HEAVEN LIES ABOUT US

by

HOWARD SPRING

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novels

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RACHEL ROSING
O ABSALOM!

for children

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criticism

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HEAVEN LIES ABOUT US

A FRAGMENT OF INFANCY

HOWARD SPRING

with drawings by
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Without permission, but with
sincere affection, to S. C. Fox
a mentor of my infancy

It all happened like this, but most
of the names have been changed

HEAVEN LIES ABOUT US

WHEN you told a boy you'd meet him at Joe Andrew's Stone, he knew well enough what you meant; for to us the Stone was a landmark as geographically important as the Cape or the Horn to more distant wanderers.

Our street was short, but nevertheless it was cleft in twain by another street that ran across it. Standing at the cross-road, looking to one end of our street and then to the other, you would see little to choose. The houses were identical. Each one of them contained a sitting-room, a kitchen and a scullery downstairs, a stairway that ran up between walls with no bannister or rail, and two bedrooms.

At each end of the street you would see a high wall, closing the uninspiring view, so that whether, coming into the street from the cross-road, you turned right or left, you were in a dead end.

Nothing to choose then, looking from the cross-road. Yet in our end of the street the other end was always spoken of as The Other End. We understood, yet knew not why we understood, that The Other End was nefarious and evil. "Don't go down The Other End" my mother would say; and I remember as one of the queer facts of childhood that, for all the years I lived in the street, not once did I go down The Other End.

Joe Andrew's public house stood at the intersection of the roads; and in a corner of the wall was the tar-blackened buttress that was Joe Andrew's Stone. The fathers of the street met in Joe Andrew's bright bar; the boys consorted each night at the Stone.

Thence we ranged on our simple pleasures. It was unfortunate for Mr. Hann that every time the door of his corner shop was opened a bell rang. He would come from the parlour behind the shop, rubbing his hands in his apron in expectation of some such petty sale as his miserable stock permitted, and find a grinning row of young fiends chanting:

Hann, Hann,
Catch us if you can.

He would fling up the flap of the counter and plunge spasmodically towards us, only to find that his quarry had disappeared into the dark lane that ran behind our street with the electric speed of a shoal of minnows among whom a stone has been dropped.

But Hann was a tactician ever alert to devise new methods of outwitting his tormentors. His first essay at counter-measures was a long cane, concealed behind the row of glass jars that shone with all the delectable and deceptive colours of cheap confectionery. Emerging from the parlour one night, he feigned a dull stupidity as he stared at ten dancing impudent eyes set in five impertinent faces; then with lightning speed grabbed the cane, threw his body across the counter, and slashed.

It taught us caution; we hovered nearer the door next night, more swiftly poised for flight. Alas! that it did not suggest something of the cunning of our enemy. For not long after that, no sooner did the bell ring and we stand there gazing with unholy rapture at the lighted panes of the parlour door, than Hann leapt from concealment behind a parapet of sacks loaded to their chins with split peas and potatoes; and there for the first time in our experience was the baited bear plumb among the terriers. He seized me in a grip of iron, bent me in one masterly stroke across his knee, and with a flat brush, designed for the sweeping of carpets but alas! not ill-adapted to more lethal ends, proceeded to demonstrate the inadequacy of my trousers.

Perhaps it was this revelation of Hann’s readiness to meet enterprise with craft, that turned our thoughts for much of that winter to the safer delights of Rap-tap-ginger. A game simple enough, God knows, consisting, in its crude and inartistic form, of merely banging on the neighbours’ knockers and crying Rap-tap-ginger as you fled from the wrath to come.

It was Joe Blain, ever an alert and enterprising mind, who raised this horse-play to the status of an eerie art. A neighbouring street was well designed to meet the needs of the case, for the houses on one side of the street were flat to the pavement, while on the other side were niggardly yards of blackened earth where privets pushed an untidy growth against the rails.

A piece of blackened string was fastened to a knocker, the string was carried to our ambush behind the privets, and a pull set the knocker at work. Again and again some wretched householder was drawn from the peace and comfort of his fireside; and we, trembling behind the privets, savoured to the full a deep conviction that that householder must sooner or later attribute the knockings to a ghostly agency.

Running Round the Block was another joy of winter nights, the competitors starting from the same point and running in opposite directions. We had paced the track and marked with white chalk the half-way point; and what horror it was to find that your opponent was past the point—five, ten or fifteen yards—before you reached it! How, then, your heart pumped, and you urged your feet, cased in heavy hob-nailed boots, to a tremendous endeavour! Awful those moments of isolation, not seeing your flying foe, but knowing that not far away he, too, was panting his young heart out, bent on adding insolence to victory by running out to meet you!

But perhaps our greatest joy was that which depended on awful and grisly provision. Not far away was the slaughter-house, to which, in defiance of all rules and orders, we would often creep in, drawn by the repulsion of its dreadful sights and sounds and smells. In our street there lived a man who gained his living in that shambles, and we would waylay his homeward march and beg the boon of a pig's bladder.

He was an apparition from Hell, a little shambling man with a squint, whose clothes and hands were always imbrued with blood. I could never see him without a shudder; but he was kind enough, and always our petition would be granted. Taking a bloody mess from his pocket, he would throw it to us, and there were, fortunately, boys who, with no qualms at all, would blow it up; and then the game would be on.

Playing football with a pig's bladder, enclosed in no leather case, is an exercise fit for fairies, and goodness knows there were no fairies among us. The game soon ended either with the bursting of the ball or with a shrill cry of "Creeping Jesus!"

I do not know why the sergeant of police had received that name, though the adjective was appropriate. One moment he was not; and the next, lo! in all his panoply he was materalising in the misty winter night. I have at this distance of time no difficulty in supposing that he was a simple and humane being; but then his mere appearance convinced us all of unimaginable guilt, and, taking to our heels, we would run till he was out of sight, and then steal home by the darkest and most devious ways. No citizen as law-abiding as myself has fled the officers of the law through so many terror-stricken miles.

§ §

Terror is a dreadful companion once you have admitted him to your heart. From the start, there was terror for me in our street. The Other End held terrors unguessed. The women sitting on their doorsteps in the hot summer nights might have been hags from Hell; the men, with their cruelly-buckled leather belts, lounging towards Joe Andrew's pub, looked fierce and inimical; and old Pheney who lived opposite to us, and set out every morning with a great basket of crockery on his head to cry his wares about the streets, seemed always to me a presence to be peculiarly dreaded. Never once in my young life did I speak a word to old Pheney, or he to me; yet it would not have surprised me had he suddenly swooped upon me and subjected me to diabolic torture.

And this is how the Terror came to me. I do not know how old I was when we went to the street, but I must have been five or six. We shifted, as poor people do, with the aid of a handcart. My father carted such furniture as there was from the old house to the new one in a series of journeys, and on one of those journeys he took me and my brother with him. He took us into the kitchen, and sat us side by side on his old wooden armchair. Then he left us, and went away for another cartload.

It was wintertime, and the night was coming on. We were alone in that strange dark house. A glimmer of fire burned in the grate on our right; in front of us was an uncurtained window, giving upon blackness. The stairs in that house always creaked. They creaked of their own accord without anyone setting foot upon them. They creaked that night. We sat there, two babes in the wood of Terror, clutching one another, speaking no word, looking at the dark window and listening to the stairs creaking.

Then through the night there boomed suddenly the sound of a great drum beating. Loud voices were upraised singing "The Lamb, the Lamb, the bleeding Lamb," and upon them all burst a greater voice that shrieked through the night "The Blood!"

Still we spoke no word. We sat and trembled in that forlorn and empty house, and listened to the voice crying "The Blood!"

We soon got to know it as a regular performance: that arrival of the Salvation Army outside Joe Andrew's pub, the rush from the bar of Mrs. Murphy, the street's most notorious drunkard. The singing of the hymns converted her every time she heard them; crying upon the Blood she would

rush forth, join the singers, march with them to their barracks, and be at Joe's again the next night.

So the Terror came to the street. Always to me the house in some sort was haunted. Sleepless, I would listen to the stairs creaking below me; to the thudding of the drum, to the cries upon the Blood; and to these were added now and then the shrieks of beaten women, the commotion of the arriving police; and then, when everything else was quiet, again the stairs would creak as though impalpable beings had weight and were ascending and descending.

§ §

For years, on Sunday nights, we sat around the fire and read. My father sat in his armchair on the right. My mother sat facing him in a low rocking chair. Between them was a long wooden backless bench on which we all sat: my sisters, my brother and I.

It was cosy enough in the kitchen then. There was a lamp hanging to a nail in the wall: a tin lamp, a glass chimney with no shade, a reflector of polished tin. We read *The Pilgrim's Progress* and *Robinson Crusoe*, and many another good book, because my father abhorred rubbish. He would read a little; then, one by one, the children would take their turns. If we mispronounced a word once, he would correct us irritably; if twice, he would clout us across the head. So we became acquainted with wholesome English.

He was an irritable man. I can remember only one occasion when I was conscious, in the fullest sense, of enjoying his company. I was a child just recovered from the only serious illness I have had in my life. I had been in bed for a long time, and my life was despaired of. I lived in a little cottonwool jacket, and a Queen Victoria nurse came in every day. One of the boys whom I was accustomed to meet at the Stone sent me a present. It was a minnow in a Rose's lime juice cordial bottle—one of those absurdly long bottles with a neck-opening no wider round than a shilling. But there the minnow was in the bottle beside my bed to remind me of streams and fields. I do not think that to this day a more thoughtful gift has been made to me.

I recovered; and I recall walking on thin tottery legs, very slowly, in the street, holding my father's hand. He met a neighbour, and even now I can hear him say: "You see, he's better," and feel again the thrill that filled my heart at the swift consciousness that he was *glad* I was better, that I meant something to the silent, aloof and enigmatic being who was my father.

His trade was that of a man who did such jobs as he could get in gardens. He had a printed card which set forth in terms worthy of a Micawber the multiplicity of his qualifications. He was—on this card—first and foremost, a landscape gardener, by which, no doubt, he meant that if the Duke of Devonshire had offered him the overlordship of Chatsworth he would with serene confidence have done with the job what he could. From that peak he descended to the plain of a straightforward offer to make asphalt paths, supply gravel, design and lay out gardens or tend them and to provide turf in any quantity.

In practice, it came to little more than such jobs as any labourer might do; and long after he was dead my mother told me that, taking one week with another, he supplied her with about a pound a week throughout their married life. Nine children were born of the marriage; seven grew to manhood and womanhood.

He was very proud of his tools and was for ever oiling their shafts and polishing the blades which all too often were not shining from use. He had a branding iron with which he would burn his name into all he possessed; not only on to the shafts of tools but on to the legs of tables, the bench we sat on for the readings, and all sorts of other improbable places.

I recall a night when there was gladness because, after being out of work for a long time, he had some shabby little job to start on the morrow. He made great play of assembling spade and rake, turf-cutting iron, a huge pounding weapon which he himself had fabricated from a block of teak, and much else. A neighbour came in then, asking the loan of a spade for a friend who, also, had been fortunate enough to find some work in a garden. My father heaped all his tools into the man's arms. "Give him these," he said.

And when, the man being gone, my mother protested, he made no answer, which was his front to all complaints, but, smoking his clay pipe as silently as an Indian, sulked in his chair.

"God help us," said my mother. "You'll be the ruin of us all."

§ §

Many a day I spent with him in gardens or in the fields where he cut his turf. We would take our dinner with us, and tea and sugar in a tin can whose lid was used as a cup. When the time for the meal came, I would be sent to the nearest house to ask for hot water "for the gardener." Never did anyone refuse, though we had no claim upon them.

With a tool which he called a half-moon he would cut down through the turf, drawing long parallel lines, then slice lines crosswise, till the whole area was marked out in long oblongs of about one foot by three. Then he would use the tool which slid beneath the turf, loosening it from the chocolate-brown earth; and it was my job to roll the turfs then till they were like big Swiss rolls, and pile them side by side. He promised me again and again that he would pay me a penny a hundred; but never a penny did I get. He must have had few enough pennies for himself; and with such as he had he would visit the second-hand bookstalls in the market, bringing home for himself, perhaps, some such book as the battered version of *Paradise Lost*—the only one of his books which I still possess—and for us a *Swiss Family Robinson* or *Tom Jones*.

Save for the occasions of the readings, he was taciturn, morose, and reserved, rarely stirring from his fireside chair in the kitchen, where he wrapped himself in aloofness and tobacco smoke. Never, I should think, was there a family which knew less about its own father. My mother told me that even to her he had never spoken a word concerning himself, save to tell her that, as a boy, he ran away from his home in County Cork.

Because I knew so little of him, and because, even when I accompanied him, I was in no sense with him, I recall the more vividly a Sunday walk when the barrier came near to obliteration. We stood on the top of a hilly field, with young spring woods greening on the right hand and the left. There were cowslips growing in the field and a stream at its foot where kingcups floated their golden saucers upon the water. The whole day was full of bird-song and the quavering cries of lambs. I remember how my father stood there on the top of the hilly field, bare-headed, holding my hand; and when I looked up into his face I saw with a shock that there were tears behind his eyes. Brusquely then he urged me down the field to where, at the bottom, a man was turning the handle of a turnip-cutting machine. He and my father talked of the weather and this and that, as strangers will, while I munched a long finger of turnip.

It cannot have been long after that that he died. My brother and I were taken in to see him lying in his coffin; and when we were in bed that night we fell to arguing about the number of small pearl buttons that had fastened

the top of the shroud. We crept out of bed and into his room to settle the matter.

After the funeral, I walked out to Fairwater to collect the wages due for the last job he had done. We could not afford to let those few shillings slide; and week after week thereafter I called every Saturday at a small grocer's shop to pay something off the bill. We began to get straight as soon as he was gone. God rest his soul! He was a lonely and unhappy man.

§ §

There were many ways of adding small sums to a family's income. Joe Blain, who brought ghostly complication to the simple game of Rap-tap-ginger, had a handcart made of a box fixed to the wheels of a perambulator. On the side he had painted

J. BLAIN
Dealer in White Rats
and
Old Iron.

Joe had discovered the fecundity of rats and the irresistibility of the pink eyes that looked out over the soft pointed snouts. Any boy who coveted one of Joe's rats had to pay heavily in junk: any sort of old iron, jam jars, rags, bones or bottles. These he conveyed in his handcart to the marine-store dealer's.

We, lacking his imagination and enterprise, acted on the simple commercial principle of buying a thing and then selling it for more than it had cost. Behind the high wall which made our end of the street a *cul de sac* there was a sawyer's yard, presided over by a patriarchal man whose flowing beard was always powdered with sawdust. It was a good place to visit, that woodyard, with its rich resinous scents, its chugging steam-engine, its whining circular saw, and its good-natured old proprietor who was always willing to give sawdust for nothing to boys who owned rats, mice or rabbits.

His son, who ran the engine, was something of a celebrity with us because once, taking the saw in his father's absence, he had sliced one of his fingers clean off.

There we bought wood: planks sawn into pieces that were approximately a foot square. Our only contribution to increasing their value consisted in chopping each piece into a dozen sticks and tying the sticks into bundles.

There was always a perambulator knocking about the house, and that made a good enough hawker's cart. From door to door in the better-class streets that were not far away we would hawk our firewood and add about fifty per cent. to the capital invested in the enterprise.

Rhubarb, in its season, was another line of ours, and one that I preferred, because it meant an early call at the market gardens where everything smelt fresh and dewy. To sell rhubarb, you had to be an early bird—earlier than the orthodox greengrocers who came about the streets with their carts. So we would go to the gardens before breakfast, and we were always told to pull our own supplies. That was an agreeable thing to do, sinking your hands deep amid the wet lush leaves and pulling at the stalks that came away with a ripe sucking sound. Then home to breakfast, a hasty bundling of the rhubarb, and off on the round.

When winter set in I became engaged as a regular Saturday errand boy at the greengrocer's and fishmonger's. Before there was light in the sky I would be at the shop where a natty little pony was pawing the ground, harnessed to a light cart. The greengrocer was a woman, and a devil of a driver. Already she would be waiting, reins in her fingers, and no sooner had I leapt up beside her than we were off with a jingle of harness and a brisk cloppity-clop of the pony's hoofs.

I loved those rides, though to this day I can feel the bitter tingling in my feet that did not reach down to the friendly straw strewn on the floor. The sharp air cut like whips, but what of that when such a gallant drive was forward! Over the river bridge we went before a soul was stirring, and into the heart of the town. There in Custom House Street, which is Cardiff's Covent Garden, I held the pony while the woman chaffered over boxes of kippers and crates of oranges, sacks of potatoes and all the ingredients of her picturesque calling.

Dead though the city might be elsewhere, Custom House Street was wideawake, full of champing horses, and rattling harness, and shouting men; and the pavements exhaled into the still frosty air their unforgettable smell of trodden vegetable garbage.

Back then we would rattle as briskly as we had come, the lash lightly stroking the pony's flank as he tore past the grey face of the workhouse behind the elms that were winter-bare. Then, after a cup of tea in the parlour behind the shop, we would open up for business, and the day degenerated into a prosaic lugging of baskets about the streets, delivering the three-pennorths of this and that which housewives were too lazy or too proud to carry for themselves.

At eleven p.m., while the gas-flares were still sizzling in the shop, I would be sent home after a sixteen hour day with a shilling for wages and a couple of herrings for charity. I had no complaints to make, for a sumptuous midday dinner was thrown in, too.

I liked that job, but lost it through ambition. A scholarship examination was held one Saturday, and in order to sit, my employer having refused me permission, I took French leave. I did not win the scholarship, but I was given the sack.

§ §

All these money-making enterprises were engaged in on Saturdays, for we were still at school. School and money-making could be combined. My brother and one of my sisters used to get up very early, do an hour's work at a large house which provided them with breakfast, and be at school like the rest of us at nine.

I have no affection for the only school I ever knew. It was a gaunt and dismal barrack, full of stone stairs that echoed coldly to the clang of hob-nailed boots. It was honeycombed with classrooms, and into each classroom fifty or sixty children were herded twice daily.

Our little mob was usually early before the gates, supported by a conviction, that had no warrant so far as I know, that at 8.30 the right of entry was ours. Just inside the great iron gates was the caretaker's house, and as soon as the caretaker was espied, walking wearily from the school to his own door, laden with brushes and pans, a shrill chorus would break out, as thin hands rattled the bars:—

Half-past eight, Mr. Haywood.
Open the gate, Mr. Haywood.

This chant would be monotonously maintained till in desperation Haywood would open the gate and spring deftly aside from the stampede.

I do not know why, but the first rush was always to what were incorrectly called the lavatories, outbuildings in the far corner of the yard. More understandably, this was the immediate objective at the mid-morning break. Down the stone stairs we would run with a hellish clatter, across the gravelled yard, and into the lavatories. If a boy was first in, and, having done what he had come to do, first out again, he would stand without the wall triumphantly crowing: "First in! First out!" though a poorer cause for

boasting I have never known. But that, in our school, was one of the ingredients of prestige.

The most popular game in the school yard bore the strange name of Bumberino. Sides were chosen, and about six boys made a team. A boy, tucking his head well down, would grasp a waterspout. The next would grasp this bending boy round the waist, the third would grasp the second, and so on, till the whole team made a line of bent backs and had the appearance of a strange and rather tall caterpillar. Then No. 1 of the opposing team, taking a run of ten yards, would make a leapfrog jump, landing as far as possible along the line of backs. No. 2 would follow, and soon the whole team was astride its opponents, and as each leap was made, the leaper would yell: "Bumberino!"

Then the leapers would comport themselves as violently as they knew how, hurling themselves up and down on the bent bodies below them, doing all they could to bring about their fall. But the horses—as the leapt-on team was called—would yell "Strong horses! Strong horses!" as long as they could stay upright and gasp a word; and when at last they crashed—and sooner or later crash they must—the riders shouted: "Weak horses! Weak horses!" and took their turn to be leapt upon. A strange game, which I have never seen played elsewhere.

Mr. Flegg, the headmaster, had made a rule that when he appeared upon a balcony overlooking the playground and blew his whistle, sound and motion must on the instant cease. On the second blast, everyone must fall into his own rank in front of his teacher. It need hardly be said that watchful eyes were on Mr. Flegg as soon as he appeared on the balcony. The raising of the whistle to his lips was the signal for monstrous attitudes to be assumed, and when the whistle had sounded the school yard took on the appearance of a vast lunatic asylum struck to petrifaction. Mouths gaped open; fingers were pushing noses into strange distorted shapes, boys lay flat on their backs or, standing upon their hands, had their feet against a wall; couples were engaged in grotesque wrestling attitudes; or, caught in the middle of a run, remained struck with one leg lifted in air. Mr. Flegg never knew that the whole school yard was a howling derision: it seemed to give him a godlike sense of power to be able, with one expulsion of his puny breath, to strike life suddenly into the silence and immobility of death.

The whistle sounded again; the ranks formed; one by one the battalions marched to their several dooms.

The Boer War was in full swing. In the playground we played Britons and Boers: a primitive pastime which consisted of chasing the Boers and

lamming them with belts when they were caught. We all wore in our lapels buttons bearing the photographs of Gatacre and Buller, Roberts, White and Kitchener; and those boys were greatly admired whose mothers could afford the popular extravagance of sending them to school dressed in little replicas of a private's uniform.

Mr. Simey, whom I chiefly remember of all my undistinguished masters, was never without a tie of khaki and red. He was a stripling thickly powdered with chalk-dust, and on his upper lip grew a tuft that might have been the consequence either of negligence or ambition. He was as lithe as a panther, and a cane seemed always to be twitching about him, angrily, like a panther's tail.

Under Mr. Simey we learned the prepositions by rote. We would intone: "The prepositions are: About, Above, Athwart, Against—" and so through every preposition known to the English tongue.

All, in that way, was handed to us in made-up packets, which no one bothered to explain.

The Grand Patriotic Concert was a glorious break in the deadly routine of the board school. Mr. Jones, the pleasant little consumptive who was the musical authority of the school, was continually raiding classrooms and having out the boys who were to sing this song or give that recitation. He lived in a whirl of most congenial excitement, a tuning-fork rarely out of his hand.

We were assembling in the school hall for rehearsal one bitter November morning when Mr. Jones called me to him.

"Will you run along to my house for me?" he said, knowing I should be no loss to the choir.

"Yes, sir."

"I forgot to bring my milk and biscuits this morning. Ask Mrs. Jones to let you have them."

A thin little woman answered my knock when I reached Mr. Jones's house, and asked me in when I had explained what I wanted. It was a very clean house, but so poorly furnished that it shocked all my preconceptions concerning the status of board school teachers. A baby in a wicker cot was crying lustily in the kitchen. Mrs. Jones put the biscuits into a tin box, and the milk into a bottle, and the whole into a basket. She said to me very suddenly and urgently: "How is Mr. Jones this morning? Is he coughing much?"

I answered truthfully that he was. To my consternation she broke down in bitter tears. “He always says,” she sobbed, “that he *never* coughs at school.” She added: “There, there! Don’t tell him I was crying. Will you give him these?” And she handed to me three clean handkerchiefs.

§ §

Neither my father nor my mother attended any place of worship. We children were allowed to go whither we pleased; but, as parents expected to be free of children on Sunday afternoons, we were expected to go somewhere. Thus, fortuitously, I made the acquaintance of the Plymouth Brethren. Their dingy chapel was the nearest one to our house; and so I attended their Sunday school.

I soon discovered that I was a goat among lambs. All the other boys in my class were the children of Plymouth Brethren parents, and they had, young as they were, taken the Great Decision. Not one among them but possessed a Bible, inscribed in some such way as this: “J. Smith, Born Feb. 18th, 1889. Born again, July 16th, 1899, 11.32 a.m.” They knew to the dot when they had left the broad highway and taken to the straight and narrow path.

In a second-hand shop I bought a Bible whose former owner had underscored in red a great many verses. It was a battered book, and when first I produced it in the Sunday School class, the teacher seized it with a glitter in his eye. “This,” he exclaimed, holding it up for the admiration of all, “is how I like the Old Book to be—worn with use.” He flicked the pages. “And see,” he said, “Bob has underlined the Promises.”

I kept a cowardly silence. I could not with my own words tear down their beginnings of respect.

All the Brethren were monomaniacs of the Book. Nothing else—literally nothing else—was admitted to be fit to read. I became a hypocrite of hypocrites at the age of ten. The Brethren were great visitors in pursuit of souls. They took to visiting our house; and one night, when I was reading the *Pickwick Papers*, I heard the voice of one of them at the front door. I hastily buried *Pickwick* beneath the old rag cushion on my father’s chair and sunk myself deep into the Bible with the Promises underlined in red.

From the Sunday school I passed to attendance at the morning services. They were held in a drab oblong hall. A few painted texts relieved the

coldness of the ugly walls. Pinned to a seat half-way down the room was a notice “Unbelievers! Sit behind this seat.”

Thus there was no chance to pass yourself off for what you were not. Though my dirty Bible was held to show the dawn of grace, I remained unregenerate and sat with the damned behind the notice. There were advantages in that, for the collecting-plate never came to the unredeemed.

How many sermons I listened to in that blear place, with my toes dangling above the ground: a thin dark little goat, with sticks of wrists and poor clothing. No sermon was ever written or, it seemed, thought about. Torrents of denunciation poured out: particularly denunciation of "our friends the Wesserleens," who went to worship in top-hats, which were held by the Brethren to be worldly and blasphemous, who sat on cushions, paid pew rents in the House of God, quoted profane poetry in the belief that it helped to expound Divine truths, and sang "Amen" at the end of their hymns.

"The Wesserleens" were fair game; they were always for it; and so was smoking, and the theatre, and the wearing of jewellery, and any sort of sport. I was not the only goat. I soon got to know of boys who kept their football boots and jerseys in the homes of friends, changed there before and after a match, and never let their parents know how dangerously they had warmed their hands at the flames of Hell.

But even the Brethren unbent on a Whit Monday, which was the day of Sunday school outings. Waggons with benches lashed upon them would draw up in the early morning before the chapel door and, when we were all aboard, the great lumbering horses would plod slowly away to some green field where the day was spent in sunshine. There the true and secular selves of the Brethren would be betrayed in round games and an enthusiasm for swinging the young women teachers from the Sunday school in the shade of the oaks and elms. There were tea and buns and sweets, and if lugubrious hymns damped the temper of the journey home, still the day had been good and nothing could alter that.

But even on these occasions the Brethren maintained the sober fashion of dress which their minds allied with holiness; and once, when Brother Thompson, a young and not unhandsome spark, appeared at the Treat wearing white trousers, a crimson cummerbund and a straw hat, it was whispered in more than one quarter that he had Gone Too Far.

§ §

I have never in my life sought jobs. I have always been pushed into them or lured into them. So it was with the first full-time job I held.

But before I got the job I had to leave school. I was only twelve years old, and the law had laid it down that I must imbibe the milk of education for another two years. But there was little enough difficulty in getting over that rule. Any boy who sold evening papers was permitted to leave school before the last lesson was finished; and any master who wanted to send a boy out on some errand of his own made no bones about it.

Some sort of application must have been made about me, because one day Flegg sent for me to his study. He told me what a fool I was to want to leave school, as though the affair were of my devising. He told me just what magnificent advantages I was missing by losing two years of learning; but he said not a word which would help me to understand that all need not be over when the board school had done with me. Then he handed me some sort of certificate and growled ungraciously that that was that.

So there I was at twelve with school days ended and no job in sight. My brother was already at work. He had won the scholarship which I had failed to win; but after long family conferences it was decided that we could not afford for him to go on as a mere honey-bee. He had to set to and do some donkey-work.

And now my turn had come, too, and I was all for it. I had not left school with work in view, but only in order to be free to take any work that offered. It was on a Friday that I said good-bye to Mr. Flegg, and on the Monday the job appeared.

There it was, in the window of a butcher’s shop: the conventional notice, “Smart Boy Wanted.” I was engaged in five minutes, ran home to tell my mother about it, and half-an-hour later had begun the first of all the jobs that have gone on without intermission ever since.

I had not been in the shop an hour before an awkward hobbledehoy, whose business was to look after the stable, groom the horse, and drive it when it had to be driven, whispered in my ear: “D’you want to get on?”

I assured him that such was my firm intention. “Well, don’t let the boss see you loafing about the shop. Find something to do. Clean all the brass on the harness.”

With the utmost goodwill I cleaned the harness, and only when Mr. Ventricle, the boss, appeared in the stable and wanted to know why I was messing my hands with metal polish when they had to handle meat did I realise that I had been taught my first lesson by a twister.

Ventricle seemed to me a forbidding and redoubtable chap. Years before, when chopping through a bone, he had caused a sliver to leap at his eye, and the consequence was that now he always wore a black shade carried by a string that slanted across his temple. It impressed my mind out of all proportion to the cause, and made him sinister.

When I was not carrying joints to customers' houses, and discovering how very heavy joints in a big basket can be to a small boy, Ventricle kept me perpetually chopping up suet on a block. It became as odious a torture as picking oakum, and it was not surprising that I ended by chopping off the fleshy end of a finger. It was dressed in a rough and ready way, and I went on chopping.

I disliked that job very much. If you have to be an errand boy, be an errand boy in a greengrocer's shop. There you have atmosphere: lovely colours, exciting smells, and the strange sense of all the queer places that the fruits have come from. To this day I love the smell of a greengrocer's shop and I dislike the smell of a butcher's.

On the Saturday night I waited till Ventricle had handed me my wages. Then, with the money safely in my pocket, I told him I should not come on Monday.

"What about notice?" he asked.

"What's notice, sir?" I innocently demanded.

"P'shaw!" said Ventricle, and left me to go my ways.

§ §

By Monday morning I was employed again. There had been swift work somewhere, and it was not done by me. I can see now what acute anxiety on my mother's part was betrayed by that instantaneous finding of a job. She had canvassed the Brethren! My next job was that of office boy to a Plymouth Brother.

Richard Basham, F.S.A.A., was a short, thickset fellow with a close-cropped black beard. All his movements were swift darting rushes. All his words were sharp quick barks. His chief clerk, an old bearded man named Hadley, had a giggling laugh and the dirtiest teeth I have ever seen on a human being. He, too, was a Plymouth Brother, but Hallows, the articled clerk, was only a nephew of two lady Plymouth Brethren. They had put him

into the office because they thought the atmosphere would be good for him, but Hallows did not like it.

All this was clear within a week even to a twelve-year-old office boy. It was the most intimate office imaginable. Basham was almost always out, auditing books, and Hadley and Hallows discussed him and one another with unrivalled freedom. Young Hallows was a non-smoker, a teetotaller, a regular football player in a good team, as fit a man as you could see; yet decrepit old Hadley nagged him like a naughty child; and always found some offence which “your aunts wouldn’t like, my boy.”

One theme which recurred again and again in Hadley’s diatribe was the smoking concerts which Hallows attended with his football team. “But I don’t drink myself, and I don’t smoke,” Hallows would explain.

Hadley would cease totting up figures to say darkly: “Ay, but some day you will, and what will your aunts say then?”

Another thing which offended Hadley was the songs which Hallows brought from the concerts and which he would sing *con brio*. To Hadley they were disgusting, though he himself again and again burst into the only line of a song he seemed to know. “I saw Esau kissing Kate,” he would sing in a whining voice and then let out his childish giggle.

It was a brown dingy little office, packed to the door and the ceiling with furniture and packets of dusty documents done up in brown paper parcels. There was a gas fire which smelled abominably though a saucer of water was kept in front of it, someone holding the opinion that the steam purified the atmosphere. Opening out of the office was a second room which was used only for board meetings of the innumerable companies of which Basham was secretary.

On the same landing was an office occupied by an Italian named Mansoni. Mansoni was always popping in to pass the time of day. He never seemed to have any work to do. He would stay talking as long as Hadley and Hallows would let him. He was the first perfectly-dressed man I ever saw, a real little beau, and his cheerful face, shaved to incredible smoothness, would have shone with good humour if he had not used so much powder.

“Gooda morning, Hallows! Gooda morning, Hadley!” he would say, and then, turning to me, “Gooda morning, Mr. String!” Every time Mansoni came in, smoking his perfumed cigarettes, he made that little joke, a poor enough one, God knows, but I don’t begrudge it to him, for he was a goodhearted man. The sight of the smallest and thinnest office boy at Cardiff docks seemed a bigger joke than he could bear.

Mansoni would have known how to give a present without making it an offence. But Basham didn't. He must have weighed me up on that first morning, for on the second, blowing in in his tempestuous way, he threw me a piece of paper, and barked: "Here boy! Take this, and wear it."

The paper contained a tie, the first I ever wore. Basham didn't like the look of my Eton collar stud, but he might have taken a quieter way of showing it. I wore the tie for a week, and out of my first wages bought a new one. I hope Basham noticed it. I put his in the fire.

§ §

I spent a happy year at Basham's. The Docks were a long way from my home, a good four miles, I should think; and I walked there and back each day. The wages didn't run to tramfares, and, anyway, there was fascination in the walk through Tiger Bay. Chinks and Dagos, Lascars and Levatines, slippered about the faintly evil by-ways that ran off from Bute Street. The whole place was a warren of seamen's boarding-houses, dubious hotels, ships' chandlers smelling of rope and tarpaulin, shops full of hard flat ship's biscuit, dingy chemists' shops stored with doubtful looking pills, herbs and the works of Aristotle. Children of the strangest colours, fruit of frightful misalliances, staggered half-naked about the streets; and the shop windows were decorated with names that were an epitome of all the clans and classes under the sun. The flags of all nations fluttered on the house fronts; and ever and anon the long bellowing moan of a ship coming to the docks or outward bound seemed the very voice of this meeting place of the seven seas. It was a dirty, smelly, rotten and romantic district, an offence and an inspiration, and I loved it.

In the lunch hour a mob of us office boys would take our food to the Pier Head and watch the shipping: the pleasure boats of the White Funnel Line setting off on high jinks we could not hope to share, the coal steamers lying under the chutes, the pilot cutters which then still carried sail. A grand spot, the Pier Head, on a day when the sun was shining and the white gulls were screaming, and Penarth Head, across the muddy flats where the Taff found the sea, towered up at the entrance to the Channel which contained so many delights. As yet they were delights on paper only—on the posters stuck about the Pier Head, advertising the joys of Ilfracombe and Clovelly, Lundy Island, Lynmouth and Glevedon.

Sometimes we would go down the steps to the water and timorously embark upon a dinghy lying there, never daring to untie her painter, but, by the mere fact of being afloat and feeling the swell and undulation of another element, savouring the infinite possibilities of navigation. The clock in the tall red tower of the Docks Office crawled all too swiftly round to two, and, lamming and batting one another as boys will, we scuttled back to our various servitudes.

And still I was learning nothing. Indeed, I was unlearning, for now I did none of the reading which my father had insisted on, but found instead the delights of the Union Jack, the Marvel and the Bull's-eye. These were the daily pabulum of Hallows, who had a trusty knack of covering them with a ledger when Basham snorted and butted into the office. Hallows handed them to me when he had done with them; and for a long time Crusoe and Christian were ousted by the White Chief of the Umzimvubu Kaffirs and other heroes of the same brand.

I had to leave home before eight, I was not back till after six; I was only twelve, and I let things slide.

There was plenty to think about. There were changes at home. We had left The Street. The terrors of The Other End were gone. We were in a house with a bathroom! True, there was no hot water system. Only cold water ran into the bath, but hot could be carried upstairs in a bucket.

That did away with the ritual of the Wash All-Over. From as far back as I could remember, the time would come now and again when my mother would drastically announce: “Wash All-Over to-night.” The operation was sufficiently complicated to make it necessary for all the children to be Washed All-Over on the same night, so that the business could be got through and done with. A big wooden tub was put in front of the kitchen fire, kettles were boiled, the water prepared, and No. 1 began the ritual. First you knelt on a mat alongside the tub, stuck your head into the water, soaped your hair, and washed it. Then you got into the water and Washed All-Over.

While No. 1 was in train, a kettle would be boiling to warm up the water—the same water—for No. 2, who would go through the same ritual while No. 1 was drying his or her hair, kneeling before the fire. The kettle was kept going all the time, so that the water was hot for all, though for the last of the clan it would also be pretty slimy. And by the time the last was done, and had joined the kneeling line by the fire, No. 1 would be dry, dressed for bed, and sent packing.

But now that was done with. We had a bath!

§ §

How on earth was that family kept together? I received four shillings for my five-and-a-half day week at the Docks. Older than I were one brother and two sisters. All were earning some pittance; but then there were another brother and two more sisters still at school.

As I see it, only the indefatigable realism of my mother kept us afloat. She was a little five-foot woman who could read the simplest things, but made a great to-do if she had to sign her name. She was not often called upon to do so; but when she was, the occasion was elevated to such dignity, the operation was performed with such care and circumspection, that one would think no document she signed could have less importance than Magna Carta.

She worked her fingers to the bone. Screwing her “coarse apron” into a roll, she would set off with a brisk step, wearing rather jauntily a man’s cap. She scrubbed and charred, while the younger children were at school; and when they were at home she found time to do her own housework, to run piles and piles of other people’s linen through the mangle, and to wash the clothes which it was my business to collect from our clientele, and to take back when they were laundered. I would gather the bundles on the way

home from the Docks, huge loads done up in sheets that I heaved on to my back, then staggered off like Christian before his sins rolled away.

These things troubled me. I was bitterly ashamed of being seen lugging those bundles. The boys used to yell: “Your mother takes in washing!” and, by Heaven, she did! But these things worried her not at all. She was a realist. There was a family to be, somehow, “brought up” She set about it in the only way she knew.

She acquired in those years a sort of terrific momentum, so that, long after it was necessary for her to do such things, she could not stop; and when the rest of us were lying abed we could hear her downstairs laying into the beginning of the day’s washing. A woman would be coming in to do it, but she couldn’t be restrained. She would be up early on the specious pretence of “putting things ready.” It was never possible to get a maid to suit her. Her own dogmatic views about how things ought to be done were too deeply planted. In those early days she cared nothing what anybody thought of her, and when I complained that boys were yelling after me in the street, she replied with a favourite saying of hers: “Let them call you what they like so long as they don’t call you pigeon-pie and eat you.”

It cost her much to bring up her sons. She lost two of them; and for the one she lost in the war she was awarded five shillings a week. It was I who had to be the realist then. She was very small, very grey, but fierce and energetic as ever. “They can keep it!” she said. “They can keep it! He was worth more than that.”

Her only relaxation in those arduous days was on Sunday nights. We carried on with the readings—and it was only during those few hours that I read anything that was good. We went through book after book by Dickens. He pleased my mother immensely. “I’ll tell you all about *my* life, some day,” she used to say to me. “Then you can write a book. That’ll make people laugh.”

I don’t know where the idea came from that I would write books, or whence she got the notion that her life had been comic. Certainly, she refused to consider it tragic. It was just a job like any other and she put all she knew into it.

One night there was illness in the house. I was told to run for the doctor. I was to say to him: “Come at once. It will be all right. We can pay you.”

It seemed to me horrible to have to say any such thing to the doctor. For the first time I realised in a concrete way how poor we were.

§ §

No money was spent on amusements. It was unthinkable. I was about seventeen years old before I went away for a holiday, and I did not enter a theatre until I went as the “dramatic critic” of the first newspaper I worked for. I do not suppose any other dramatic critic in the history of the world has taken a completely virgin mind to his task. But my first acquaintance with the stage was in the Theatre Royal, Cardiff, when I told the world what I thought of “A Wrecker of Men.” It moved me profoundly, and when a pistol was actually and literally let off upon the stage, causing a deafening report accompanied by a perceptible flash of fire, I saw at once that here was realism as in my wildest dreams I had not till then envisaged it.

But that was yet a long way off; and though amusements could not be bought, that is not to say that amusements could not be had. We were all walkers. We did not call it hiking, and no special clothes were necessary. We just said we were going for a walk, and we went for a walk. We did a good deal of walking as a clan; but, by one of those tacit understandings that arise in families, my elder brother and I, about this time when I was twelve and he nearly fourteen, split off from the rest, discovered one another, and became friends as well as brothers. From then on we did everything together until he prematurely died.

And here is the place where I may as well speak of the first holiday I ever took, because he and I took it together.

The holiday stands out in my mind as a bright foreground, but you will understand nothing about the foreground unless you bear in mind the background too.

You will already have gathered that it was not a drab background, but it was one of startling opportunism. You took what you could get when you could get it, and it didn’t work out badly. If there was no long stretch of joyous freedom by the sea or in the hills to which you could look back and say: “That was my holiday!” there were at any rate rare jewels of days threaded here and there along the string of the year, and they made a gleaming handful to count over in a dark time.

There was the waifs’ and strays’ outing, as we called it, though we were not precisely to be reckoned in either category. We were just very poor children whose parents snatched anything they could for their offspring, and the outing to Barry Island was certainly a thing to snatch. I remember little of it, but chiefly the delirium of passing through the tunnel. Railway coaches

were not lighted in those days. The sexes were segregated, God help us: little boys in one compartment, little girls in another; but the partition did not go right up to the ceiling. You could stand on your seat and look over. And when you came to the tunnel you could do more. With a knotted handkerchief, a belt, or a cricket-stump, you could lash over blindly into the darkness, raising hell generally, and filling the tunnel, unfortunately brief, with demoniac uproar.

That, chiefly, I remember of the waifs' and strays' outing from Cardiff to Barry Island: that and running on sand, and the persuasion, which lasted for years, that we had been "cut off by the tide" because we had waded some yards through rising water from a rock; and tea and buns; and a man with black formal clothes and a great power of producing a piercing whistle by putting two fingers in his mouth and blowing; and giving at the end of the day, when we were all hot and tired and dusty, three cheers for God knows whom, and going home happy.

There was, too, the annual picnic of the Wesleyan Bible Class. Each year the power of God among us waxed in early June, to wane at the month's end. The graph of membership rose steeply, declined as sharply. The picnic was in mid-June.

We would betake ourselves with the paraphernalia of cricket and rounders to some meadow newly green from the year's haymaking and there beguile a sunny hour or two till the moment came for the day's high peak: tea in a cottage garden. How well I recall one such occasion: the table of planks piled with buttered scones, and cake richly brown, oozing currants, lashings of bread-and-butter, pineapple chunks and stewed pears! Tea-urns sizzled at the table's head where sat the lame old man with silver hair who was our shepherd during these ungraceful ventures into the fold; and all about were tall hollyhocks, and beehives of golden plaited straw, and the shrill call of swifts wheeling under the blue sky. And what added joy we felt in the security of that brief paradise, when we perceived, gazing over the hornbeam hedge, one of our number who had turned his footsteps to the path of truth too scandalously late to deceive even the ingenuous shepherd who now, in a thin tenor voice, was leading us in the singing of our grace. "Praise God from Whom all Blessings Flow," we shrilly sang, and the face at the hedge disappeared as a sinner's might do who had been permitted, as torture's refinement, to peep upon angels at play.

And when life could not rise to such heights as these, there was always the improvisation of our own delights. In the long school holiday we would be up early and away into the dewy fields which lay then much nearer to the

city than they do now, and we would seek mushrooms, though I do not remember that we ever found one, or gather the flat bunches of elderberries that stained our fingers an exciting purple, and from which our mother concocted wine. Or, making a whole-day job of it, we would set out with a few slabs of bread-and-butter and a bottle of water; and in those unexacting days these simple provisions answered to all that we knew by the name of dinner. We took with us a book on natural history, and discovered much joy in identifying this and that; and in a stream at Fairwater, crossed by a railway bridge whose embankment was at times like a long snowdrift, so thickly the dog-daisies grew there, we would fish by the hour, tirelessly turning over the stones in search of millers' thumbs.

Once I wandered away from my brothers and sisters and went into a near-by field, and right out in the middle of it I lay down in grass so high that no one could see me. The red sorrel from that angle rose like spires and the dog-daisies trembled against the blue with fantastic loveliness. The silence was so great that I could hear the grasses making a small commotion like the trees of a forest in which I was a beetle. I shut my eyes and tried to forget that I was anyone at all. I tried to imagine that I was a stone lying on the ground; and I remember snatching myself up from what must have been something near to unconsciousness and rushing away frightened.

So in the summer we improvised our substitute for what other people called "holidays," and when school was again in session and we back at it, it would be not wholly with a sense of desolation that we heard other children speak of grand times they had had at Ilfracombe or Weston-super-Mare.

Nor were the winters without joyful occasions. There was an entertainment, known no doubt to those who organised it by some magniloquent title, which we called briefly "Santa Claus." Santa Claus was always held in a great hall in the centre of Cardiff. It was a feed, and an entertainment, and a bright new penny for each child, and as you left you were given a bag containing an apple and an orange and some cast-off clothing.

It doesn't sound great fun; and I suppose that to children whose Christmas entertainment is stalls at the pantomime and everything else to scale it wouldn't be great fun; but Santa Claus remains, all the same, in my mind as a high light, a time of chewing and bawling, of gusty good humour, and the surprise of the sack which you lugged home to see what your mother's patient fingers could do with the garments it contained.

These were strange things from which to extract joy, but joy we found in them; and, stranger still, there was joy to be found in the soup kitchen. In

bitter winters the soup kitchen was opened in the fire station, and to get the soup thence was to me a fascinating experience. Tickets were supplied by the police, and armed therewith you could enter that mysterious and attractive place where all woodwork was a glowing red, and all metal work was twinkling brass, and the hoses were rolled like very tidy snakes who had washed themselves and coiled up for sleep. A grand place, full of all that cleanness and glitter, and beatified now with the incense rising from the steaming cauldrons of good pea soup!

What a long time I am getting to my first holiday; but that's just it: I *was* a long time getting to it, and when it came it had all the enchantment of a complete experience after so many nibblings at the rind of joy.

There was an interregnum, a time when we were still too poor to go away for a holiday, but now too proud to take the bliss offered by Santa Claus and the Bible Class or anyone else who could give us something for nothing. This was perhaps the hardest time of all: the time of waking up to the good things that can be wrested from life while you are still too weak to do the wresting.

I do not remember in what year the first holiday came. I was sixteen or seventeen years old. My elder brother and I had been saving up for a long time, and at last a week's holiday could be achieved. We decided to go to Bideford because somebody we knew had been there and had given us the name of a sensationally cheap boarding-house. We had written and arranged to pay twelve-and-six a week each, to cover everything. We were to share a bed, but we had always done that, and had occasionally had other members of the family sleeping at the foot of it with their legs pushed up between us. So there was no hardship in sharing a bed.

But when we had saved the twelve-and-six each, and a few shillings each for expenses when we got there, the question remained of getting to Bideford.

Now it is one of the joys and the scandals of newspaper life that newspaper men can get many things for nothing. We were both working in a newspaper office, and the office possessed a pass which permitted free travel on the paddle steamers plying between Cardiff and Ilfracombe. We were allowed the use of the pass, but there still remained the railway journey from Ilfracombe to Bideford and back. My brother settled that heroically. "We'll walk it." It is something like twenty miles.

On a cloudless day of June we set out on that holiday. We had no appropriate clothes. We wore the stuffy city clothes that were all we had. Inexperienced travellers as we were, we had fantastic notions of the things

we should need. It still is a bafflement to me, when I see a poor family going for a day at the seaside, to behold the meaningless things they take. All that we took with us that far-off June day was stuffed into a great tin portmanteau—food, overcoats, books, and God knows what—and in the brave spirit of youth we proposed to carry that portmanteau twenty miles!

Blue and lovely was the sea at Ilfracombe, darkening to green at the foot of Capstone Hill, grown so thick with valerian that a single sprig of the plant brings back the moment to me: the gulls wheeling and crying, and the paddles making a noisy, frothy dither as we edged in to the pier as though over the effervescence of a colossal Seidlitz powder.

We humped that monstrous trunk ashore and then we ate the lunch that we had brought with us. We did not dream of spending our precious savings on restaurants. And when we had eaten we began to walk to Bideford.

It was about one o'clock, and the sun was at its powerful height. The noon of the day, and the noon of the year, that trunk, and twenty miles to go! Now when I take a taxi to go a mile, I am not sure whether to be ashamed or to say: "By God, you've earned it!"

We didn't carry that trunk to Bideford! How could we have dreamed of doing it? We were skinny strengthless boys. We did our best. We sweated along between hedgerows dripping with honeysuckle and ditches where the meadowsweet made a creamy foam. There were no tarmac roads then. Our shoes kicked up the pitiless dust. We took turns with the trunk. We carried it at times between us. At times we dumped it and subsided into the hedge among the ragged robins and the foxgloves.

Never once did we complain. We were on our first holiday, and neither of us would admit that there was any flaw in the loveliness of the time we were having. No complaint, but at last from my brother a complete admission: "We can't do it."

It was true. We couldn't do it. We dumped the old trunk again and turned out our pockets. Each set aside his twelve-and-six and considered what was left. We could take the train, but it would mean that those small diversions we had promised ourselves must all be abandoned.

So on we went again till we came to the next village at which the train stopped. We had walked about ten miles. When we got to Bideford we carried the trunk up to our lodgings in a back street. A supper of shepherd's pie was waiting for us. It was brought in by a stout kind girl who said we looked very tired and that she hoped we would enjoy our holiday. We were tired. We went straight to bed by candle-light. Neither of us had ever spent a night away from home before, and that bare little bedroom in a quiet back

street, with the candle-light flickering on a steel engraving of Jael driving the nail into the head of Sisera, seemed uncanny, cold and dubious. My brother read his Bible, as he always did at night right up to the time when he died soon afterwards on a ship at sea; and I lay on my back looking across the thin outline of his chest against the yellow candle-shine to the dark eyes of Jael.

They haunted me all through the holiday, but we slept well because we were out all day. Long before breakfast the next morning we were on the quay, looking right towards the many arches of the lovely bridge and left towards the estuary. Behind us was the “Rose,” the inn that has its place in *Westward Ho!* and before us were the shining sands where Amyas Leigh fought his duel.

I had brought *Westward Ho!* with me. I have never read it since, nor ever shall I. But I am prepared to defend it as a grand romance, let who say what he will. Every stone and tree, the pebble ridge on the near-by shore, the estuary sand and the boats in the river, all conspired to paint bright pictures that nothing can ever efface of Amyas and Salvation Yeo and all the others going about their high and mighty business.

No; I do not want to read it again and I do not want to go to Bideford again. It is now a place in a dream, far off but very bright; and I fear what I should find if I put it to the touch of waking. I should not find the tree in which I sat all through a summer day. We had taken food with us, and we found the tree on the edge of a field that was being mown. I climbed into it, and with my legs along a bough and my back to the trunk I read and read, peeping out through the leafy screen now to a blue vision of the estuary, now at my brother who was reading *Henry Esmond* at the tree’s foot, now at the swarthy men whose scythes advanced with a rasping rhythm through the standing grass. That afternoon I read in *Westward Ho*: “And beauty born of murmuring sound shall pass into her face,” and that led me on to Wordsworth.

Of the brief holiday that day remains for ever, and whatever modern villas may now adorn the hill, my men for ever swing their scythes and my brother reads on in a green shade.

Wherever our legs could take us we wandered that week; out to Northam where, beneath grey crooked stones, the graves of drowned mariners are green; to Appledore and Instow which come back to me now, standing above the pearly iridescence of the estuary at flood with the intangible grace and mystery of a water-colour by Wilson Steer; to the old Army and Navy college which we found deserted and open to any intruder. We looked about its rooms, seeking on door or wall some scrawled “R.K.” which might testify to the sojourn there of Stalky’s creator. But we found nothing.

All through the week we spent hardly a shilling, but I doubt whether I shall ever again know a holiday so mightily endowed with wonder and refreshment. All too soon we were back. On my way home from work each day thereafter, I would glimpse my face in shop mirrors, admiring its tan; then regretting that the tan was passing like the holiday itself. Soon nothing was left—except this which, long years after, I have been able to set down.

Since then, what holidays there have been! But none like that. None which has left a place-name so magic in my ears as Bideford is to this day.

Ah, les premières fleurs qu’elles sont parfumées!

§ §

I have gone ahead, and now I must go back—a few years back before that first holiday—to the humble expeditions during which my brother and I fully discovered one another.

It is a long time since I have seen the environs of Cardiff, but there were grand walks to be had in those days. We would take our bread and butter and bottle of water, and make a day of it. We would go to Caerphilly or Castel Coch; or take the dusty road to Leckwith Hill and climb over its broad shoulder to a sight of the grey water of the Bristol Channel. We would lie for hours in the sun, just doing nothing, or fish in small clear streams, or gather blackberries in their season. They were good days, free of fret and intrusion, just he and I, away in places where we could be quiet. He was a boy of profound seriousness, and it was he who began to see that we were pleasantly loafing along with no aim or object. We decided that we had better stop it, that when the autumn came we must go to night school. Not a very heroic decision! But it was something to be going on with.

Here, now, is Mr. Simey, that mighty wielder of the board school stick, but in how changed a guise! When you go to night school you go as a free agent, and free agents cannot be caned. Mr. Simey is no longer called “Sir.”

A spirit of *cameraderie* irradiates the new relationship. Mr. Simey is trying to add a few shillings to his doubtless insufficient income. We are trying to add a few ideas to a meagre stock.

The whole feeling of the school is different. The classrooms are nearly empty. Not many boys elect to go to night school, and as the session wears along even the thin field of starters dwindles. In the English class I alone am left.

Many an intimate evening Mr. Simey and I spent together in the English class. A pleasant fire is burning; there is no one but us two. Mr. Simey takes from his pocket Chardenal's First French Course. "D'you mind if we run through these verbs again?" he says.

I am enchanted. It is a great thing to be assisting Mr. Simey to learn French. I know nothing of pronunciation, so Mr. Simey has to spell each word as he ploughs through the verbs of the first conjugation. A tedious business, but if it suits him, it's all right for me.

Thus did Simey interpret his duties as my instructor in English. But, completely by accident, he taught me as much as I or any other boy needed to learn about the structure of the language. He said: "You should read the best things in the newspapers. There's a man called Sub Rosa writing in the *Morning Leader*."

I bought a copy of the *Morning Leader* next day, and in his column Spencer Leigh Hughes said how splendid a book was Cobbett's Grammar. I went to a second-hand bookshop and got the book for twopence. It is written in the form of letters to a ploughboy, and if any don has beaten that book as an exposition of English I have yet to see his work.

So the first winter's work at the night school was not all loss. It cost nothing. Mr. Simey got on with his French; I got to know Cobbett; and, for reasons unknown, I was told to choose a book for a prize. I took Lamb's *Tales from Shakespeare*.

And now all sorts of things began to happen which were to affect my destiny—if I have anything so imposing as a destiny.

The poor are always restlessly on the move. We shifted to a new house, and—which did not often happen—we became friendly with the family next door. The son of the house, a dark handsome youth, was a corporal in a cavalry regiment. He was at home on a long leave, and a friend of his wanted to be near him so that they might spend their time together. This young man came to us as a lodger; not the first by any means, but indubitably the pleasantest.

Frank brought a large trunk stuffed with books. He was completely uninterested in them. They had belonged to his brother, a youth who had died while studying for the Nonconformist ministry. Frank was a rolling stone, and when his corporal friend from next door left to go with his regiment to India, he himself decided to go and try his luck in South Africa. He said those books were just a nuisance. Would we look after them till he decided what he wanted to do about them?

So off went Frank—God bless his soul!—and left us a little library. My brother and I unpacked the books and set them up. There were the complete works of Scott, cheap editions of most of the English poets, the works of the then popular Drummond, who wrote *Natural Law in the Spiritual World*, Darwin's *Origin of Species*, Hawthorne, translations from Goethe, the *Shah Nameh* of Firdausi, odds and ends of Thackeray, and a hotch-potch of other stuff, all good of its sort and seeming to us as imposing in its array upon the tops of chests-of-drawers as the Vatican Library or the Bibliothèque Nationale. Not that we had then heard of either.

Frank's books remained with us for about three years. By then we had whacked our way through every page; and I am free now to confess that when they were claimed I kept back one volume, which I have to this day, with Frank's brother's writing on the flyleaf, as a memorial of the great awakening.

And the second thing which happened now was that I said good-bye to Mr. Basham, and to Hadley and Hallows and to the charming Mr. Mansoni. It was a question of finance. For a year I had trudged the miles through Tiger Bay, morning and evening. By trial and error upon Basham's Empire typewriter I had made myself what I considered an efficient typist. True, my handwriting was abominable, and I could not be trusted to add up a row of figures. Nevertheless, I thought it time that Basham should make some advance on four shillings.

Trusting already to the pen rather than to my tongue, I told him so in a letter which I saw him read with a frown. He told me that for my wages he could get a boy from the Higher Grade School, and added that anyway he was paying me four shillings only because my mother was a widow. Reluctantly, I handed in a week's notice, and so ended my contact with the great world of affairs.

§ §

From then till now I have had to do with newspapers, but my becoming connected with newspapers was, like everything else at that time, haphazard and accidental. I felt no vocation, followed no star more compelling than the need to get a job.

There I was, now thirteen years old, thin as a rail, wearing ridiculous short trousers and big boots. (Why is it that poor people always put ungainly boots instead of shoes on their children's feet?) There I was with a week to go, and then my job would be ended.

My mother, always optimistic, thought that a year's service as an office boy qualified me to apply for work as a Junior Clerk, but things happened otherwise. One of my sisters was a domestic servant in the house of a man who was a sub-editor on a Cardiff newspaper. She learned from him that a messenger boy was wanted in the office. I was given the job. The manager who interviewed me was a haughty personage with an unsmiling manner. One of his cheeks was afflicted with a persistent tic. That, and a very dry cough, made him seem terribly aloof and impersonal. And from that day till the day I left the office to go to *The Yorkshire Observer* in Bradford, nine years later, the manager remained an austere Olympian, a sort of very polar bear on a very tall iceberg.

But if the manager was aloof, the editor was familiar with an awful and embarrassing familiarity. Never shall I forget the first time I was called into his room. His appearance was no surprise to me, for his was a well-known figure about the Cardiff streets. On the thin and awkward body of an Abraham Lincoln, clothed always, summer and winter, in a dark grey suit of very thick broadcloth, was imposed a head that reminded me at once of Tennyson's, as I had seen it portrayed in the frontispiece of one of Frank's books. The bold high forehead with a sweep of hair flowing nobly back, the beard, the nose: all were there, amazingly Tennysonian.

Now, at close quarters, I looked at him with awe. He addressed me in a voice that was deep and completely without tone. There was no light or shade in it. It was a sepulchral rumble coming out of the beard. "Boy," he said, "how is it with your soul?"

This was awful. Mr. Basham, good Plymouth Brother though he was, had never allowed the soul to intrude into the office; and there was my editor, the high and mighty chief of everything that constituted my new universe, tackling me on first principles at the very outset.

I stood and stared at him, then mumbled: "I don't know, sir."

He placed a hand on my shoulder, propelling me kindly towards the door. "Boy," he said, "your soul comes first. Think of your soul."

I wondered for a time whether there was about me some imprint of the primal curse, some mark of the beast which said to all beholders: “This boy’s soul needs watching,” but I soon learned that this was not so, that the editor’s concern about souls was all-embracing. He would come into the sub-editors’ room and boom his famous question at sub-editors wrestling with the peak-confusion of the day’s chief edition. He would ask men at street corners and in tramcars how it was with their souls.

The aureole of poesy that was about his brow was a fraud and a deception. He once swooped upon me when I was reading verse and informed me tersely that I would be better employed reading political economy. He looked with suspicion on all musical and dramatic criticism that went into the paper, and once, when Shakespeare was on our local boards, declared forthright that Shakespeare was “all rubbish.”

This dark consistency of his proselytising character I was to learn bit by bit, learning at the same time his generosity, his selflessness, the reality of what I can only call a perverted saintliness. But during that first startling interview I knew nothing of that: I knew only that I felt upset and afraid, and I crept away to see what work there was to do.

§ §

There was all sorts of work. There was running to the station for parcels of news sent in by the district correspondents; there was opening the unending stream of telegrams and learning to sort them into home news, sporting news, foreign news, and to deliver them to the sub-editor concerned. There was running down to the machine-room for editions. A grand place the machine-room, worked by steam in those days, and it was thrilling to see the engineers, incredibly daring souls, crawling about in the pits beneath the stationary monsters, to leap out at the sound of a bell, just in time, as it seemed, to escape annihilation amid the rushing cogs and whirling cylinders, the noise and deep, satisfying vibration, that all culminated in the neatly-folded pale primrose sheets spewing out dozen by dozen and filling the air with the hot scent of fresh newsprint.

There was going down to the boiler-room with the pipes of sub-editors and reporters to have steam blown through them; there was running with copy to the compositors, watching their deft fingers tapping their machines to produce those long galleys of type that, afterwards, were all picked to pieces again by the girls upstairs.

There were journeys through the streets to places where reporters were at work, so that their "copy" might be taken bit by bit to the office, and thus, at one moment you would be in the police court listening with rapt attention to the charge against a girl of soliciting, or against a big buck nigger of using a razor on a policeman in Tiger Bay; and the next you would be at an inquest, or a meeting of the City Council or the august Assizes to which in the morning you had seen the judge drive up to the music of trumpets and with all the solemn pomp of black and scarlet.

Through it all was threaded the feeling of an immensely enlarged horizon, of belonging to a great and intricate concern that was so much more spacious than the little brown office in Mount Stuart Square, where Hallows and Hadley were still toasting their toes by the gas fire and discussing the anxieties of the Aunts.

And one memorable day there was to be an important political meeting. Sir Henry Campbell-Bannerman was coming to the Park Hall. I was ordered to be there to run to and fro with "copy." I had never before been at a political meeting of any sort; I had never seen a "great man." The excitement was intense. The hall was packed with a cheering singing crowd. The gaslight filled the place with a sizzling heat and the organ pealed as the local grandees filed on to the platform. Then suddenly everyone on the floor and in the galleries stood up and cheered and cheered. I was standing by the press-table under the platform, too small to see anything. A hefty reporter took me under the arms, hoisted me up, and there I was, with my nose and eyes just above the platform level, gazing from two feet away at the bottoms of a pair of creased trouser legs and a pair of big boots. They were Campbell-Bannerman's. I raised my eyes to the other end of him, and saw him standing there, ruddy, commonplace, kind-looking: my first "great man." He looked very much like the doctor to whom I had said that we would pay him if he came quickly.

§ §

Though blind chance took me to a newspaper office, I was happy there at once; and I have been happy in newspaper offices ever since.

It was clear from the first that the way up was through the reporters' room; and the way to the reporters' room in those days was by learning shorthand. It was a lucky thing for me that there was another boy in the office who shared my passion for learning shorthand. It is the easiest thing

in the world to learn; but when we had learned the principles there came the question of practice.

We solved this by coming to the office at eight each morning. Our work began at nine, and for an hour before that time we harangued and declaimed to one another from a volume of Sir Edward Clarke's speeches, borrowed from the office library. To this day, I could pass with honours an examination upon Sir Edward Clarke's reactions to the burning problems of his day. It was a hard and long-continued grind, but we made ourselves efficient shorthand writers, and in due course we both earned such laurels as efficient shorthand writers may hope to wear. But that is another story.

What is more important is that in time my brother and I made the discovery, which seemed astonishing to us, that you can work for a university degree without attending a university. We learned of such things as the London University, and extra-mural students, and Tutorial Correspondence Courses.

My brother was now in my newspaper office as secretary to our strange editor. He had never ceased to regret that missed scholarship. Some of the boys who had gone on that time to the Higher Grade School could now be seen a stage further in their careers, going through the streets with mortar boards on their heads and gowns fluttering in the wind: undergraduates of the University of Wales. The thought of all they were getting and all we were missing gnawed him, and suddenly he hurled himself with what can only be called passion into the acquiring of knowledge. With his day filled by the earning of his living, with a wretched physical constitution that was the bequest of our childhood, he nevertheless drove at learning with sustained frenzy. I have come home late at night and found him asleep with his head on the table amid a pile of books and with a penny bottle of ink upset at his hand. It killed him in a few years. He took a trip round the world on a cargo boat in the hope that a wrecked body might be repaired, and he died at sea.

For all of us they were toilsome years that came now. We had somehow got embarked on a grand push. A death or glory atmosphere was abroad and used us up. Our editor had something to do with it. Evening classes were held in the University College, a hotch-potch collection of wooden shacks surrounding a building that had once been a hospital. They were good classes. Many of them were conducted by the professors of the University, seeking, even like my old friend Simey, some small addition to what they could earn by day. But they differed from night school in this: they had to be paid for.

This was where our strange editor came in. For all the secret laughs we had at that man and his passionate evangelism, he was one of those rare souls who practise what they preach. Out of his scanty means he was a generous giver. He would call you down and inquire about your soul, and then go on to call your attention to the classes at the University. You could join as many as you liked, and he would pay the bill.

With the major problem solved, my brother and I leapt at it, and for about five years we slaved as I hope never to slave again. It grew worse as the time went on, because by then I had found new work in the office. From nine in the morning till five or six at night my job was to take over the

telephone news reports from district correspondents for the evening paper. Then forthwith I switched over to the status of reporter for the morning paper, which meant working all through the evening. From seven to eight I might have a class to attend in those old University buildings; then on I would go to pick up a bit of news somewhere. The tail-end of another class could be reached when that was done. Back then to the office to write my report. Then home to supper and homework; and on again in the morning at nine.

We found a flaw in our arrangements. Latin was compulsory for the matriculation of the London University, and there was no Latin class on the syllabus. We decided heroically that we would find a private tutor. We would raise the money somehow. We would give lessons in shorthand. That would fetch in a bit. I did indeed begin to teach shorthand. One small boy, a few months younger than myself, began to attend at our home. That was something else to fit in. Either I was a bad teacher or he a dull scholar. Anyway, we got nowhere. I threw up the whole thing, and hopes of an income from that source died. In any case we could never have paid for those private Latin lessons. We advertised for a teacher. The answers shocked us. The cheapest offer was ten shillings an hour. It seemed a monstrous sum; but we didn't give in. We took our case to the principal and urged him to found a Latin class. He said he would do it if we could guarantee a dozen students. We beat them up somehow. Soon they declined to four or five; but by then the class was started, and it went on. We fitted it in. Everything, in those days, seemed capable of being "fitted in."

§ §

English, French, Latin, mathematics and history were "fitted in" to our bursting days. They had to be, because they were the matriculation subjects. Now all that struggle seems very far off, very dim and dusty, singularly unenriched by human contact. All save the French classes. Who that ever sat under him will forget the boisterous, swelling humanity of old Paul Dalou? For all his long residence in England, he never dimmed the rich Gallic flavour of his being. With his imperial and fierce moustachios, his hair which he treated like a hay field, allowing it to grow to a luxuriant crop and then having it scythed down till the very skin of his scalp shone through the stubble, with his rolling voice full of deep and splendid inflexions in which he would declaim the verses of his country's poets, with his fondness for little English puns as feeble as the gusto with which he produced them was

heroic: he was indeed a moving and inspiring figure of my infancy. He dragooned us mercilessly, drove the conjugations into us with oaths of mock ferocity, and for reward, when all that dry and arid preamble was done, he would take up a French anthology into which, as it were by the gracious afterthought of a tolerant editor, there had crept some verses by his son.

"Et maintenant," he would cry, "les poètes, les grands poètes français."

Before each poem he would utter the name of the author in tones of a deep, vibrant veneration, so that we felt we were permitted to quaff of cups which gods had charged with wisdom and beauty. And when he had gone through his list—Hugo, Verlaine, de Musset, and the rest—he would end: "Maintenant, un poète de nos jours—Paul Dalou fils." And he would read his son's poems with his voice running lovingly over the lines like a light hand caressing velvet. It was an impressive performance.

But how long—how long, O Lord!—it seemed before the stubborn tongue would yield to us, unaided, the riches that came as gaily as light leaping at the touch of a switch when old Paul Dalou's was the master hand. Hour by hour, dictionary on knee, we ploughed through the obvious elementary books with which the learner is lured: Daudet's *Lettres de Mon Moulin*, Souvestre's *Philosophe Sous les Toits*, and one or two others. But these authors seemed tough and grudging till the night of illumination came. I was reading Hugo's *Quatre Vingt Treize*, dictionary and note-book at hand, going as lightly as a clod-hopping ploughboy through clay. And then I forgot the dictionary, forget the note-book, forgot that I was "studying" French, forget everything, till I came to with a start and realised that the miraculous thing had happened—the thing that comes to the cyclist and the swimmer—the sudden swift enjoyment of having, Heaven knows how, done the trick. It was Hugo's gorgeous passage about the fight with the gun that got loose on the ship—one of the most exciting passages, I still feel, that he ever penned—that had caught me up and by the magic of its invoked scene made me a participant unaware of the medium through which I was seeing. And after that it was all right.

I shall not pretend that I ever found myself on such happy terms with Latin. I never read it with joy, never without a sense that it was both a dead and foreign tongue. There was a dilapidated arcade, making a right angle from the Hayes to Queen Street. Now, I believe, it is very neat and modern. But then it had a phrenologist's shop where a white plaster cast of a well-developed pate stood on moth-eaten black velvet; and it had a "pets" shop, where puppies and kittens, little caged birds and goldfish of a dim debased currency existed in a warm atmosphere of sawdust and excreta; it had all

sorts of queer, remote and somehow dubious businesses existing in its right-angled enclosure of warm and breathless air. It had a bookshop, blessed of impecunious students; and there, for twopence a time, the fruits of all man's wit and wisdom could be picked up as it were from under the contemptuous and unregarding feet of time.

It was thence we salved our Latin readers: the dim brown-covered version of *De Bello Gallico*, the little slim blue volumes which enshrined Cicero's reflections *De Amicitia* and *De Senectute*. We dutifully ploughed through them, and through many another Latin book, bought in the same place, which always seemed to me to be, in that moist creek of an arcade, like a ship-breaker's yard to which limped up the crippled residuum of lofty fleets launched with high hopes that had dwindled down the years.

But if Latin never meant to me more than an occasional creep of the spine as the echo of an intended cadence made itself heard through words at best but poorly grasped, yet at any rate it helped to fortify me in another direction. It won me a prize, and for the prize I took Taine's *History of English Literature*.

Till then, what with the books my father had instilled into my mind, what with the rich and heterogeneous mass Frank's brother had left behind him, and what with the vast and unrelated forays I had here and there made on my own account: what with all these things, English literature was for me a glorious, coloured jig-saw, not yet composed. And, reading Taine, I saw all the bits and pieces shuffling to their places; I saw new and unguessed bits moving into the pattern; I saw at last not a welter but a design, the rich and royal road of letters, marching from the rugged cell of Baeda to the fertile and watered meadows of Tennyson's England. And that, too, was one of the grand and unforgettable adventures of the spirit, such as might come to a watcher of the skies not when some new planet swims into his ken but when there breaks an apprehension of the rich and ordered harmony in which all the planets swing together about their celestial business.

They were great moments, those on which we went to receive our prizes. Gone now was the dingy old Town Hall of Cardiff. No longer were we mere townsfolk: we were citizens, whose Mayor had become a Lord Mayor and been knighted to boot, and we had built for ourselves goodly white palaces, dragon-straddled domes and slender campaniles whence the mellow bells called the hours of that golden and prosperous day.

That day is ended, but it is good to recall those white buildings and some of the happy occasions they housed. One of them was our annual prize-giving. A long, packed room, a formal and academic array at its upper end, a

distinguished visitor to give away the prizes, which repose before him on a table like a rich coloured cake which bit by bit is nibbled away as the evening proceeds.

On one of those occasions, for a variety of subjects, I had won three pounds worth of books. It was in the happy days when the volumes of the Everyman Library cost but a shilling apiece. Decorously the students walked up and received their books—one, two or three. But, with a lust for quantity, and to the devil with morocco bindings, I had staked out my claim on Everyman. On my first call, I was received with ironic cheers as I bore away a toppling pile of thirty volumes; and when, called later, I added another thirty to the store and walked back to my seat, chin firmly pressed into the topmost volume, there were roars of laughter. It was a business getting home those sixty volumes. I had taken the precaution to provide myself with plenty of string, and what is more I got on to a tram, a rare thing to do in those days.

§ §

Why does one start to write? And how? Long before this, I had been at it, on the sly. And, again, why is it that one hides those early writings as furtively as one hides some secret sin?

I had a small note-book with a hard shiny cover. A piece of elastic, fastened to the back, snapped round it. To this I confided my first literary work, which was an Ode on the Death of Gladstone. I had read about Gladstone’s death in a newspaper, and that fixes the date. I was nine years old. I do not know why Mr. Gladstone’s decease should have given birth to my Muse. He was, I assure you, nothing to me or mine. Nor do I remember anything of the Ode except the last line—an unfulfilled prophecy which is indelible upon the tablets of my memory:

The Sun that sets in cloud shall rise in Glory.

Having inscribed the Ode in the shiny note-book and snapped the elastic round it, I placed the book in a flat tobacco tin, and the tin under the contents of the topmost drawer in a chest-of-drawers. From time to time I would sneak up to the bedroom, unearth the Ode, gloat sinfully upon it, and then bury it again.

An idea that the writing of books was an almost supernatural occupation persisted in my mind. I began to keep a scrapbook into which I pasted every

piece of gossip concerning literary people that I could rake together, dozens of photographs of nonentities, reviews of books, interviews. The last time I looked at that book I noticed that the net had been trawled with generous indiscrimination and had landed Tom Gallon, Henry James, Meredith and "Iota." Who to-day knows, as I knew then, that Iota's name was Mrs. Caffyn?

When I had settled down in my newspaper office, I discovered with an unimaginable thrill that it had two authentic contacts with books. One was that a member of the staff had been a reporter on the Nottingham paper which had employed Barrie; the other was that in this very office had worked the novelist whom I shall call Henry Francis.

Francis was already a legend. It was told how he used to come into the reporters' room wearing an amazing check suit, with a sporting gun over his shoulder and a setter at his heels; how once, when there had been an important coal arbitration in the town, he had been commissioned to take a shorthand note of the proceedings, and with the money thus earned had bought a part share in a small sailing ship, in which he spent much of his time on our adjacent seas.

I never entered a railway station at that time without scanning the rows of sixpenny novels, whose coloured covers had a curious shiny attractiveness. There were always a number of Francis's books among them, and merely to see his name there, and to realise that I was working in the very room where this man had worked, gave me a feeling of personal pride that seems a little ludicrous now but which I can recall with the least effort of the imagination.

The something bizarre and foreign about him must have had its part in the matter. I knew from "Who's Who" all about his mixed parentage of French and English, about his education in a Continental seminary, about his having left our humble paper to work in one of the Dominions. That gesture of taking a part share in a boat seemed to me very fine. I knew how the men in the office scrambled for their bits of "lineage" and shorthand notes like dogs for bones, and nothing but a fiercer scramble seemed to come of it. But to wire in like that, intensively, on one good slog, and do something liberating with the cash! That was another matter.

I used to think with a thrill that some day Francis would stroll casually into the office to see his old companions. He never did. Nor is his photograph in my cutting-book. I never found a picture of him anywhere, but his picture is still clearly in my mind. I "made it up" myself. There is a foreign swarthiness about that face, its strangeness mitigated by a love of

homely English fields. It is a young face, alert and energetic, and in the poise of the head there is something that suggests a glance accustomed to horizons. The body is lithe and athletic; and all the romances that Francis writes I see as prompted by his own quick and varied experience. I never read one of them. Why, I wonder? What instinct was preventing me then, when perhaps it was good to have a hero, from taking the first step towards smudging the fair canvas my mind had painted?

It was written that I was to meet Henry Francis. More than twenty years had passed. The war had come and gone, and up and down the country memorials were being unveiled to the dead. My work took me to many of those mournful ceremonies. I was in an hotel one night, far from home, that I might be ready for an unveiling by a royal personage the next day. It was a bleak and inhospitable winter night. I had dined and saw no resource for the evening but a novel in the hotel lounge. Suddenly I recalled that Henry Francis, "settled down" at last, was living in that town. An impulse to call upon him seized me. There was no reason why I should not. He was not the great man I had thought him; a less prolific Guy Boothby was about his mark. And our common association with a certain old rag would be an excuse for an evening's talk. Some inhibition prevented the impulse from going far. I began to perceive that Henry Francis would never be for me merely a creature discerned by the intellect.

I cannot say how it was that I knew him as soon as I saw him the next morning. The memorial was unveiled, and we stood with heads bared on a rainy hill overlooking a sea of lead. The old man—oh, so old and sad!—who stood opposite me, twisting in his fingers a ruffled silk hat, was Henry Francis. He wore an old-fashioned frock coat. He had scanty white hair, and his face was flabby and sagging. He looked very poor. The purple ribbon of a commonplace order was round his neck. I asked a local reporter who the old man was, knowing well enough. "Oh, that's Francis, the chap who writes stories. He lost his only son."

In the hotel that night, I completed the disillusion by reading one of Francis's novels. And yet . . . When, rarely, something brings Francis to my mind—for he is dead now and his work forgotten—I do not think of an old man with a crumpled face and a crumpled hat, standing on a cliff in the rain, and taking what doubtful consolation he may for the death of a son. I think of a swarthy youth bustling into an office I once knew, whistling his dog to heel; or, on a day all blue and white and blowy, setting a sail to catch a fair breeze down the Channel.

§ §

In that new house to which we had moved, and where Frank's brother's books were for so long spread out for our delight, we were piling up some stylish things by the simple means of buying tea in the right shop. You got coupons with the tea, and furniture for the coupons. There was a bamboo tripod which supported an aspidistra, a table lamp with an ornate base, plush photograph frames. All these things were in the "front room." We had all that fanatical devotion to the "front room" which is peculiar to the poor. It was a sacred place. A room of our own to work in would have suited me and my brother splendidly. But the whole family, including us, still crowded into the kitchen for all purposes. It was a fine, comfortable kitchen with an open fireplace, a cheerful room to be in if you had nothing to do but read or talk. Not so good, though, if you had any other sort of work to do. The simple fact is, of course, that the use of one room for all purposes, in a house with a beggarly income and no servants, arises from the necessity to save money and labour. Using another room would mean laying fires, and fires would mean money, and so would light. That is what really lies behind all the old jokes about the unused "parlours" of the poor. But the consequence is the creation of the "sacred" feeling where the parlour is concerned. Even in the summer-time, when light and fire were not in question, one kept out of it.

So when the time came for me to write a novel, my bedroom was the only refuge. The work could not be done while the winter classes were on, but once they were out of the way I set to. Under the window in the bedroom there was a washstand, supporting an immense basin containing an immense jug and flanked by a covered soap-dish and a small vase, presumably for tooth-brushes. I have no recollection that any one of these things was ever used. For all ablutions—labour-saving again—a tin bowl under the scullery tap, supplemented by the Wash All-Over, and later by the cold bath, had sufficed. Yet there was that imposing Set, and there was another like it in another bedroom, cumbering the earth. To propose that they be sold, given away, or taken into the back yard and smashed, would have seemed to my mother subversive if not revolutionary.

So the first thing to do was to shove the Set, piece by piece, under the bed. Then I could get on with the novel. I had just been reading *David Copperfield*. I had wanted to read it for a long time, and I knew where I could get a fine edition for a shilling. My brother's birthday was due, so I borrowed a shilling from him and gave him *David Copperfield*. He was a boy who never took back money lent.

My hero, suspiciously, was named Dangerfield, and when the novel was finished, knowing that Messrs. Chapman and Hall had been Dickens's publishers, I gave them the first opportunity of keeping in the great tradition. But if they have records going back over more years than I care to count, they will find that they returned the book with scant encouragement to its author. It was a heavy blow to me, and scarcely a lighter one to my brother, who had taken the stuff day by day to the office, arriving early and staying late in order to knock it out on the editorial typewriter.

Dangerfield never went out again, nor was another novel begun. The labour was so immense, both for my brother and me, that we decided I had better try short stories.

A new weekly for boys had just come into being, and, shifting the Set again, I sat down to see if I could give it what it wanted. I wrote a rollicking tale of life in a public school. My mind was as virgin of knowledge concerning public schools as it was to be later concerning the theatre, when I sat down to assess the merits of a "Wrecker of Men." I filled the tale with prefects and quads, introduced a Doctor, and devised gay doings in the Upper Sixth. What was Talbot Baines Reed born for if not to give ideas to hard-up boys?

And the consequence was a cheque for £1 12s. 6d.—the first cheque ever to fall through the letter-box of a house we had lived in. It was incredible! One and a half guineas for two evenings' work! Something like delirium settled on us all; and before the first flush had faded I struck again, and again the editor re-acted. He was one of those splendid editors who pay when they accept a thing, not when they use it, and that was fortunate, for neither of those two stories ever saw the light of day, nor did a third, which was bought and paid for.

A man-to-man letter came from the editor. The new paper was not making the headway that had been hoped. He was asking all contributors whether, for the time being, they would write for half rates.

I felt so much affection for that editor that I would have supplied him with boundless quads and unlimited prefects for a good deal less than half rates. But, alas! soon there were no rates at all. The good ship sank, and the Doctor with his prefects disappeared into the limbo where Dangerfield was already with the unhonoured dead.

But blessings on that editor's name. He had demonstrated that it was worth while to shove the Set under the bed, to take up the pen and lay into it.

"You want a new overcoat," my mother said, when we discussed the spending of the £1 12s. 6d. "Put on your cap and come with me."

I resisted. Never before had I bought clothes alone, but I did not want my mother to buy that overcoat. I would buy it myself. I did, and there was half-a-crown change to jingle in my pocket. It was a responsible moment, a moment of beginning to fend for myself and make my own choices. It was the end of infancy.

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TRANSCRIBER NOTES

Misspelled words and printer errors have been corrected. Where multiple spellings occur, majority use has been employed.

Punctuation has been maintained except where obvious printer errors occur.

Illustrations by Gill-Lancaster have been omitted as information on the illustrator(s) is unknown.

[The end of *Heaven Lies About Us* by Howard Spring]