the Crack, remember, so everything’s possible.’

‘Undoubtedly something’s up, but it’s not me, I’m afraid,’ she laughed.

‘Hush! Hush! Hush!’ Nixie’s voice reached them from the higher branches. ‘Talk in whispers, please, or you’ll frighten them. And be quick. They’re rising everywhere. Any minute now they may be off and you’ll miss them——’

Joan and Paul obeyed; though in his record of the aventure he never described the details of their ascent. A few minutes later they were perched beside the child near the rounded top of the ilex.

‘It’s fearfully rickety,’ Joan said breathlessly.

‘But there’s no danger,’ whispered Nixie, ‘because this is an evergreen tree, and it doesn’t go with the others.’

‘How—“Go with the others?”’ asked the two in the same breath.

‘Trees,’ answered the child. ‘They’re emigrating. Look! Listen!’

‘Migrating,’ suggested Paul.

‘Of course,’ Nixie said, poking her head higher to see into the sky. ‘Trees go away south in the autumn just like birds—the real trees; their insides, I mean——’

‘Their spirits,’ Paul explained in his lowest whisper to Joan.

‘That’s why they lose their leaves. And in the spring they come back with all their new blossoms and things. If they find nicer places in the south, they stay, that’s all. They—die. Listen—you can hear them going!’

High up in that still autumn sky there ran a sweet and curious sound, difficult to describe. Joan thought it was like the rustle of countless leaves falling: the tiny tapping noise made by a dying leaf as it settles on the ground—multiplied enormously; but to Paul it seemed that sudden, dream-like whirr of a host of birds when they wheel sharply in mid-air—heard at a distance. There was no question about the distance at any rate.

‘Are they just the trees of our woods, then?’ asked Joan in a whisper that held delight and awe, ‘or——’

The child laughed under her breath. ‘Oh, no,’ was the reply, ‘all the South of England below a certain line meets here. This is one of the great starting-places. It’s just like swallows collecting on the wires. Some big tree, higher than the rest, gives a sign one night—and then all the other woods flock in by thousands. Uncle Paul knew that!’ There was a touch in her voice of something between scorn and surprise.

‘Did you, Uncle Paul?’ Joan asked.

He fidgeted in his precarious perch. ‘I write the Record of it all, so I ought to,’ he answered evasively.

And high up in the autumn sky, now darkening, ran on that curious sweet sound. Across the heavens, silvery in the coming moonlight, they saw long feathery clouds drawn thinly from north to south, known commonly as mares’ tails.

‘Those are the tracks they follow,’ whispered Nixie. ‘Look! Now you can see

them—some of them!'

Her voice was so thrilled that it startled them. But for the fact that they were in the Crack where nothing can be ever 'lost,' both Paul and Joan might have lost their hold and their seats—to say nothing of their lives—and crashed downwards through the branches of that astonished ilex tree. Instead, they turned their eyes upwards and stared.

They looked out over the world of tree-tops. On all sides rose Something in a silent tempest, almost too delicate for words—something that touched the air with a Presence, swift and wonderful—then was gone. With it went the faint music as of myriad wheeling birds, too small for sight. And through the sky ran a vast fluttering of green. They saw the coming stars, as it were, through immense transparencies of green, stained here and there with the washed splendours of wet and dying leaves—the greens, yellows, aye, and the reds too, of autumn. For a few passing seconds the night was positively robed with the spirit-hues of the dying year, rising rapidly in the sheets of their dim glory.

'They're off!' murmured Nixie. 'It's the first flight. We are lucky!'

Far overhead the pathways of fleecy cloud were tinged with pale yellow as when the moon looks sometimes mistily upon the earth—tinged, then suddenly white and silvery as before.

They collect—Paul drew upon the child's account for his Record—far over-seas upon some lonely strand or headland, and then swarm inland, sometimes following their companions, the birds, sometimes leading them. In countless thousands they go, yet for all their numbers never causing more than a passing tremble of the air. Their armies add, perhaps, a shadow to the night, a new tint to the clouds that veil the moon; or, if owing to stress of autumn weather, they start with the daylight, then the sunset gains a strange new wonder that puzzles the heart with its beauty, and makes unimaginative people write foolish letters to the newspapers. Their speed

makes it difficult to catch even the slightest indication of their flight; the sky is touched with glory, there is a reflection in the river or the sea—and they are gone! Or, perhaps, from the evergreens that stay behind, often fringing the coast, the wind bears a message of farewell, wondrous sweet; or some late birds, delaying their own departure, wake in the branches and sing in little bursts of passion the joy of their own approaching escape.

And when they return, each tree in the order of its leaving, and according to its times and needs, they bring with them all the essential glory of southern climes, and the magic of spring is due as much to the tales and memories they have collected to talk about, as to the clear brilliance of the new dresses with which they come to clothe their old bodies at home.

The Record of the Aventure, as Paul wrote it faithfully from the child's description, makes curious and instructive reading, and the loneliness of the stalwart evergreens who remain behind to face the winter brought a pathos into the tale that all lovers of trees will readily appreciate, and may be read by them in the published account.

Yet to Paul and Joan, to each according to temperament and cast of mind, the little Aventure brought thoughts of a more practical bearing. To him, especially, in the escape of the tree-spirits—of their 'insides,' as Nixie intuitively phrased it—he divined an allegory of the temporary escape of the little army of city waifs. Those boys, old in face as they were cramped in body, had enjoyed, too, a migration that clothed them for a time, outwardly and inwardly, with some passing beauty which they could take back to London with them just as the trees come back with the freshness of the spring.

And this thought led necessarily to others. The little migration of their bodies from town was important enough; but what of their minds and souls? What chance of escape was there for these?

The conclusions are obvious enough; they need no elaboration. He had already

learned from Joan of their sufferings. His heart burned within him. It was all mixed up in his queer poetic mind with the swift vision of the Tree-Spirits, and with the picture of Joan, Nixie, and the other children perched like big berries in that astonished ilex tree. In due season both berries and dreams must ripen. He was beginning to see the way.

‘They’re gone already,’ Nixie interrupted his long reverie in a whisper; ‘and to-night there’ll be great rains to wash away all the signs. To-morrow morning, you’ll see, half the trees will be bare.’

And high in the heavens, incredibly high and faint it seemed, ran the curious sweet sound, driven farther and farther into the reaches of the night, till at last it died away altogether.

‘Gone,’ murmured Joan, ‘gone!’ The beauty of it touched her voice with sadness. ‘I wish we could go like that—as beautifully, as quietly, as easily!’

‘Perhaps we do,’ Paul thought to himself.

‘I think we do,’ Nixie said aloud. ‘Daddy did, I’m sure. I shall, too, I think—and then come back in the spring, p’rhaps.’

CHAPTER XXIV

See where the child of heaven, with wingéd feet,

Runs down the slanted sunlight of the dawn.

Prometheus Unbound.

Very often in life, when the way seems all prepared for joy, there comes instead an unexpected time of sadness that makes all the preparation seem useless and of no purpose. Those coloured threads, whose ends and beginnings are not seen, weave this unexpected twist in the pattern, and one knows the bitterness that asks secretly, What can be the use of efforts thus rendered apparently null and void at a single

stroke? forgetting the roots of faith that are thereby strengthened, and shutting the eyes to the glory of the whole pattern, which it is always the endeavour of the imagination to body forth.

And so it seemed to Paul a few weeks later when he returned to England from America, where he had been to settle up his affairs. For he had decided to sever his connection with the Lumber Company, and to devote his life henceforward to battling against the wrongs and sufferings of childhood. The call had come to him with no uncertain voice. Nixie had unintentionally sown the seeds; Joan had deliberately watered them; his own liberated imagination girded its loins to go forth as a labourer to the harvest.

Then, coming back with the joy of this approaching labour in his heart, the veil of great sadness descended upon his newly-opening life and set him in the midst of a dreadful void, a blank of pain and loneliness that nothing seemed able to fill. Nixie went from him. The Hand that gilds the stars, and touched her hair with the yellow of the sands, drew her also away. Just when her gentle companionship had justified itself for him as something ideally charming that should last always, a breath of wintry wind passed down upon that grey house under the hill, and, lo, she was gone—gone like the spirit of her little birch tree from the cruelties of December.

He was in time to say good-bye—nothing more; in time to see the awful shadow fall silently upon the wasted little face, and to feel the cold of eternal winter creep into the thin hand that lay to the last within his own. Not a single word did he utter as he sat there beside the bed, choked to the brim with feelings that never yet have known the words to clothe them. That cold entered his own heart too, and numbed it.

Nixie it was that spoke, though she, too, said little enough. The lips moved feebly. He lowered his head to catch the last breath.

‘I shall come back,’ he heard faintly, ‘just as the trees do in the spring!’

The voice was in his ear. It sank down inside him, entering his very soul. For a

moment it sang there—then ceased for ever. With eyes dry and burning, he buried his head in the tangle of yellow hair upon the pillow, and when a moment later he raised them again to speak the words of comfort to his weeping sister, Nixie was no longer there to hear him or to see.

'I shall come back in the spring—just as the trees do.'

And so she died, leaving Paul behind in that sea of loneliness whose waves drown year by year their thousands and tens of thousands—the vast army that know not Faith. Her blue eyes, so swiftly fading, were on his to the last. It seemed to him that for a moment he had seen God. And perhaps he had; for Nixie assuredly was close to divine things, and he most certainly was pure.

Sad things are best faced squarely, very squarely indeed; dealt with; and then—deliberately forgotten. In this way their strength, and the beauty that invariably lies within like a hidden kernel, may be appropriated and their bitterness destroyed. But such platitudes are easily said or written, and at first, when Nixie left him, Paul felt as though the world lay for ever broken at his feet.

What this elfin child had done for him must appear to some exaggerated, to many, incredible; for the relationship between them had somehow been touched with the splendour and tenderness of a world unknown to the majority. The delicate intimacy between their souls, as between souls of a like age, is difficult to realise outside the region of fantasy. Yet it had existed: in her with a simple, childlike joy that asked no questions; in him, with an attempt at analysis that only made it closer and more dear. What Paul had been to her was a secret she had taken away with her; what she had been to him, however, was to remain a most precious memory, and at the same time a source of strength and happiness that was to prove eternal.

Not, however, in the manner that actually came about—and, at first, not realised by him in any manner whatsoever.

For, at first, he found himself alone, horribly alone. What her little mystical heart of

poetry had taught him is hard to name. Expression, of course, in its simpler form, and the joy of a sympathetic audience; but more than that. In all fine women lies hidden ‘the child’—the simple vision that pierces—and perhaps in Nixie he had divined, and ideally reconstructed for himself, the ‘fine woman’! Who can say? A dream so rich and tender can never be caught in a mere net of words. The truth lay buried in the depths of his being, to strengthen and to bless; and some few others may divine its presence there as well as himself perhaps. The only thing he understood clearly at the moment was that he had been robbed of an intimate little friend who had crept into every corner of his heart, and that—he was most terribly alone.

CHAPTER XXV

Donnez vos yeux, donnez vos mains,

Donnez vos mains magiciennes;

Pour me guider par les chemins

Donnez vos yeux, donnez vos mains,

Vos mains d’Infante dans les miennes.

From Les Unes et les Autres.

There is nothing to be gained by dwelling upon sadness; the details of Paul’s suffering may be left to the imagination. It was characteristic of him that he sought instinctively, and without cant, for the Reality that lay behind his pain; and Reality—though seas of grief may first be plunged through to find it—is always Joy. For love is joy, and joy is strength, and both are aspects of the great central Reality of the life of the soul. The child was so woven into the strands of his inmost being that her going seemed, as it were, to draw out with her these very strands—drew them out away from himself towards—towards what? He hardly knew how to name

it. The word ‘God’ rarely passed his lips: towards ‘Reality,’ then; towards the deep things he had sought all his life.

Part of himself, however, the child had taken away with her. He passed more and more away from the things of the world, though these had never yet held him with any security in their mesh. Nixie had gone ahead, that was all. Before long, as years measure time at least, he would follow her. She might even come back, ‘like the trees in the spring,’ to tell him of the way.

His great longing, unexpressed, had always been to know something of the Beyond—to see into the heart of things; not by the uninspired methods of an unsavoury spiritualism, or the artificial forcing-house of an audacious Magic; but by some inner, as yet undetermined, way in his own heart. For he had always clung to the secret belief that there must be some interior way of finding ‘Reality,’ some process, simple, piercing, profound, that would have authority for himself, if not for all the world. In the heart of all true mystics some such Faith is ingrained. They are born with it. It is ineradicable—lived, but rarely spoken.

And the root of this belief it was that Nixie had unknowingly watered and fed. Her going seemed suddenly to have coaxed it almost into flower. His need of the great, satisfying Companion that knows no shadow of turning was incalculably quickened thereby. Love and Nature were the veils that screened the Beyond so thinly that he could almost see through them; and to both these mysteries the child had led him better than she knew.

The energy of his mystical yearnings suddenly increased a hundredfold. Whether these remain within to poison, or go out to bless, depends, of course, upon the nature of the heart that feels them. Paul, fortunately for himself, had found ways of expression; he was always provided now with the safety of an outlet. And, for the immediate moment, the path was clear enough, and very simple. He was to comfort the mother that mourned her; himself that mourned her; the puzzled little brother

and sister, and even the army of more or less disconsolate four-footed friends that missed her presence vaguely, and haunted the door of her room with the strange instinct that there must still be caresses for them within, and that for the moment she was merely hiding.

It was Smoke, the furry black fellow, however, always her favourite and his own, participant in all their old Aventures, who brought him a strange comfort by secret ways that no man understands. For Smoke asked no questions. He knew; and though he missed her in all their games, and meals, and undertakings of every kind, in house or garden, he showed no obvious symptoms of grief as a dog might have shown. And sometimes he was positively uncanny: he behaved almost as though he still saw her.

The others, however,——! With most of them out of sight was out of mind. The kittens, now growing up, purred and played as of old in the schoolroom, and the Chow puppies, China and Japan, more like yellow puddings than ever, tore about the house, tumbling and thudding, as though they had never known their little two-legged elfin playmate. The household dropped back into the old routine; Margaret, sadder, less alive than before, pressed down by her new grief into the semblance of a vision; and the children, hushed and pale, but gradually yielding to the stress of bursting life which at that age has no long acquaintance with grief.

It was winter, and the woods and gardens were so altered that the usual corners of play and mischief were unrecognisable. ‘Out-ov-doors’ was dead, the sunshine unreal, the darkness hovering close even on the clearest day. The haunts that Paul and Nixie knew were too much changed, mercifully for him, who often sought them none the less, to remind him keenly. The little silver birch tree that danced in summer before the skirts of the fir wood was bare and shivering in the winds. Behind it, however, unchanged and shaggy, still stood the dark sheltering pine, steady among the blasts.

And Paul, meanwhile, beyond the smaller sphere of his immediate duties in the grey house under the hill, took up with all the enthusiasm he could spare from sorrow the work among the lost waifs. As has been seen, he found the complete organisation ready to hand. And, to his great satisfaction, he found, as he became familiar with the detail, that it was work suited to the best that was in him. He was the right man in the right place.

Moreover, it was Dick's scheme, and to lose himself in it was to get into touch again delightfully with the great friendship of his youth. Nixie, too, who had meant when she grew up to provide a Wood for Lost Children, seemed ever pushing him forward from behind. Thus his zeal never lessened, and he lost himself in others to some purpose.

The test of time, of course, proved this. At the moment, however, it can only be known by the trick of 'looking at the last chapter'—which is unlawful, as well as logically impossible. And, before he got so far, he had first learned another profound truth: that only he who carries in his heart a great sorrow, borne alone, can know the mystery of interior Vision, inspiring and truly marvellous, which comes from a blessing so singularly disguised as pain.

CHAPTER XXVI

I feel, I see

Those eyes which burn through smiles that fade in tears,

Like stars half quenched in mists of silver dew.

Prometheus Unbound.

The readjustment of self—the renewal—that follows upon great bereavement having thus been faced courageously, Paul threw himself into his work with energy. Every Friday night he came down to the house under the hill, and every Monday morning

he returned to London. But the details of the work, beyond the fact that their fulfilment blessed both himself and those for whom he laboured, are not essential to the story of what followed. For the history of Paul's education is more than anything else a history of Aventures of the inner life. Outwardly, his existence was quiet and uneventful.

Almost immediately with the disappearance of his little friend, for instance, he discovered that the region through the Crack—the land betweenyesserdayandtomorrow—became more real, more extraordinarily real, than ever before. The entrances now seemed everywhere and always close; it was the ways of exit that were difficult to find. He lived in it. Even in London he moved among those fields of flowers, and the winter gloom that depressed the majority only enhanced the bright sunshine that lay about his path. His thoughts were continually following the windings of the river to the far horizon; and the horizon, too, was wider, more enticing and mysterious, more suggestive than ever of that blue sea beyond where he had sailed with that other Companion.

The land became mapped out and known with an intimacy that must seem little short of marvellous to those who have never even dreamed of the existence of so fair a country. For, the truth was, his Companion, who was now his guide and leader, had suddenly revealed herself.

It came about a few days after the funeral—when the emptiness and hush of sorrow that lay over the house found its exact spiritual correspondence in the silence and sense of desolation that filled his own heart. He was in his bedroom, battling with that loneliness in loneliness which at the first had threatened to overwhelm him. He had just left his sister's side, having soothed her with what comfort he could into the sleep of weariness and exhaustion. By the open window, as so often before, he stood, staring into the damp winter night. Smoke moved restlessly to and fro behind him, sometimes sitting down to wash, sometimes jumping on the bed and sofa as

though to search for something it could never find. Mrs. Tompkyns, who had scratched at the door a few minutes before, for the first time in her life, and for reasons known to none but herself and her black companion, lay at last curled up before the fire.

The room was filled with a soft presence, once silvery and fragrant, but now draped with the newly woven shadows that rendered it invisible. The invasion was irresistible. His heart ached. He knew quite well that his own soul, too, was being measured for its garment of shadow—garment that, unlike ordinary clothes, fits better and closer with every year. He was in that dangerous mood when such measurements are made only too easily, and the lassitude of grief accepts the trying-on with a kind of soft, almost pleasurable, acquiescence—when, sharply and suddenly, a sound was audible outside the window that instantly galvanised him into a state of resistance. The night, hitherto still as the grave, sighed in response to a rising wind. And through his being at the same moment ran the answering little Wind of Inspiration some one had taught him to find always when he sought it.

And the sound brought comfort. It was as though an invisible hand had reached down inside him and touched the source of joy!

Paul turned quickly. Mrs. Tompkyns was awake on the mat. Smoke rubbed against his legs. On the table, where he had spread them a few minutes before, were the black tie, the mended socks, the unused bottle for nettle stings and scratches, and beside them the faded spray of birch leaves, now withered and shrivelled. And, as he looked, the wind entered the room behind him, and he saw that the brown branch turned half over towards him. It rattled faintly as it moved. He was just in time to rescue it from Smoke, who saw in the sound and movement an invitation to play. He pinned it out of reach upon the wall over the mantelpiece.

And it was just as he finished, that this sound of wind sighing through the dripping and leafless trees outside was followed by another sound—one that he recognised....

There was a rush and a leap, a swift, whistling roar—and the next second he found himself among the sunny fields of flowers that he knew, and heard the water lapping at his feet ... through the Crack!

‘Everybody’s thin somewhere,’ was what he almost expected to hear; but what he did hear was another sentence, followed by merry and delicious laughter: ‘Everybody can be happy somewhere!’

And close in front of him, rising, it seemed, out of the reeds and waves and yellow sands, stood—that veiled Companion whom he knew to be a part of himself.

She was turned away from him so that he could not see her face, yet he instantly divined a movement of her whole body towards him. Something within himself rushed out to meet her half-way. His life stirred mightily. The thrill of discovery came close. The next second his arms were about her and she was looking straight into his eyes.

But her own eyes were no longer veiled; her laughing face was clear as the day; the figure that he held so close was Nixie, child and woman. If ever it can be possible for two beings to melt into one, it was possible then. Each possessed the other; each slipped into the other.

‘Face to face at last!’ he heard himself cry. ‘Bless your little fairy heart! Why in the world didn’t I guess you sooner?’

A flame of happiness sped through him, and grief ran away utterly. The sense of loss that had numbed his soul vanished. And when she only answered him by the old mischievous laughter, he asked again: ‘But how did you disguise yourself so well—your voice, and everything——? Even if your face was veiled I ought to have recognised you! It’s too wonderful!’

‘It was you who disguised me!’ she replied, standing up close in front of him, and playing with his waistcoat buttons as of old. ‘Your thoughts about me got twisted—sometimes. You thought too much. You should have felt only.’

‘They never shall again,’ he exclaimed.

‘They never can. We are face to face now.’

Paul turned to look again more closely. He saw her with extraordinary detail and vividness. It was indeed Nixie, but Nixie exactly as he had always wanted her, without quite knowing it himself; at least, without acknowledging it. No gulf of age was there to separate them now. She was the perfect Companion, for he had made her so. He smoothed her hair as they turned to walk by the river, and he caught the old childish perfume of it as it spread untidily over his shoulder, her eyes like dropped stars shining through it.

‘Isn’t it awfully jolly?’ she whispered: ‘we can have twice as many aventures now, and you can go on writing them for Jonah and Toby just the same as before, only faster.’

He felt her hand steal into his; his heart became most strangely merged with hers. He had known a similar experience in Canadian forests, when the beauty of Nature had sometimes caught him up till he scarcely felt himself distinct enough from it to realise that he was separate. He now knew himself as close to her as that. It was exquisite and yet so simple that a little child might have felt it—without perplexity. Perhaps it was precisely what children always did feel towards what they loved, animate or inanimate.

‘But how is it you can come so close?’ he asked, though he fancied that he thought, rather than spoke, the question.

‘Because, in the important sense, you are still a child,’ he caught the answer, ‘and always have been, and always will be.’

The whole world belonged to him. In the midst of the sea of sorrow he had discovered the little island of happiness.

‘We never can lose each other—now!’ he said.

‘As long as you think about me,’ she answered. ‘Please always think hard, veryhardindeed thoughts. Through the Crack you can find everything that’s lost——.’

‘And we’re through the Crack now.’

‘Rather!’

CHAPTER XXVII

... Straightway I was ’ware,

So weeping, how a mystic Shape did move

Behind me, and drew me backward by the hair;

And a voice said in mastery, while I strove,

‘Guess now who holds thee?’—‘Death,’ I said. But there

The silver answer rang—‘Not Death, but Love.’

E. B. B.

... It was only when the sky grew dark and the shadow of clouds fell over that sunny landscape that he realised he was still standing half dressed beside a dying fire, and that through the open window behind him the cold night air brought discomfort that made him shiver. He drew the curtains, lit a candle, spoke a soft word or two to the curled—up forms of Mrs. Tompkyns and Smoke, who were far too busy in their own Crack-land to trouble about replying, and so finally got into bed.

He felt happier, strangely comforted. The wings of memory and phantasy, withdrawing softly, left a soothed feeling in his heart. In that region of creative imagination known as the ‘Crack’ he always found peace and at least a measure of joy. Until sleep should come to captain his forces, he deliberately turned the current of his thoughts to the work he was about to take up in London. Nixie, Joan, Dick—all helped him. His will erected an iron barrier against the insidious attacks of

sadness—the disease which strikes at the roots of effort. He would dream his dreams, but also, he would do his work....

The shadows thickened about the house, crowding from the heart of winter. The fire died down. The room lay still. It was between one and two o'clock in the morning, when silence in the country is a real silence, and the darkness weighs. Chasing Smoke and Mrs. Tompkyns down the winding corridors of dream—Paul slept.

A faint sound in the room a little later made him stir in his sleep and smile. His lips moved, as though in that land of dreams where he wandered some one spoke to him and he answered. Then the sound was repeated, and he woke with a start, sat up in bed, and stared hard into the darkness.

The fire was quite out; nothing was visible but the dim frame of the window on his right where he had forgotten to draw the curtains. A glimmer of light revealed the sash. Thinking it must be the winter dawn, he was about to lie down again and resume his slumbers, when the sound that had first wakened him again made itself audible.

A slight shiver ran down his spine, for the sound seemed to bring over some of the wonder of his dreams into that dark and empty room. Then, with a tiny revelation of certainty, the knowledge came that he was wide awake, and that the sound was close in front of him. Moreover, he knew at once that it was neither Smoke nor Mrs. Tompkyns. It was a sound, deliberately produced, with conscious intelligence behind it. And it shot through him with the sweetness of music. It was like a breath of wind that rustled through a swinging branch—of a birch tree; as though such a branch waved to and fro softly above his head.

His first idea was that some one was in the room, and had taken down the spray of withered leaves from the wall; and he strained his eyes in the direction of the mantelpiece, trying to pierce the darkness. In vain, of course. All he could distinguish was that something moved gently to and fro like a spot of light—almost

like a fire-fly, yet white—about the room.

From some deep region of sleep where he had just been, the atmosphere of dream was still, perhaps, about him. Yet this was no dream. There was somebody in the room with him, somebody alive, somebody who wished to claim his attention—who had already spoken to him before he woke. He knew it unmistakably; he even remembered what had been said to him while yet asleep! ‘How can you go on sleeping when I am here, trying to get at you?’

It was just as if the words still trembled on the air. Confusedly, scarcely aware what he did, yet already thrilling with happiness, his lips formed an answer:

‘Who are you? What is it you want?’

There was a pause of intense silence, during which his heart hammered in his temples. Then a very faint whisper gathered through the darkness:

‘I promised....’

The point of light wavered a little in the air, then came low and seemed to settle on the end of the bed. Into the clear and silent spaces of his lonely soul there swam with it the presence of some one who had never died, and who could never die.

‘Is that you——?’ The name seemed incredible, for this was no Aventure through the Crack, yet he uttered it after an imperceptible moment of hesitation——‘Nixie?’

Even then he could not believe an answer would be forthcoming. The light, however, moved slightly, and again came the faint tones of a voice, a singing voice:

‘Of course it is!’ There was a curious suggestion of huge distance about it, as though it travelled like an echo across vast spaces. ‘I’m here, close beside you; closer than ever before.’

He heard the words with what can only be described as a spiritual sensation—the peace and gratitude that follow the passion of strong prayer, of prayer that believes it will be heard and answered.

‘You know now—don’t you?’ continued the tiny singing voice, ‘because I’ve told you.’

‘Yes,’ he answered, also very low, ‘I know now.’ For at first he could think of nothing else to say. A huge excitement moved in him. Those invisible links of pure aspiration by which the soul knits herself inwardly to God seemed suddenly tightened in the depths of his being. He understood that this was a true thing, and possible.

‘You’ve come back—like the trees in the spring,’ he whispered stammeringly, after another pause, gazing as steadily as he could at the point of clear light so close in front of him.

‘The real part of me,’ she explained; ‘the real part of me has come back.’

‘The real part,’ he echoed in his bewilderment. He began to understand.

But even then it all seemed too utterly strange and wonderful to be true; and a subtle confirmation of the child’s presence that followed immediately only added at first to his increasing amazement. For both Smoke and Mrs. Tompkyns, he became aware, had jumped up softly upon the foot of the bed, and were sitting there, purring loudly with pleasure, close beneath the fleck of light. And their action made him seek the further confirmation of his own senses. He leaned forwards, hesitating in his bewilderment between the desire to find the matches and the desire to touch the speaker with his hands.

But even in that darkness his intention was divined instantly. The light slid away like a wee torch carried on wings.

‘No, Uncle Paul,’ whispered the voice farther off, ‘not the matches. Light makes it more difficult for me.’ He sank back against the pillows, frightened at the reality of it all. The old familiar name, too, ‘Uncle Paul,’ was almost more than he could bear.

‘Nixie——!’ he stammered, and then found it impossible to finish the sentence.

Then she laughed. He heard her silvery laughter in the room, exactly as he had heard it a hundred times before, spontaneous, mischievous, and absolutely natural. She was amused at his perplexity, at his want of faith; at the absurd difficulty he found in believing. He lay quite still, breathing hard, wondering what would come next; still trying to persuade himself it was all a dream, yet growing gradually convinced in spite of himself that it was not.

‘And don’t come too near me,’ he heard her voice across the room. ‘Never try and touch me, I mean. Think of me at your centre. That’s the real way to get near.’

Very slowly then, after that, he began to accept the Supreme Aventure. He talked. He asked questions, though never the obvious and detailed sort of questions it might have been expected he would ask. For it was now borne in upon him, as she said, that only her real part had come back, and that only his real part, therefore, was in touch with her. It was, so to speak, a colloquy of souls in which physical and material things had no interest. His very first question brought the truth of this home to him with singular directness. He asked her what the tiny light was that he saw moving to and fro like a little torch.

‘But I didn’t know there was a light,’ she answered. ‘Where I am it is all light! I see you perfectly. Only—you look so young, Uncle Paul! Just like a boy! About my own age, I mean.’

And it is impossible to describe the delight, the mystical rapture that came to him as he heard her. The words, ‘Where I am it is all light,’ brought with them a sudden sense of reality that was too convincing for him to doubt any longer. From her simple description he recognised a place that he knew. But, at the same time, he understood that it was no place in the ordinary sense of the word, but rather a state and a condition. He himself in his deepest dreams had been there too. That light had sometimes in brief moments of aspiration shone for him. And the curious sense of immense distance that came so curiously with her tiny voice came because there was

really no distance at all. She was no longer conditioned by space or time. Those were limitations of life in the body, temporary scales of measurement adopted by the soul when dealing with temporary things. Whereas Nixie was free.

A sense of happiness deep as the sea, of peace, bliss, and perfect rest that could never know hurry or alarm, surged through him in a tide. He thought, with a thrill of anticipation, of the time when his own eyes would be opened, and he should see as clearly as she did. But instantly the rebuke came.

‘Oh! You must not think about that,’ she said with a laugh; ‘you have a lot to do first, a lot more aventures to go through!’

As she spoke the light slid nearer again and settled upon the foot of the bed. His thoughts were evidently the same as spoken words to her. She knew all that passed in his mind, the very feelings of his heart as well. This was indeed companionship and intimacy. He remembered how she had told him all about it in the Crack weeks ago, before he realised who she was, and before he knew her face to face. And at the same moment he noticed another curious detail of her presence, namely, that the little torch—for so he now called it to himself—in passing before the mirror produced no reflection in the glass. Yet, if his eyes could perceive it, there ought to have been a refraction from the mirror as well—a reflection! Did he then only perceive it with his interior vision? Was his spiritual sight already partially opened?

‘That’s your ’terpretation of me—inside yourself,’ he caught her swift whisper in reply, for again she heard his thought; and he almost laughed out aloud with pleasure to notice the long word decapitated as her habit always was on earth. ‘In your thoughts I’m a sort of light, you see.’

The explanation was delightful. He understood perfectly. The thought of Nixie had always come to him, even in earthly life, in the terms of brightness. And his love marvelled to notice, too, that she still had the old piercing vision into the heart of things, and the characteristically graphic way of expressing her meaning.

The purring of the cats made itself audible. They were both ‘kneading’ the bed-clothes by his feet, as happy as though being stroked.

‘No, they don’t see,’ she explained the moment the thought entered his mind; ‘they only feel that I’m here. Lots of animals are like that. It’s the way dogs know ’sti’ctively if a person’s good or bad.’

Oh, how the animals after this would knit him to her presence! No wonder he had already found comfort with them that no human being could give.... The thought of his sister flashed next into his brain—the difficulty of helping her——

‘I tried to get at her before I came here to you,’ he heard, ‘but her room was all dark. It was like trying to get inside a cloud. She’s cold and shadowy—and ever such a long way off. It’s difficult to explain.’

‘I think I understand,’ he whispered.

‘You can get closer than I can.’

‘I’ll try.’

‘Of course. You must.’

It was Nixie’s happiness that seemed so wonderful and splendid to him. Her voice almost sang; and laughter slipped in between the shortest sentences even. Brightness, music, and pure joy were about her like an atmosphere. He was breathing a rarefied air, cool, scented, and exhilarating. He had already known it when playing with the children and enjoying their very-wonderful-indeed aventures; only now it was raised to a still higher power. In its very essence he knew it.

‘Toby and Jonah are with me the moment they sleep,’ she continued, ever following his least thought. ‘The instant their bodies fold up they shoot across here to me. Toby comes easiest. She’s a girl, you see. And Daddy’s here too——’

‘Dick?’ he cried, memory and affection surging through him with a sudden passion.

‘Of course. You’ve thought about him so much. He says you’ve always been close

to each other——’

The voice broke off suddenly, and the torch of light moved to and fro as though agitated. Paul heard no sound, and saw no sign, but again, into the clear and silent spaces of his soul, now opened so marvellously, so blessedly to receive, there swam the consciousness of another Presence....

There was a long pause, while memory annihilated all the intervening years at a single stroke....

His mind was growing slightly confused with it all. His mortal intelligence wearied and faltered a little with the effort to understand how time and distance could be thus destroyed. He was not yet free as these others were free.

‘How is it, then, that you can stay?’ he asked presently, when the light held steady again. By ‘you’ he meant ‘both of you.’ Yet he did not say it. This was what seemed so wonderful in their perfect communion; words really were not necessary. Afterwards, indeed, he sometimes wondered whether he actually spoke at all.

‘I was going on—at first,’ came the soft answer, ‘when I heard something calling me, and found I couldn’t. I had something to do here.’

‘What?’ he ventured under his breath.

‘You!’ She laughed in his face, so to speak. ‘You, of course. Part of you is in me, so I couldn’t go on without you. But when you are ready, and have done your work, we’ll go on together. Daddy is waiting, too. Oh, it’s simply splendid—a very-splendid-indeed aventure, you see!’ Again she laughed through that darkened room till it seemed filled with white light, and the light flooded his very soul as he heard her.

‘You will wait, Nixie?’ he asked.

‘I must wait. Both of us must wait. We are all together, you see.’

And, after another long pause, he asked another question:

‘This work, then, that keeps me here——?’

‘Your London boys, of course. There’s no one in the whole world who can do it so well. You’ve been picked out for it; that’s what really brought you home from America!’ And she burst out into such a peal of laughter that Paul laughed with her. He simply couldn’t help himself. He felt like singing at the same time. It was all so happy and reasonable and perfect.

‘You’ve got the money and the time and the ’thusiasm,’ she went on; ‘and over here there are thousands and millions of children all watching you and clapping their hands and dancing for joy. I’ve told them all the Aventures you wrote, but they think this is the best of all—the London-Boys-Aventure!’

He felt his heart swell within him. It seemed that the child’s hair was again about his eyes, her slender arms clasping his neck, and her blue eyes peering into his as when she begged him of old in the nursery or schoolroom for an aventure, a story.

‘So you’ll never give it up, will you, Uncle Paul?’ she sang, in that tiny soft voice through the darkness.

‘Never,’ he said.

‘Promise?’

‘Promise,’ he replied.

The thought of those ‘thousands and millions’ of children watching his work from the other side of death was one that would come back to strengthen him in the future hours of discouragement that he was sure to know.

And much more she told him besides. They talked, it seemed, for ever—yet said so little. Into mere moments—such was the swift and concentrated nature of their intimacy—they compressed hours of earthly conversation; for his thoughts were heard and answered as soon as born within him, and a whole train of ideas that the lips ordinarily stammer over in difficult detail crowded easily into a single

expression—a thought, a desire, a question half uttered, and then a reply that comprehended all. There was no labour or weariness, no sense of effort.

Moreover, when at length he heard her faint whisper, ‘Now I must go,’ it conveyed no sense of departure or loss. She did not leave him. It was more as though he closed a much-loved book and replaced it in his pocket. The pictures evoked do not leave the mind because the cover is closed; they remain, on the contrary, to be absorbed by the heart. Nixie’s silvery presence was in him; he would always feel her now, even when his thoughts seemed busy with outer activities.

The little torch flickered and was gone; but as Paul gazed into the darkness of the room he knew that the light had merely slipped down deep into himself to burn as an unfailing beacon at the centre of his soul. And then it was that he realised other curious details for the first time. Some of the more ordinary faculties of his mind, it seemed, had been in suspension during the amazing experience, while others had been exalted as in trance. For it now came to him that he had actually seen her—with a clearness that he had never known before. That torch lit up her little form as a lantern lights up a person holding it in darkness. Just as he had felt all the sweet and essential points of her personality, so also he had been vividly aware of her figure in the terms of sight—eyes, hair, sunburned little hands, and twinkling feet. Her very breath and perfume even!

If the working of his ordinary senses had been in abeyance so that he hardly knew the hunger for common sight and touch, he now realised that it was because they had been replaced by these higher senses with their keener, closer satisfaction. And this intimate knowledge of her was as superior to the ordinary methods as flying is to crawling—or, better still, as a draught of water in the throat is to dipping the fingers in the cup.

For who, indeed, shall define the standard of reality? And who, when the senses are such sorry reporters, shall declare with authority that one thing is false and could not

happen, and another is true and actually did happen?

Experiences of the transcendental order are, perhaps, beyond the power of precise words to describe, for they are not common enough to have become incorporated into the language of a race. And words are clumsy and inadequate symbols at best. The deepest thoughts, as the deepest experiences, ever evade them. It is difficult to convey the sense of fierce reality the presence of Nixie brought to him. It flooded and covered him; spread through and over him like light; entered into his essential being to cherish and to feed, just as the body assimilates earthly nourishment. He absorbed her. She nourished while she blessed him.

She had told him the secret: to think centrally. He now began to understand how much nearer he could be to others by thinking strongly of them than by walking at their side. Physical touch is distant compared to the subtle intimacy of the desiring mind. The mystical conception of union with God came home to him as something practically possible.

Yet when he got up a few minutes later to write down the conversation as he remembered it, the mere lighting of the candle, the noise of the match, the dipping of his pen in the ink—all contrived somehow to bring him down to a lower order of things that dimmed most strangely the memory of what had just passed. Most of what he had heard escaped him. He could not frame it into words. All he could recapture is what has been here set down so briefly and baldly.

It then seemed to him—the thought laboured to and fro in his mind as he got back into bed and sleep came over him—that it was only the Higher Self in him that had been in communication with the child. The eternal part of him had talked with the eternal part of her. In the body, however, this was commonly submerged. Her presence had temporarily evoked it. It now had returned to its Throne at the core of his being.

All that he remembered of the colloquy was the little portion that, as it were, had

filtered through into his normal self. The rest, the main part, however, was not lost. He had absorbed it. If he could not recall the actual words and language, he understood—it was his last thought before sleep caught him—that its results would remain for ever.

And those who have known similar experiences will understand without more words. The rest will never understand. Perhaps, after all, the best and purest form of memory is—results.

CHAPTER XXVIII

... Ne son già morto; e ben ch’ albergo cangi,

resto in te vivo, ch’ or mi vedi e piangi,

se l’ un nell’altro amante si trasforma.

And one of the clearest impressions that remained next morning when he woke was that he had actually seen her. The reality of it increased with the daylight instead of faded. While he dressed he sang to himself, until it occurred to him that his signs of joy might be misunderstood by any of the household who heard; and then he stopped singing and moved about the room, smiling and contented.

Something of the radiance of that little white torch still seemed in the air. The heavy gloom of the chill December morning could not smother it. Something of it remained too about him all day like a halo; looking out of his eyes; communicable, as it were, from the very surface of his skin to all with whom he came in contact. His sister, especially, and the children felt the comfort of his presence. They followed him about from room to room; they clung close; they were instinctively aware that peace and strength emanated from him, though little guessing the real source of his serene and tranquil atmosphere.

For, of course, he told no one of what had happened. During the day, indeed, it lay

in him submerged and unassertive, like the presence of some great glowing secret, feeding the sources of energy for all his little outward duties and activities, yet never claiming individual attention itself. Only with the fall of night, when the doings of the day were instinctively laid aside like a garment no longer required, did it again swim up upon him out of the depths, and speak.

‘Now!’ he heard the tiny singing voice, ‘we can be alone. Your body’s tired. I can get closer to you.’

‘I’ve felt you by me all day, though,’ he said, as though it were the most natural thing in the world.

‘Of course,’ came the answering whisper, soft as moonlight, ‘because I never left you for a single moment. I was in everything you did—in your very words. Once or twice, I even got into mother too, through you, and made her feel better. Wasn’t that splendid?’

Paul longed to give the child one of his old hugs—to feel her little warm and sunny body pressed against his own. Instead, her laughter echoed suddenly all about the room.

‘That’s impossible now!’ he heard. ‘I’m ever so much closer this way. You’ll soon get used to it, you know!’

This spontaneous laughter was the music to which all their talks were set. He laughed too, and blew the candles out.

‘I tried very hard to say the true things,’ he murmured, referring to her remark about comforting his sister.

‘I know you did. That’s how I got into her—through you. You must go on and on trying. In the end we’ll get her all soft and happy again. She’ll feel me without knowing it.’

Suddenly it struck him that, although the room was dark, he did not see the light of

the little torch as before. He missed it. He was just going to ask why it was absent when the child caught his thought and replied of her own accord:

‘Because it’s spread all over now, instead of being just a point. You are in it, I mean. There’s light everywhere about you now, and I see you much clearer than last time.’

The explanation described exactly what he felt himself.

‘Let them in, please,’ Nixie suddenly interrupted his thoughts again. ‘They’re both coming up the stairs. It was very naughty of you to forget them, you know.’

After a moment of puzzled hesitation he understood what she meant, and was out of bed and across the floor. He did not wait to light a candle, but opened the door and stood there waiting in the darkness. Almost at once two soft, furry things brushed past his feet as Smoke, followed by Mrs. Tompkyns, marched into the room, uttering that curious sharp sound of pleasure which is something between a purr and a cry. They disappeared among the shadows beyond the fireplace, and Paul sprang back into bed again pleased that they were there, yet annoyed with himself for having forgotten them.

‘But it was my fault really,’ she laughed. ‘I’ve been with them out in the garden, and they’ve only just got in through the pantry window. My presence excites them awfully. Oh, it’s all right,’ she added quickly, in reply to his further thought; ‘Barker’s very late to-night doing the silver. But he’ll shut the window before he goes.’

It was his turn to laugh. She had caught his thought about the window almost before it reached the surface of his mind. Moreover, he found that both Mrs. Tompkyns and Smoke had very cold wet soles under their padded little feet.

In this way, most strangely, sweetly, naturally, even the trivial details of their daily life as they had always known it together, intermingled with the talk that was often very earnest, mystical, and pregnant with meanings. It was in every sense a continuation of their former relationship, touched on her side with a greater

knowledge—almost as though she had suddenly developed to the point she might have reached in time upon the earth; on his side, with a delicate sense of accepting guidance from some one with greater privileges than himself, who had come back on purpose to help and inspire him.

For more and more it seemed to partake of the nature of genuine inspiration. Speech came direct and swift as thought, without hesitation or stammering as in the flesh. She told him many things, often quaintly enough expressed, but that yet seemed to hold the kernel of deep truths. There had never been the least break in their companionship, it seemed.

‘I knew all this before,’ she said, after a singular exchange of questions and answers about the nature of communion with invisible sources of mood and feeling, ‘only I suppose my brain had not got big enough, or whatever it was, to tell it. Like your poets you used to tell me about who couldn’t find their rhymes, perhaps.’

And her laughter flowed about him in a rippling flood that instantly woke his own. They always laughed. They felt so happy. It was a communion between old souls that surely had bathed deeply in the experiences of life before they had become imprisoned in the particular bodies known as Paul Rivers and Margaret Christina Messenger.

He became convinced, too, more and more that she really did not speak at all—that no actual sound set the waves of air in motion—but that she put her words into him in the form of thoughts, and that he it was, in order to grasp them clearly, who clothed them with the symbols of sound and language. It was essentially of the nature of inspiration. She blew the ideas into his heart and mind.

And many things that he asked her were undoubtedly little more than his own thoughts, half-formed and vague, lying in the depths of him.

‘Then, over there, where you now are, is it—more real? Are you, as it were, one stage nearer to the great Reality? What’s it like——?’

‘It’s through the real “Crack,” I think,’ she answered. ‘Everything is here that I imagined—but really imagined—on earth. And people who imagined nothing, or wanted only the world, find very little here.’

‘Then is the change very great——?’

‘It doesn’t seem to me like a change at all. I’ve been here before for visits. Now I’ve come to stay, that’s all!’

‘You yourself have not changed?’

She roared with laughter, till he felt that his question was really absurd.

‘Of course not! How can I change? I’m always Nixie, wherever I am!’

‘But you feel different——?’ he insisted.

‘I feel better,’ she answered, still laughing. ‘I feel awfully jolly.’

Then after a long pause he asked another question. It was really a question he was always asking in one form or another, only he had never yet put it so directly perhaps. He whispered it from a grave and solemn heart:

‘Are you nearer to—God, do you think?’

It was a word he rarely used. In his conversations with the child on earth he had never once used it. She waited a long time before replying. Instinctively, very subtly, it came to him that she did not know exactly what he meant.

‘I’m in and with Everything there is—Everywhere,’ she said softly. ‘And I couldn’t possibly be nearer to anything than I am.’

More than that she could not explain, and Paul never asked similar questions again. He understood that they were really unanswerable.

And it was the same with other thoughts, thoughts referring to the fundamental conditions of temporal existence, that is. Nothing, for instance, made time and space seem less real than the way she answered questions involving one or other. Out of curiosity he had gone to the trouble of reading up other records of spirit

communion—the literature (saving the mark) of Spiritualism brims over with them—and he had asked her some question with regard to the detailed geography there given.

'But there's no place at all where I am,' the child laughed. 'I am just here. There was no place really in our Aventures, was there? Place is only with you on earth!'

And another time, talking of the 'future' when he should come to join herself and Dick at the close of his earthly pilgrimage, she said between bursts of the merriest laughter he had ever known: 'But that's now! already! You come; you join us; we are all together—always!'

And when he insisted that he could not possibly be in two places at once, and reminded her that she had already told him she was 'waiting' for his arrival, the only reply he could get was this jolly laughter, and the assurance that he was 'awfully muddled and c'fused' and would 'never understand it that way!'

The main thing these 'silent' conversations taught him seemed to be that Death brings no revolutionary change as regards character; the soul does not leap into a state much better or much worse than it knew before; the opportunities for discipline and development continue gradually just as they did in the body, only under different conditions; and there is no abrupt change into perfection on the one hand, or into desolation on the other. He gathered, too, that these 'conditions' depended very largely upon the kind of life—especially the kind of thought—that the personality had indulged on earth. The things that Nixie 'imagined' and yearned for, she found.

His communion with her became, as time passed, more frequent and more real, and soon ceased to confine itself only to the quiet night hours. She was with him all day long, whenever he needed her. She guided him in a thousand unimportant details of his life, as well as in the bigger interests of his work in London with his waifs. And in murky London she was just as close to him as in the perfumed stillness of the

Dorsetshire garden, or in the retirement of his own chamber....

And one singular feature of their alliance was that it continued even in sleep. For, sometimes, he would wake in the morning after what had been apparently a dreamless night, yet later in the day there would steal over him the memory of a long talk he had enjoyed with the child during the hours of so-called unconsciousness. Dreams, forgotten in the morning, often, of course, return in this fashion during the day. There is nothing new or unusual in it. Only with him it became so frequent that he now rose to the day's work with a delightful sense of anticipation: 'Perhaps later in the day I shall remember! Perhaps we have been together all night!'

And in this connection he came to notice two things: first, that after these nights together, at first forgotten, he woke wonderfully refreshed, blessed, peaceful in mind and body; and secondly, that what recalled the conversation later was always contact with some object or other that had been associated with the child. Thus—the picturesquely-mended socks, the medicine bottle for scratches, or the spray of birch leaves, now preserved between the pages of his Blake, never failed in this latter respect.

It was curious, too, how the alliance persisted and fortified itself during the repose of the body; as though, during sleep, the eternal portion of himself with which the child communed, enjoyed a greater measure of freedom. It recalled the closing lines of a sonnet he had always admired, though his own experience was true in a literal sense hardly contained, probably, in the heart of the poetess:

But when sleep comes to close each difficult day,

When night gives pause to the long watch I keep,

And all my bonds I needs must loose apart,

Must doff my will as raiment laid away—

With the first dream that comes with the first sleep

I run, I run, I am gathered to thy heart.

He filled a book with these talks as the years passed, though to give them in more detail could serve little purpose but to satisfy a possible curiosity. They had value and authority for himself, but for the majority might seem to contain little sense, or even coherence. They expressed, of course, his own personal interpretation of life and the universe. And this was quite possibly poetic, queer, fantastic—for others. Yet it was his own. He had learned his own values in his own way, and was now engaged in sorting them out with Nixie's fairy help to guide him.

And all souls that find themselves probably do likewise. The strength and blessing they shed about them as a result is beneficial, but the close details of the process by which they have 'arrived' can only seem to the world at large unintelligible, possibly even ridiculous; and this late interior blossoming of Uncle Paul, though it actually happened, must seem to many a tissue of dreams knit together with a strange fantastic nonsense.

CHAPTER XXIX

Donnez vos yeux, donnez vos mains,

Donnez vos mains surnaturelles;

Pour me conduire aux lendemains

Donnez vos yeux, donnez vos mains,

Vos mains comme deux roses frêles.

And thus, as the region where he met and held communion with the freed child seemed to draw deeper and deeper into his interior being, the reality and value of the experience increased.

That there was some kind of definite external link, however, was equally true; for the cats, as well as certain other of the animals, most certainly were aware

sometimes of her presence. They showed it in many and curious ways. But it was distinctly a shock to Paul to learn one day from his sister that queer stories were afoot concerning himself; that some of the simple country folk declared they had seen ‘Mr Rivers walking with a young lady that was jest like Miss Nixie, only taller,’ who disappeared, however, the moment the observer approached. And the way the household felt her presence was, perhaps, not less remarkable, for more than one of the servants gave notice because the house had become ‘haunted,’ and there had been seen a ‘smallish white figure, all shiny and dancing,’ in his bedroom, or going down the corridor towards his study.

Perhaps the glamour of his vivid creative thought had cast its effect upon these untrained imaginations, so that his vision was temporarily communicated to them too. Or, perhaps, they had actually seen what they described. But, whatever the explanation may be, the effect upon himself was to increase, if that were possible, the reality of the whole occurrence....

And when the spring came round again with its charged memories of perfume, and sight, and the singing of its happy winds; when the tree-spirits returned to their garden haunts, all flaming with the beauty of new dresses gathered over-seas; when the silver birch tree combed out her glittering hair to the sun and shook her leaves in the very face of that old pine tree—then Paul felt in himself, too, the rejuvenation that was going forward in all the world around him. He tasted in his heart all the regenerative forces that were bursting into form and energy with the spring, and knew that the pain and desolation he had felt temporarily in the winter were only spiritual growing-pains and the passing distress of a soul forging its way outwards through development to the best possible Expression it could achieve.

For Nixie came back, too, gay and glorious like the rest of the world—sometimes dressed in blossoms of lilac or laburnum, sometimes with skirts of daisies and feet resting upon the Little Winds, sometimes with the soft hood of darkness over her

head, the cloak of night about her shoulders, the stars caught all shivering in her hair, and dusk in the deeps of her eyes....

His life became ‘inner’ in the best sense—a Life within a Life; not given over to useless dreaming, but ever drawing from the inner one the sustenance that provided the driving force for the outer one: the mystic as man of action!

The Wind of Inspiration blew for him now always, and steadily; but it was no longer the little wind that stirred the measure of his personal emotion into stammering verse, but the big, eternal wind that ‘blew the stars to flame,’ and at the same time impelled him irresistibly along the path of High A’venture to the loss of Self in work for others....

‘Then why is it we are in the body—and spend so much time there?’ he asked in one of those intimate and mysterious conversations he held with the child to the very end of his life. ‘Why need the soul descend to such clumsy confinings?’

For their talk was very close now about ‘real things,’ and neither found any difficulty in the words of question or answer.

‘To get experience that can only be got through the pains of limitation,’ the answer sang within him, as he lay there upon the lawn beneath the cedars, absorbing the spring beauty. ‘Everything is doing the same thing everywhere—from Smoke, Mrs. Tompkyns and Madmerzelle, right up to you, me, Daddy, and the waifs! They all have a bit of Reality in them working upwards to God. Even stones and plants and trees are learning experiences they could learn only in those particular forms—’

‘I know it! Of course, I know it!’ Paul interrupted, with a rush of joy in his heart he could not restrain; ‘but go on and tell me more, for I love to hear your little voice say it all.’

‘It’s only, perhaps, that the stones are learning patience and endurance; the flowers sweetness; the trees strength and comfort; and the rivers joy. Later they change about, so that in the end each ‘Bit of Reality’ has gathered all possible experiences

in nature before it passes on into men and women.

‘Think, Uncle Paul, of the joy of a stone, who after centuries of patience and endurance, cramped and pressed down, knows suddenly the freedom of wind and sea! Of the restlessness of flame that, after ages of leaping unsatisfied to the sky, learns the repose of a tree, moved only by the outside forces of wind and rain! And think of the delight of all these when they pass still further upwards and reach the stage of consciousness in animals and men—and in time enter the region of development where I—where you and I, and all we knew and loved, continue together, ever climbing, fighting, learning——’

It was curious. Afterwards he could never remember the way she ended the sentence. For the life of him he could not write it down. Definite recollection failed him, together with the loss of the actual words. Only the general sense remained in such a way as to open to his inner eye a huge vista of spiritual endeavour and advance that left him breathless and dizzy when he contemplated it, but at the same time charged most splendidly with courage and with hope.

‘Then the pains of limitation,’ he remembered asking, ‘the anguish of impossible yearnings that vainly seek expression—these are symptoms of growth that in the end may produce something higher and nobler?’

‘Must!’ he heard the answer amid a burst of happy laughter, as though from where she stood it were possible to look back upon earthly pangs and see them in the terms of joy; ‘just like any other suffering! Like the stress of heat and pressure that turns common clay into gems——’

He interrupted her swiftly, high hopes crowding through his spirit like the rush of an army.

‘Then the life in us all—the “Bits of Reality” in you and me—have passed through all possible forms in their huge upward journey to reach our present stage——?’ He stammered amid a multitude of golden memories, half captured.

‘Of course, Uncle Paul, of course!’ he caught deep, deep within him the silvery faint reply. ‘And your love and sympathy with trees, winds, hills, with all Nature, even with animals’—again her laughter ran out to him like a song—‘is because you passed long ago through them all, and half remember. You still feel with them, and your imagination for ever strives to reconstruct the various beauty known in each stage. You remember in the depths of you the longings of every particular degree—even of the time when your soul was less advanced, and groping upwards as your London waifs grope even now. This is why your sympathy with them, too, is deep and true. You half remember.’

‘And Death,’ he whispered, trembling with the joy of infinite spiritual desire.

The answer sank down into him with the Little Wind that stirred the cedars overhead, or else rose singing up from the uttermost depths of his listening heart—to the end of his days he never could tell which.

‘What you call Death is only slipping through the Crack to a great deal more memory, and a great deal more power of seeing and telling—towards the greatest Expression that ever can be known. It is, I promise you faithfully, Uncle Paul, nothing but a very-wonderfulindeed Aventure, after all!’

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TRANSCRIBER’S NOTES

Silently corrected obvious typographical errors and variations in spelling. Retained archaic, non-standard, and uncertain spellings as printed.

*** END OF THE PROJECT GUTENBERG EBOOK THE EDUCATION OF UNCLE PAUL ***

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