

MOSS

By

Bill Stanton

A novel about childhood
in the 1920s in Sheffield



Monday, the twenty-fifth day of September, in the year of Our Lord Nineteen Hundred and Sixteen . . .

Jim finished his solitary meal, washed the one plate, knife and fork at the kitchen sink, wiped each one with fumbling hands unused to such chores, and made his way back to the entry-end in search of company.

But the expected glow of the Woodbine was no longer to be seen, nor was Jack Pincher to be found leaning against one of the brick pillars there. Jim decided that his neighbour had doubtless gone in search of folk less taken up with mundane affairs and more willing to chatter over the events of such a news-worthy night.

On any other night than this he might have felt regret at the loss of Jack's company; tonight, he was almost glad to be left to his own sombre thoughts. Waistcoated and shirt-sleeved in an air refreshingly cool after the day's warmth, he leaned against one of the pillars, a still and shadowy figure in the darkness. At length, too weary from his day's toil to stand any longer, he rested his back against the wall, slid down, and squatted on his hunkers in the manner of peasants and workers the world over.

On any other night, too, he might himself have been as preoccupied as Jack Pincher and the rest of his neighbours with the searchlights probing the sky above his head in search of their prey. Tonight he had other and weightier matters in hand, nearer to home and more pressing than airships, or even the distant, though unheard, thunder of the monstrous Somme offensive, already going on three months old and likely to be older yet before it died of exhaustion. At a time when so many minds had learned how to put aside the contemplation of war and death and the like awesome mysteries to attend to matters of every day, Jim's entire thought was fixed on a mystery no less awe-inspiring to him.

In that day and age it would have astonished no one in Hallamside to see that, though the night was well advanced and his work over some hours earlier, he was still dressed in his working clothes. Only the clogs and the sacking apron had been folded and put away in their customary drawer; for the rest, he still wore the heavy flannel shirt and, round his neck, his sweat scarf, the badge of his trade. Almost luminous in the gloom, it gave to his close-cropped head an odd, disembodied look.

He turned for yet another look at the small bedroom window of No. 17, its upper sash lowered for the sake of a breath of air in the autumn night – a most unusual

circumstance in a neighbourhood not much given to allowing the winds of God into its homes.

The window was now only faintly lit by the glow of candle-light, since Lizzie had asked him to draw the curtains for respectability's sake. He had gladly, almost feverishly, agreed to her request, hoping that the curtains' none-too-heavy folds and Lizzie's none-too-perfect hearing might muffle the crump of any distant explosion. For, on the principle that she had other and more pressing matters in hand, he had kept from her all knowledge of the air-raid which had drawn most of his neighbours out into the streets of Grimesmoor. She's got enough on, he told himself. Best if she can rest while she's got the chance, at least until the worst's over.

Along with a growing sense of unease, this thought also brought with it the realization that still, after such an unconscionable time, no sound came from that partly-open window. He was puzzled to know what he ought to do, the more so because of that disturbing silence. At any other time, he told himself, his Lizzie lying awake could have been counted on to be singing one of her favourite and innumerable chapel hymns. 'throw Out the Life-Line' or 'the Sands of Time are Sinking', perhaps. Either she was asleep, or –

He told himself that he must shake off his fears. He turned again to his solitary watch.

And, even as he did so, the call came.

'Jim! Jiiim –!'

Fear clutched at his entrails as he thought he detected in the cry a note of concern none too firmly held in check. He wheeled round at once and half ran, half stumbled through the pitch dark of the entry, guided only by the lesser darkness of the sky at its end. His footfalls rang metallic and hollow like a passing-bell in its narrow confines. As he came out into the open yard, the night sky, reflecting one stray searchlight's beam, no longer seemed quite so dark.

He scrambled to his own door, careless of possible obstacles on the flagged walk, lifted the sneck, and stumbled through the crowded kitchen-cum-living-room, still filled with the smell of the new loaves that Lizzie had baked as her final task before taking to her bed.

He reached the foot of the narrow stairway, marking with renewed alarm the ominous silence from above. Almost falling in his haste to get to her, he scrambled up the steep flight of stairs and, even before he had crossed the threshold of the bedroom, called out,

'What's up, love? What is it?'

Lizzie Garrett's face, older than her years, softened at the sight of the white anxiety in his. Then, suddenly, the familiar smile belied her forty-odd summers.

'Yer soft a'porth!' she said. 'Everythin's awright! Stop frettin' yerself! A just fancied a cup o' tea, that's all.'

In the light of the two candles he was aware that her eyes were searching his face and he strove to look less concerned than he felt. She smiled again, but there was something in the smile that told him she was not deceived. a suspicion which she was equally quick to read in his eyes.

‘What’s up, then?’ she asked. ‘Did yer think it were ‘ere already?’

He grinned, a little relieved but still not entirely reassured. He had a man’s proper awe, not to say terror, of childbirth and all that went with it, understanding the business but dimly, and fearing it the more for his ignorance.

‘Nay, lass,’ he said, affecting a bravado he was far from feeling, one which he suspected she would know for what it was worth and discount it in consequence. ‘Yer’d think A’d be used to it bi now, wouldn’t yer? Aye, awright, love. A could do wi’ a cup mesen. A’m nearly starved to death standin’ out theer!’

‘then why don’t yer come in, yer soft a’porth?’ she said. The words fell on deaf ears, for he was already on his way down the stairs, his mind still full of anxious thought, but grateful for this temporary respite and for some occupation for his hands.

In the glow of the fire, still burning brightly as it did throughout the four seasons of the year, he searched beneath the sofa cushions for a newspaper. But even at such a moment, he could not bring himself to be prodigal with reading-matter which he might not yet have digested to the full, and he tilted the dog-eared sheets towards the fire so that he could check the date. Then he tore a strip from one of the sheets, folded it tightly into a thin spill and slid it between the bars of the fire-grate, where it glowed red at once and popped into flame.

As he began to withdraw the spill from the bars, he stopped for a moment, reflecting that, come Saturday morning at the crack of dawn, Lizzie would doubtless, despite all his protests, be on her knees before these bars at her weekly chore of blackleading. He pondered for a moment the inscrutable ways of womankind and his wife’s rigid code of duty, until the flame died in his hand and he was obliged to make another. This time he held the spill down until it was well alight, reached up to turn on the gas before lighting the gas mantle, and stopped dead.

Nay, Jim, he said to himself, whatever are yer thinkin’ about? Yer must be woolgatherin’, lad. Lighting t’gas? Wi’ a Zeppelin up theer, ‘appen?

He threw the spill back on the fire at once where it flared up and was gone in an instant, except for a black, curling shard through which a quick spark ran. He watched it abstractedly, wishing with his whole heart that the coming event could be over and done with and, now that the hour was almost on him, cold with fear and again pushing aside the thought which had haunted him for so long, that Lizzie was no chicken to be having her sixth bairn.

He waited until the spark died before he hefted the iron kettle from its place on the hob, carried it over to the sink and half filled it from the one tap. Then, in the act of lifting the iron monster to carry it back to the fire, yet another sudden and appalling

thought struck him. With a quick decision he rammed the kettle down on the coals, scarcely waiting to ensure that it was securely lodged there before scrambling back to the stairway and rushing headlong up the stairs.

He all but fell into the bedroom, crying out as he did so,

‘Eigh up! Yer’ve done this befoor, ‘aven’t yer? It’s ’appened befoor!’

She looked up at him from her knitting, eyebrows raised, clearly feigning ignorance of his meaning.

‘Befoor, love? Na, what is it that’s ’appened befoor?’

He raised a finger and shook it, half in fear, half admonition.

‘Na, don’t come it! Yer know damn well what A mean! Yer’ve started, ’aven’t yer?’

No doubt she had hoped to keep the knowledge from him a little longer, but seemed to relent at the sight of his face.

‘Aye, awright, love!’ she said, gently, as to a child. ‘Goo’n fetch Mrs Skinner! A reckon it’ll not be long now!’

His mouth opened to speak, but no word came. The next moment he was thudding down the stairs, knocking against the dimly-lit furniture in the kitchen, cursing the latch for resisting his first clumsy effort to lift it. Then the night air was again cool on his brow and he was running like a man possessed, glad to be away from the centre of the stage at last, unfeignedly thankful that he could be called on to play no further part in this night’s drama, and dreadfully afraid, now that the moment had come, that all might not go well with her.

He came out into the street to an awareness that the curtain was coming down on that night’s other, and to him lesser, drama. Wherever else bombs might fall this night, there were to be none on Grimesmoor, no gap to be torn this night from a terrace of houses, bringing death and bereavement to the hapless victims. Indeed, to those not immediately concerned, an extra spice of mournful gossip would then be added to the morning’s food queues, an occasion for even more nodding of heads and indrawing of breath than usual.

By the time he reached his destination, the engine note of the Zeppelin had all but faded to silence. One by one the searchlights were flickering out, so that the autumn night was now palpably darker. Now that the danger was past, his neighbours, almost disappointed, perhaps, that there had not been more excitement, were drifting towards their own hearths and to later slumbers than were customary in Fern Street. Jim Garrett, caring nothing for all this, was knocking at the door of No. 8.

Silence. Then, after what seemed to him to be an interminable delay, the sash above his head was raised and a white head craned out.

‘‘Oo’s theer?’

‘It’s me, Mrs Skinner! Jim Garrett! Can yer come?’

‘Aye, awright!’ came the answer. ‘No peace for t’wicked. A were just gerrin’ back into me bed. Awright, Mester Garrett, you get back to your Lizzie. A’ll get me things!’

Much later, as he sat and chafed inwardly, the newspaper in his lap open but all unread, he heard the first squalling cry, felt his heart leap at the sound, and knew some small easement of mind for the first time in many days.

Later still, as the minutes ticked by with no further sound, that first leap in his breast began to give way to a thudding apprehension. It’s tekkin’ a long time, he thought. What the hangment do they gerrup to as teks ’em so long?

His apprehension mounted towards the slopes of actual fear. And then, just as he began to feel that somehow he must overpower his reluctance to approach that dread centre of activity upstairs, he heard the sound of the lifting of the latch on the bedroom door, followed by the voice of Mrs Skinner, pitched low so as not to waken the other children.

‘Mester Garrett! Are yer theer?’

Am I theer? he thought. Silly owd bitch. Wheer the ’ell else would A be but ’ere, waitin’, waitin’?

He was on his feet on the instant, throwing the newspaper aside, and crossing to the door at the foot of the stairs. The dark shape of the midwife, silhouetted in the light of the candle, loomed over the rail on the landing.

‘Yer can come up now, Mester Garrett!’

He bounded up the stairs, heedless now of the bone-weariness that always marked the end of a working day, and brushed past the midwife with a whispered, ‘Ow is she?’

‘Ee, Mester Garrett,’ she replied, ‘it in’t a she! It’s a boy! A fine lad!’

But Lizzie Garrett had heard the whispered question and read it aright. The knowledge that her man’s first thought had been for her brought her near to tears, and added yet more joy to the joy of her childbearing.

‘Come an’ look at ‘im, love,’ she said. ‘‘E’s a lovely baby!’

Jim Garrett looked down at the small dark head lying against his wife’s breast and shadowed by the thin woollen shawl, and knew again the familiar yet always forgotten wonder of this moment. Eigh, lad, he said to himself. A s’ll never get used to it, never.

He lifted dark eyes to his wife’s, and she wrinkled her nose at him as she had done at their first meeting a quarter of a century earlier. Then she pulled the shawl aside to let him see his son.

‘Goo’n fetch t’others, love,’ she said. ‘A promised as yer’d fetch ’em when t’baby come!’

The midwife came behind him, her face still moist from her exertions and shining, too, with a craftsman's pride. She leaned past him towards the bed, and delivered herself of a professional judgement.

'Eigh, yon's a Garrett awright! Yer'll not be able to blame t'milkman for this, Mester Garrett!'

She touched the baby's cheek with an arthritic finger. 'What yer thinkin' o' callin' 'im, Lizzie?' she asked.

Lizzie took her eyes from the child and raised them to her husband's.

'We said Maurice if it was a boy, didn't we, Jim? After 'is granddad, yer see, Mrs Skinner. Jim's Dad, that is.'

'Aye, lass, that were your choice,' Jim replied.

The midwife beamed.

'Maurice, eh? Na, that's a nice name, is that! There in't a lot yer can do wi' a name like Maurice. To spoil it, A mean!'

In the soft, yellow light of the candles Maurice Garrett slept on, safe in the crook of his mother's arm, unaware as yet of the world of love and poverty into which he had been born, ignorant as yet of wars and rumours of wars, and bearing with no evident concern the burden of his new-made identity.

But the midwife was wrong. True, there isn't a lot to be done with a name like Maurice, but what in the fullness of time was done he did for himself.



In the morning of a smoky October Sunday, some three weeks after the night of the Zeppelin, the newcomer was baptized – or, in local parlance, ‘christened’. The brief ceremony, attended only by the immediate family and a handful of fellow-worshippers who had lingered after the morning service, was marked by a homespun Nonconformist ritual, and held in the unlovely brick tabernacle known to its congregation as ‘t’Chapil’.

The child’s given names were Maurice Edward, the first for the grandfather he would never know and because his mother felt that it was a ‘posh’ name without being ‘stuck up’, and the second for a king not long dead who had left behind him a mythology of merriment. However, had these pious folk, highly desirous of respectability in the world’s eyes, known in all its sordid detail the sort of merriment this monarch had practised there would have been some sharp sucking in of breath among them.

The service over, the chapelgoers in their neat, drab Sunday best gathered round the family and uttered, as was expected of them, the traditional compliments. It was agreed by one and all that the baby bore a marked likeness to its father, as though this were an observation worthy of remark. And by common consent, too, Mrs Skinner’s judgement of his chosen name was confirmed. There wasn’t a lot you could do with Maurice to spoil it – meaning, doubtless, that there was no accepted diminutive form of the name. This was a matter of some moment in an age when George could become Jud, Mary become Polly, and Annie could become an unlikely Nance. The search for a name which was incorruptible was therefore worth while, and it was agreed on all sides that the Garretts had avoided the universal hazard with great skill.

Best of all, they said, was the lack of anything in the name to which its owner might object when he should be old enough to weigh his parents’ choice. True, they added, Maurice in’t a common name i’ these parts. But then, it in’t a soft name, eether, and that’s a blessing when you think ’ow many poor kids ’ave bin cursed wi’ a name like Percy or Claud, or summat just as daft.

What everyone in all this self-congratulation had failed to notice was the unfortunate conjunction of the child’s initials. It was to cause the young Maurice Edward Garrett some heart-burning the first time the initials appeared in public on his new school satchel. But that would not happen until the days of secondary school, still distant by more than a decade.

They failed, too, to appreciate the difficulty young Maurice would have in pronouncing his own name in his infant wood-notes wild. His nearest approach to it, despite help from the other members of his family, was 'Moss'. Heedless of his mother's vociferous protests, his brothers and sisters seized on such a convenient name, and Moss soon became the name by which the world knew him. By the time the first of his school-days dawned the name 'Maurice' was so much a thing of the past that the sound of it on a teacher's lips was alien and unwelcome to him. But that day, too, was still to come.

Little by little, his world took shape around him, beginning with the kitchen of No. 17 Fern Street, a place of warmth and clamour and of ever-changing odours, the characteristic smell of washday and the warm inviting smell of newly-baked bread. From that first world he ventured on all fours to the flagged walk which served the back-doors of the terrace of Victorian workers' reach-me-down dwellings that made up one side of Fern Street.

For some time, access to this new world had been barred to him by a back-step across which his father had fixed a wooden threshold strip, a device which was designed to keep out draughts, but which proved a lethal obstacle for the unwary. It was common knowledge in Grimesmoor as elsewhere that draughts were the most frequent source of human ills, from stiff necks and chills to rheumatics and pneumonia. In this, the occasional draught was equalled in the harm it might do only by the dubious practice of sitting on cold flagstones, an activity which was known to give people 'summat they wouldn't get rid of' – though what that something might be was rarely explained.

Many were the devices for keeping out draughts, from threshold-strips to 'sausages' of stout fabric stuffed with sand. Nor was that all; to limit the number of ports through which draughts might attack the home, it was the practice to seal the front door of the house so completely that a caller at that entrance could prove an embarrassment, and might find that his knock was met by a muffled request to 'Come round to t'back, will yer?' True, there were events for which the front door was brought into use, notably for weddings and funerals. But for no lesser cause was the hermetic seal broken.

The wooden threshold-strip at the Garrett back door proved for some time a hazard that Moss failed to carry, until the morning that he managed it by the simple ploy of tripping over it and pitching headlong on to the stone-flagged walk outside.

After the softness and warmth of the rag rug across the family hearth and the rather less comfortable linoleum-substitute which covered the rest of the kitchen floor, Moss found the stones of the back-yard cold, hard and unfriendly indeed. At once he set up a loud wail that brought out his mother, soap-sudded to her elbows from the Monday wash-day.

Aside from a bump like a pullet's egg on his small head, to which his mother applied a dab of butter – or rather margarine, butter being an unknown commodity in that household – the only legacy from Moss's encounter with the flagstones was a badly-skinned knee. He got little in the way of fussing from a busy mother once she had administered first-aid and a swift peck on his cheek, so he found little encouragement

to go on with his caterwauling. And the next time he tried to escape from the back door he managed it without incident or injury.

In the course of time his wounded knee formed a large brown scab, providing him with a long and rewarding source of entertainment as bit by bit he picked it away, to reveal a satisfying patch of pink skin. The later pink and white scar, slowly fading, served to remind him of the dangers attendant on exploration, and to provide him in later life with the first remembered experience of his childhood.

Later still, he surmounted his next major obstacle, the low brick wall that separated the flagged walk from the higher level of ground which bore the courtesy title of 'garden'. This patch, some two feet higher than the walk, was reached by a flight of three steps set in the wall, leading to the garden path shared by the Garrett estate and that of the Pincher family next door. At the far end of this path and some twenty feet from the back doors of the terrace stood two small brick structures known to one and all as 't'double-you's'. It was to be some time before Moss was able to make use of this family convenience, and even longer before he understood how it came by its unusual name.

The plots which comprised the terrace varied greatly, ranging from carefully-tended gardens to pieces of ground which had never seen a spade and which were covered for the most part by makeshift hen-houses that might have been designed to bring about the demise of poultry in wretched circumstances. Nevertheless, a few nondescript fowls did somehow contrive to scratch a living against all the odds.

The Garretts' plot was a sour and barren waste, some fifteen feet by twelve, and – like that of the majority – had not been known to provide much in the horticultural line, save for occasional sooty irises and some woe-begone Michaelmas daisies.

Jim Garrett was not of the hen-keeping persuasion, having long since decided that hens and flowers could not easily be raised on the same piece of ground as a large family. So, over the years, the Garrett plot became a hard-packed bed of black dirt that proved to be, in the eyes of the Garrett children and their friends, a perfect playground. It was in almost constant use, at least in dry weather, as a suitable arena for marbles, cowboys and Indians, and rare ball-games on those few occasions when one of the children came into brief possession of a ball. And, as the Garretts were the only family in the yard to have abandoned all idea of making their desert bloom, their patch of ground became Liberty Hall to the rest of the children in the yard, who envied the Garrett brood such understanding and tolerant parents.

Their plot had the added advantage of being one of the few to boast a standing tree, a large plane. Though not well suited to climbing, it gave welcome shade in the height of summer and shelter from the rain when the children might otherwise have been driven indoors. Moreover, its young Spring leaves were interestingly sticky, and its trunk provided a suitable wicket for the game which in that neighbourhood passed for cricket.

However, not all the residents were as accommodating as the Garretts. There was one couple, approaching their middle years and so far unblest with offspring, who had on more than one occasion proved difficult.

The Willett family aimed at a standard of conduct so impossibly exalted that their neighbours, whose desire for such respectability was undeniable but whose own achievement meagre in comparison, found the Willetts impossible to live up to and therefore impossible to live with. The Willetts' hen-house was more stoutly built, its roof more often and more thoroughly tarred, their double-you more regularly lime-washed, and their doorsteps more regularly donkey-stoned than those of any of their neighbours. They were accordingly much emulated as models of good housekeeping, and cordially disliked.

It was Mrs Willett who introduced Moss to a new and far from welcome experience, one which he had not thus far encountered in his family circle, for his parents were now so practised in rearing children that they rarely resorted to violence, and his older brothers and sisters treated him with a rough but kindly tolerance.

He had toddled on legs still not entirely steady along the rough brick path that skirted the tops of the gardens, occasionally falling face-down, righting himself by getting on to all fours before standing upright, swaying uncertainly, and venturing on. In this manner he arrived at the Willetts' hen-house, where he found a door of scantling and wire-netting obligingly, and most unusually, left unlatched. In falling against this door he caused it to open and to give him sudden and unexpected entry to the world of Rhode Island Reds and White Wyandottes. It was the cackling of the fowls, sounding the alarm like the geese of Ancient Rome, that brought out Mrs Willett. There she found her hens fluttering and protesting about their few square feet of ground with Moss seated in their midst, adding his own frightened squawks to theirs.

And Mrs Willett jumped to the wrong conclusion . . .

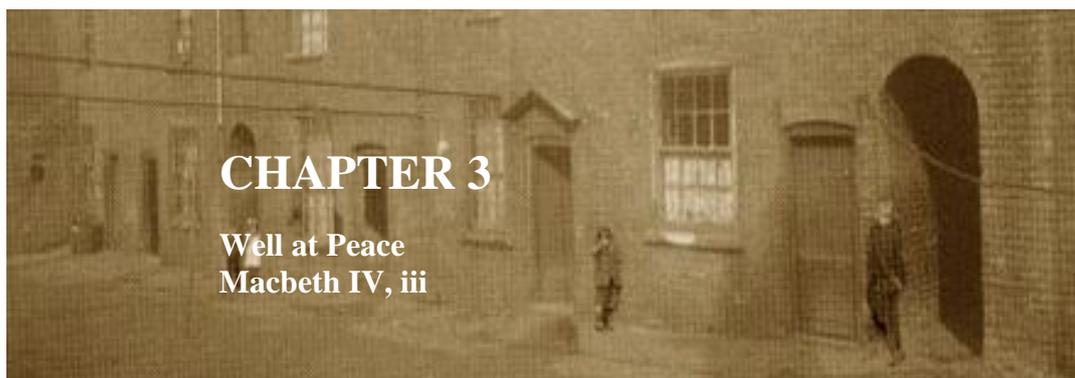
Lizzie Garrett arrived on the scene just as Maggie Willett was up-ending Moss and giving him two or three tentative slaps on his small rear, before depositing him outside the hen-house and turning to calm her outraged poultry.

Moss's bellow was one born more of offended dignity than pain, for his small behind was thickly padded with his nappy. But the sound of his cries aroused in his mother a pitch of fury and indignation so intense that it brought her neighbours scurrying out so as not to miss a moment of the promised drama.

Like her husband, Lizzie was friendly enough with her neighbours without being on terms of intimacy with any of them. To speak truth, most of their neighbours held Jim and Lizzie and their clever children a little in awe. It was common knowledge in that quarter of Grimesmoor that the Garrett family not only had books in their home but actually read them, a practice which ruled out easy camaraderie. Such an arm's length association, providing as it did a barrier to close friendships, had the accompanying disadvantage that it also prevented quarrels, a satisfying source of drama in lives not often exciting. So this set-to between Lizzie and Maggie was not to be missed.

Placid by nature, Lizzie had always taken care to stay on good terms with her neighbours but, now that the issue was joined, she took up the cudgels more ferociously than any of her neighbours would have done. In all their differences, these good folk were careful to ensure that, however outwardly violent the battle might seem, the drama should always contain a vein of enjoyment. Not so with Lizzie. The dispute rapidly grew into a 'row' of such monumental proportions and unprecedented insult that her neighbours were to remember it for a very long day. Her very belligerence on this occasion, so far removed from what was custom and practice, was to assure her henceforth of a large immunity, for her neighbours took note of what a doughty opponent she was, and vowed never to cross swords with her and to handle Lizzie Garrett with kid gloves from then on.

Moss was quite bewildered by it all, not least by the lack of any seeming proportion between the cause and its effect, but most of all by his mother, eventually seated in her own kitchen at the close of hostilities, and sobbing her heart out. At once he added his tears to hers, so that when Jim at last came home he found, as he put it 'a right old cryin' match gooin' on.'



It was a long time before Lizzie and her childless neighbour were even on nodding terms again. Lizzie had gone to great lengths – too great, she now confessed to herself – in making it plain to Maggie Willett that her barrenness was a blessing in disguise, the dispensation of a kindly Providence, meant for the protection of defenceless children.

To this monstrous assertion Maggie could advance only the well-being of her Rhode Island Reds, a stance not easy to defend before neighbours who, while not openly hostile to her, were clearly more inclined to favour Lizzie's side of the argument than her own.

As day succeeded day, Lizzie grew more aware that she had over-stepped the mark, and the tacit support of her neighbours gave her no comfort. True, she had been entirely justified in seeking to establish that, while parents had every right to chastise their own children, it was not a right that extended to neighbours, childless or otherwise. She knew that the point allowed of no argument, and that every one of her neighbours would have defended it as hotly as she. But, though she repeated this to herself over and over again, she was not reassured. She had gone too far.

Maggie Willett retired from the field thoroughly worsted, and not at all convinced that she had received justice at Lizzie's hands. The knowledge of her own barrenness was the more bitter for the additional knowledge that her neighbours on the distaff side were only too inclined to regard it as some sort of failing on her part. She had been cast out like Hagar without even the comfort of her own child. There was no comfort to be found in the world beyond the confines of her own home; she must seek it there.

But Albert Willett was no fool. He refused point-blank to be drawn in. He knew that any husband in that neighbourhood who allowed himself to become enmeshed in the toils of a feminine fracas such as this would have brought down on his own head the accusation that he was a mere tool of his wife's, and no proper man. He was only too keenly aware that his manhood was already in question because of his wife's childless state, and he had no intention of adding substance to his neighbours' unspoken sentiments.

But the ways of Providence are inscrutable, and reliable prophets few. No one could have foreseen the change in Maggie Willett that began to appear even before the noise of battle had died.

There were always sharp eyes enough on the look-out for such changes, but they failed to notice them in Maggie's case, doubtless because her outcast state provided few opportunities. True, she had always made it clear that she 'kept herself to herself', which made the opportunities for observation even fewer.

But eventually no one could fail to see that she was acting strangely, and slowly this became a matter for conjecture. It was true that she was no chicken, but she was still rather young for any of her neighbours to have good cause to nod wisely and to talk meaningfully of 't'change'. Comment bred rumour, and rumour comment, and all of it fell far short of the remarkable truth.

There came a day when the secret could be kept no longer. It was Maggie herself who broached it, and in a most unexpected quarter.

Lizzie, returning from chapel between eight o'clock and half-past on a cool autumnal Sunday evening, became aware of the unmistakable figure of Maggie Willett approaching her from the opposite direction, and clearly on a collision course.

This set a nice problem in tactics. If a meeting was to be avoided, one of them must cross over, and Lizzie could see no sign of any intention to do so on her neighbour's part. She set her face with what she hoped was the right blend of indifference and hauteur, and made up her mind that whoever gave way it should not be Lizzie Garrett.

Maggie drew nearer. It became clear that she was as fixed in her resolve as Lizzie. A meeting could not be avoided. The time for avoiding it was all but past.

Lizzie, who had long repented of the cruel things she had said, and heartily wished them unsaid, weighed the possibility even now of crossing over. But as quickly as the thought came she knew that her chance had gone.

She caught Maggie Willett's eye. There was a look in it which she could not fathom. Moreover, and most unexpectedly, Mrs Willett actually seemed to be doing her best to catch Lizzie's eye.

Maggie looked away, a bright spot of colour in her cheek. She appeared to be about to take flight. Then, it seemed, she found fresh courage. She took a step towards Lizzie, faltered, and said, in a voice none too well controlled,

'Evenin', Mrs Garrett!'

Thunderstruck, Lizzie passed her neighbour without reply. Then, knowing herself at a disadvantage now, and troubled in her conscience, she stopped and turned.

Mrs Willett had done the same.

The expression on her face was set and strained. Almost, Lizzie thought foolishly, as though she was trying to smile with a cut lip.

She allowed her own features to relax, and said in a voice almost as strained,

'Evenin', Mrs Willett!'

Then both turned and continued on the way they had been going, as though this had been any casual meeting. But Lizzie knew better, and her mind was in turmoil. In her confusion she scarcely noticed that Moss, his hand in the hand of his brother Joe, was waiting for her at the entry-end, and she had to be reminded by him of his presence.

Still with her eyes on the back of her retreating neighbour, she absently picked up her small son, methodically moistened a corner of her handkerchief with spittle, and roughly wiped his mouth. On her head, along with the respectable Sunday hat with its lethal hat-pin, she felt all the torment of deserved coals of fire.

But the events of that evening had not yet run their course.

Much later, as she rolled out the ironing-blanket on the kitchen table, stifling as she did so her scruples at doing such work on the Lord's day, Lizzie heard a knock at the door.

She made no movement towards it, expecting that at any moment the sneck would rattle, the door would open a little, and the voice of a neighbour would be heard through the crack of the door with the words 'Are yer theer, Lizzie?' for this was custom and practice. She picked up the two flat irons and laid their soles against the fire-bars.

The knock was repeated, but the sneck did not move.

Clearly, it could not after all be a neighbour calling to borrow a cup of sugar or a spoonful or two of tea. Nor could it be the chapel organist returning the chapel keys. Only a stranger would knock and wait in such a manner, and a stranger on a Sunday evening was something quite out of the ordinary.

The knock came again, this time more loudly. She was obliged to see for herself who the caller might be.

She lifted the latch and opened the door.

Outside on the flagged walk, her face barely discernible in the darkness, was Maggie Willett, clearly in some distress. Timidly, she looked up and down the path, as though fearing that she might be seen. Then she turned towards Lizzie, took a hesitant step forward, and said,

'Can A come in, Mrs Garrett?'

Speechless, Lizzie opened the door wider and allowed her neighbour to step over the threshold.

She closed the door in silence, a silence that lasted only for a moment but a moment which seemed an eternity. She avoided Maggie Willett's eyes, quite lost for a suitable greeting or a fitting gesture.

It was Maggie who spoke first.

'Mrs Garrett,' she began, 'A've got to talk to somebody, else ,,'

She got no further. Her face suddenly crumpled and, to Lizzie's utter astonishment, Mrs Willett – the hard, unfeeling, childless Mrs Willett – broke down and began to weep as though her heart would break.

Though ignorant of the cause of her neighbour's distress, Lizzie was in no doubt as to the proper treatment for such a condition.

'sit yer down, Mrs Willett! Come on, love, sit yer down! A'll put t'kettle on!'

The tea was 'mashed' and poured out before Maggie gave any sign of being able to control her tears. Lizzie waited patiently, common sense advising her that there was healing in them, and that her neighbour would tell all in the fulness of time. But the sobs died away without any sign from Maggie Willett that she was yet capable of speech, and at length Lizzie felt obliged to ask,

'What's the trouble then, Mrs Willett?'

The question, delivered in Lizzie's kindest tone, gave every sign of opening the flood-gates again, but with an apparent effort of will her neighbour at last found her tongue.

'A don't know what A'm cryin' for,' she mumbled. 'It's nowt to cry about, really. Only A'm – ' and her eyes began to brim again.

'Come on, love,' said Lizzie, stirring a spoonful of condensed milk into her own cup and pushing the tin across to her neighbour. 'sup yer tea!'

And at last the storm subsided enough to allow Maggie Willett to make herself and the reason for her visit understood. The news was so startling that at first Lizzie almost failed to grasp its full significance. Then she sat back, all but lost for words herself, though highly gratified at being entrusted with such momentous tidings.

'But what made yer come to me, Mrs Willett?'

Maggie explained.

'Well, it were Albert's idea, really. A've nobody to turn to, y'understand. No folk of me own. And Albert's mother – well, she's not the soot as A'd want to go to and talk about that. Not about that!'

She stopped, and in her eyes there was a look of joy of such intensity that it was almost painful to see. There was silence for a time while Lizzie digested the astonishing tidings. Then, without giving any sign of turning from the subject under discussion, she reached for the thickly-padded iron-holder, removed the flat-irons from the fire-bars, rolled up the ironing-blanket and put it away. There would be no ironing done in the Garrett household this night.

Then she turned to her neighbour and said,

'Mrs Willett, are yer sure?'

Maggie nodded, smiled, and lowered her head.

'Aye, A'm sure! A've allus been reg'lar, like. Albert says A'm a walkin' calendar. And now it's two months A've missed. Besides, he made me goo to t'doctor's. Oh yes, A'm sure!'

She stopped, as though to savour afresh all the hopes and the fears of those two months, the egg-shell fragility of her hopes, and the glorious realization of joy now, and joy to come. Her eyes were dry now, and shining.

Then she went on, and now with the voice of assurance,

'A said to Albert as A'd got to talk to somebody. A'd just got to talk to somebody as knows about such things. An' 'e said why don't yer talk to Mrs Garrett? After all, 'e said, she's 'ad six. An' she's reared 'em all. An' they're such a bonny lot, Mrs Garrett, an' – well, A 'ope yer don't mind, that's all!'

Lizzie made haste to assure her that indeed she did not mind, and that she would do all she could. To speak truth, she was highly flattered, though not completely clear in her mind why she should have been chosen to be the vessel for such an outpouring. But she was mightily relieved by the knowledge that their quarrel was a thing of the past and now

would never rear its head again. And the reference to her loved family in such terms had gone far to ensure that Maggie Willett would from that moment get all the help that it was in Lizzie's power to give. Her neighbour seemed to sense something of all this, and hastened to strengthen her claim still more firmly.

'Yer know, Mrs Garrett, A was that upset. That day, a mean. An' Albert did his best to – well, to comfort me, like. 'E 'asn't allus been that 'appy about things, yer know. A man feels it, not 'avin' a son. But now it's 'appened – well, A can tell yer, 'e's neether to 'old nor to bind, 'e's that glad!'

Lizzie was about to speak, but sensed that there was more to come.

'Yer know, when – when yer shouted at me, Mrs Garrett – no, no, let me finish! A shan't talk about it ever again! A – A didn't understand, yer see. Why you should feel like that, A mean. A didn't understand, not – well, not 'avin' one of me own, like. But now –!'

And there the long dispute ended.

No apologies were given or received. None was expected. There was only an unspoken acceptance on the part of both neighbours of the changed climate, signalled by the use of first names for the first time.

And now the discussion of things feminine could begin, with Lizzie delighted – as who is not? – to sit in the seat of the acknowledged expert, with Maggie Willett hanging breathlessly on every word. The tea flowed as freely as their talk, their faces grew hectic with the fever and exertion of the conversation, and time and Lizzie's ironing were both forgotten, until the return of Jim from chapel duties brought the party to an end.



It was not to be expected that such an event could be kept secret long. When Grimesmoor heard the astounding news it said with one voice, Well, who'd 'ave thowt it? It went on to add, being in no way different from the rest of mankind, that of coorse it'd known it all along; that Maggie Willett was no chicken to be 'avin' her first; and that there were moor to Albert Willett than they'd reckoned.

In that place at that time it was customary for child-bearing to begin in the 'teens rather than the late thirties. So, as Maggie's time drew near, there were those who said, darkly, that the Willetts would be lucky if the bairn survived; that it would likely be a poor thing if it did; that the Willetts would be getting on in years before their offspring was well into its 'teens; and that Maggie could look forward to a rough time in child-bed.

None of these things, of course, were said in Maggie's hearing. To her face, one and all exclaimed their delight at the news, and their confidence that all would go well. Had Maggie faced the coming event with any foreboding – which she certainly did not, spending the months of waiting in a dazed, ecstatic rapture – the number of their reassurances might have given her grounds for apprehension.

Like most human predictions, these proved to be as nearly reliable as humankind itself, which is to say not at all. True, Maggie's labour was indeed hard and prolonged and, before it was over, she was glad that Albert had insisted on calling in the doctor rather than entrusting her to the rough-and-ready services of Mrs Skinner, whose skills owed more to folklore than nursing training.

But – unlike most of the neighbour wives, for whom the subject of childbirth was a storehouse of reminiscence which grew richer and more extravagant with every telling – none save Lizzie ever heard from Maggie's lips one word concerning the ordeal of her confinement and the rigours through which she had undoubtedly passed. It was, Lizzie thought, as though the Good Lord, having decided to bestow upon Maggie Willett the best of his treasure, must first be assured that she was worthy of such blessing.

'they don't know, Lizzie,' she said. 'they don't know! A'd go through it a hundred times, aye, every minute of it, for another like Alec!'

Her undaunted resolution was not to be put to the test, however, for there proved to be but one arrow in the Willett quiver. Yet the stoicism with which Maggie had borne the long hours of her trial, the doctor having warned Albert that the birth might be difficult, and the manner in which she accepted her suffering without the presence of kinsfolk around her, moved Lizzie to unstinting admiration and caused her to revise even further her more recent opinion of her neighbour.

Her admiration was all the greater for the fact that she herself had come through half a dozen confinements with not a single complication. The bond between the two women, so strangely formed, grew still stronger, and the toughest link of all was forged in the hours of Maggie's labour.

With her newborn son in her arms, and her face lined with weariness after the long hours of her travail, Maggie said to her friend,

'Yer know, Lizzie, A s'll allus say as this were your Moss's doin'!'

To say that Lizzie was astonished at such a remark would have been a gross under-statement.

'Our Moss?'

'A know, A know,' said Maggie. 'It's daft, yer might say. Albert thinks so, any road. But A don't care! A know what A know! A s'll allus say as it 'appened that night. A was that upset, an' Albert wanted to – to comfort me, A suppose. So if it 'adn't been for your Moss gettin' into yon 'enhouse it never would 'ave 'appened!'

'Nay, don't talk soft, love!' said Lizzie, though not with any marked vigour, and in a voice which she found hard to control.

Their least observant neighbour could not have failed to notice that, surprisingly, the day of the monumental passage of arms had not after all marked the expected lengthy estrangement between Lizzie and her neighbour. Of the night of the great reconciliation the neighbourhood remained quite ignorant, except by implication; all they saw was that Maggie and Lizzie were now 'in an' out o' one another's 'ouses like dogs at a fair'.

This new relationship proved to be even more rewarding for Moss, who found himself the recipient of unusual favours. It was not customary in those parts for children to be much entertained in the homes of their neighbours, most Grimesmoor mothers having enough on their plates in coping with their own broods without taking on additional burdens. A child's playroom, therefore, was the backyard or the street. When play was over, or he was required to go on an errand, he would be called from the entry-end with an eldritch screeching of his name, apparently pitched so as to carry into the next county. On his approach he would then be greeted by 'Come in, our Ernest, will yer? Come in this minute, d'y'ear?'

In any sort of weather which made outdoor play impossible, children stayed indoors in their own homes, savage for want of occupation and a sore trial to their mothers, who greeted the return of more clement weather with thankfulness that was entirely unfeigned. It was little wonder that it sometimes required threats to persuade their offspring to come indoors.

Moss was an exception to the usual practice, since Maggie had cast him in the rôle of a talisman which had brought her riches untold. He was actually made welcome in the Willett household, which until then had not been known to open its doors to anyone but the immediate family of Albert. And not only welcome. He was fêted. He soon discovered that when his mother was up to her ears in blackleading or bread-making, and much too preoccupied to think of breaking off and making him a mid-morning crust spread with margarine and condensed milk or with beef dripping, he could almost always count on Mrs Willett to fill the gap.

The birth of Alec did nothing to threaten Moss's new-found freedom of the Willett treasure-house, and, far from pushing Moss's nose out, the arrival of Maggie's ewe lamb made his welcome in the Willett household warmer than ever. And, since Albert Willett was a first-hand melter and therefore one of the élite of the steelworks, the Garrett crust might well be replaced by a slab of fruit-cake. Cake of any kind was a rarity in Moss's home, and fruit-cake almost unknown; on the infrequent occasions when it did make an appearance it was likely to be served between two slices of bread and margarine to 'mek it goo further'.

Those neighbours who had proved right in the matter of Maggie's labour were utterly confounded in their other predictions, for Maggie's infant proved to be bonnier than most and a sturdy child into the bargain. With so many fathers away at the Front at the time of Moss's birth, and the situation not being much changed at the time of Alec's, there had been something of a falling-off in the local birth-rate. But for the timely appearance of Alec, Moss might have gone short of the companionship of those near to his own age throughout his formative years. The years before school could have proved a lonely time for a small boy with brothers and sisters who were much older, a preoccupied mother, and few of his own age to hand. But, before Moss could begin to be aware of this, Alec was graduating from the toddler stage, and it was not long before Grimesmoor was beginning to comment on their friendship in terms of David and Jonathan.

Seen together, they were a chequer pair, Moss dark of eye and hair, a gypsy child, and Alec blue-eyed and fair as a Saxon. They complemented each other, too, in temperament, for Alec was a phlegmatic child, easy-going and slow to anger; Moss's rages were summer storms, sudden and violent and as soon past.

The friendship proved fortunate for Moss in one other respect. Having arrived after a lengthy break in Lizzie's child-bearing, a gap in which she had come to regard the seven-year-old Joe as the baby Benjamin, the last and best beloved of

her brood, Moss's arrival called for some readjustment in her life. She grew more and more aware as Moss approached school age that he looked upon himself as a baby with grown-up brothers and sisters, and that but for Alec's arrival, he was in danger of becoming a spoiled child.

So Alec's appearance on the scene came as something of a blessing to Lizzie, assuring her that in the years between babyhood and school her son would not only benefit from the companionship of children of his own age, but would not be endlessly demanding the sort of attention which a busy mother would find hard to supply.

Nor were the benefits all on Lizzie's side. There were compensations, too, for Alec. As the only child of middle-aged parents, and likely to remain so, it was confidently predicted that he would be ruined, the more so as all could see that his parents found it hard to refuse him anything. Happily, Moss's presence put a stop to much of this indulgence of their son, for Maggie could not find it in her heart to give Alec dainties which Moss could not share, Lizzie having made it plain that she would not take kindly to Moss receiving too many extras which she herself could not provide. It was a good thing that the boot was not on the other foot, for Moss would have found it all but impossible to accept such an arrangement with the easy equanimity that Alec showed.

However, even in a companionship so close, it was not always fair weather, especially with Moss's thunderclouds from time to time threatening storms and overcast skies. There was one occasion he was to remember all his life and which he had no wish to see repeated.

Albert Willett, a man of long silences punctuated by embarrassed rumblings, could nevertheless speak eloquently with his huge spark-pocked hands. Alec was never short of toys which were the envy of his less fortunate friends, and particularly of Moss, who had few toys indeed.

However, the toys Alec's father made for his son were by no means run of the mill, for they were constructed in a manner one might well expect from a man whose life was spent in making steel in scores of tons at a time. Built as pear trees are planted, to serve the needs of generations yet unborn, Alec's toys were sturdy indeed. If Albert's son should demand a wheelbarrow, the product, far from being the traditional soap-box on old pram wheels, would be a stout affair which on level ground ran on ball-bearings as sweetly as watch-oil but which was hard labour to push uphill and dangerously precipitate downhill – added to which, three strong men could scarcely lift it from the ground. And all this, of course, with the best of intentions; in his anxiety not to subject his beloved son to the hazard of a broken limb, Albert, to the vast amusement of his neighbours, had been known to fashion a pair of stilts for him that might well have served as goal-posts.

Treasures such as these would have been food for envy in a breast less mercurial than Moss's, whose desire to own them was the sharper for the

knowledge that his own father, preoccupied with his chapel duties, could not be coaxed to find the time to make his son so much as a whip for a hobby-horse. So, when Alec appeared at Moss's door one morning brandishing a new wooden sword, made to Albert's usual sturdy specification and innocent of nails and such potential dangers, Moss's covetousness knew no bounds.

Alec, ever a generous and easy-going child, was ready enough to let his friend play with the sword for a while, but the time inevitably came when he felt that it ought to be his turn. But Moss had by no means exhausted the pleasures that the new toy provided, and he tried to palm off on Alec a substitute in the shape of his own crude weapon, made from the stave of a butter-barrel which still bore the marks of its Danish origin – the nearest thing to a sword that Lizzie had been able to provide.

It was plain even to a three-year old that this was no substitute for the real thing, and Alec reached out to claim his own. Moss swung the sword out of his reach, and Alec circled him, trying in vain to take it back. Moss lifted the sword even higher, and with his advantage of greater height, it became clear to Alec that he could not reclaim his own – especially as Moss now ran to his own door, still holding the prize aloft.

But, sadly for Moss, Lizzie had witnessed the incident and correctly divined what was going on. She met her son on the step.

'Give it 'ere, our Moss!' she said, in a tone which should have brooked no denial.

Moss pretended not to hear. His mother repeated the command. Again, he paid no heed. Then he tried to push past her, still holding the sword.

He had yet to learn that his own quick temper had a source, and that source now confronted him. To his utter astonishment and dismay, his mother, usually so forbearing, stopped him with one hand, and with the other dealt him a sharp slap on the cheek.

The blow from the wet soap-sudded hand rang in Moss's head like a tocsin. He stopped in his tracks, rooted to the spot with its suddenness and unexpectedness, set up a loud wail, a mixture of offended dignity and anger, turned to face the innocent Alec, and brought the edge of the sword down upon his luckless head.

It would have been wiser in Albert Willett to have wrought for his son a flimsier weapon. But, as Maggie herself said later, 'If Albert was to mek a matchbox, yer could use it fer a door-stop!'

The edge of the sword opened Alec's fair head on the instant. In the next moment the golden curls were red with his blood.

Without a word to her now silent and white-faced son, Lizzie swept the screaming Alec into her arms and rushed with him to his own back-door. Moss,

his sense of outrage now spent and his own tears wholly born of contrition, roared as loudly as his wounded friend, but the sound fell on deaf ears.

Some minutes later his mother appeared, white of face and grim of jaw, seized him in her arms and, with a single movement it seemed, swept him indoors, on to her knee, and larruped him until her own overwrought nerves had ceased to quiver.

Upon Moss, who, to speak truth, was less appalled by the enormity of his own act than by the sight of his mother in a rage such as he had never before seen, the experience left a mark which remained long after the marks of his chastisement had faded.

When Jim came home from work, he was told of his son's behaviour. For one dreadful moment, Moss feared that his father was about to add his own quota to the punishment he had already suffered, the traces of which still showed red on his small seat. But his mother, whose rage had fully abated, rushed to save him from his fate.

'Nay, there's no call to be reachin' fer 't'strap! 'E's a burnt child, is our Moss! 'E's 'ad a damn good 'idin' from me as 'e 'll not forget in a hurry!'

So his father contented himself with packing his son off to bed, fasting and in disgrace. Moss hammered on the bedroom wall, drummed his heels on the bottom of his truckle bed, and screamed until he was like to choke for lack of breath. Maggie Willett, from two doors away, feared that Jim was doing his son an injury, and rushed to assure Lizzie that Alec was no worse for his experience.

But Jim was adamant. Moss continued to shriek, but to no avail, and in the end he cried himself into a state of dry, heaving sobs and at last fell asleep, denied even the sight of his mother fast relenting of her anger. Like her son's, it had departed as quickly as it had come.

The next morning she took a much-chastened Moss by the hand to Maggie's door, tapped on it, lifted the sneck and said into the gap between door and jamb, 'Are yer theer, Maggie?'

It was the three-year-old Alec who opened the door, all eagerness to see his friend. Moss, seeing the curls swathed in white bandages, was appalled anew at what he had done.

Maggie brushed aside Lizzie's abject apologies for her wicked son.

'It's awright, Lizzie. It's awright! There's no 'arm done! Your Moss wouldn't do a thing like that on purpose, would yer, Moss?'

Moss had yet to learn that there are times when undeserved forgiveness is harder to bear than condign punishment. Abased beyond his control, he burst into a passion of tears.

‘Come in, Lizzie! Come in!’ said Maggie, opening the door wide. As they crossed the threshold, she made her way to the front room, calling over her shoulder,

‘sit yer down, love! A’ve got summat ’ere fer your Moss!’

A moment or two later she appeared, carrying the offending sword and, with it, an exact replica.

‘‘Ere y’are, Moss!’ she said. ‘A towd Albert, Lizzie! A said it’s your silly fault fer on’y mekkin’ one sword. So e’s made one fer your Moss!’

Moss, the flow of his tears ceasing on the instant, reached out with shining eyes for the prize. But his mother was too quick for him.

‘No, Maggie!’ she said, in a tone that Moss knew only too well. ‘A’m sorry, love, but no! It were right good of Albert to mek another sword, but A can’t ’ave our Moss profitin’ from wickedness like that. No, no, A mean it, Maggie. If ‘e gets away wi’ that soart o’ thing this time, ’oo knows wheer it’ll end? No, ’e’s just come to tell Alec ’e’s truly sorry for what ’e did, an’ to promise as ’e ‘ll niver do it again!’ And then, shaking Moss’s hand with obvious intent, ‘‘Aven’t yer, our Moss?’

Moss looked up at his mother and knew from the glint in her eye that her question allowed of only one answer. And, though Maggie eloquently pleaded his cause, Lizzie was not to be moved.

On the following Monday morning, the school bell tolled its customary warning, but this time it tolled for Moss, to summon him to yet more lessons to be learned.

With one small hand clutched in his mother’s, and with a soul filled half with delight and half with terror of the unknown, he stood before the headmistress’s desk to be enrolled as a pupil in the infants’ class at Grimesmoor Council School.



CHAPTER 5

Shining Morning Face As You Like It II, vii

His first impression of the Council School came by way of his nose – a pervading smell which seemed to be a compound of chalk dust, disinfectant, some sweetish odour which defied analysis, and over all this the familiar lower-orders bouquet of much washed clothing, worn over-long between laundings.

It was an odour not entirely new to Moss, for it had something of the flavour of Sunday School, though without the added fragrance of sticky varnish and musty hymn-books which gave ‘t’Chapil’ its distinctive aroma. He was to meet this smell of the schoolroom in other times and other places, and to discover that the effluvium of school is well-nigh universal.

He surveyed the hall from under his brows as he and his mother waited their turn to speak to the headmistress, and his first thought was that he had never seen a place quite so enormous. He noticed that it had a shape like the letter ‘L’ with which he was already familiar, and that it bred echoes even louder than those of the chapel with which he had long been familiar. Only here, he now saw, there were desks where the chapel had pews, and the desks in each arm of the ‘L’ turned their backs on the headmistress’s desk. This last and quite enormous piece of furniture stood between the arms of the ‘L’ on a raised square patch of planked floor, isolated on its own rostrum and with a piano beside it.

In the walls of the ‘L’, again like those of the chapel, he noticed the tall windows, set so high in the wall that he could not see the playground beyond. Indeed, he doubted whether someone even as tall as his father, and standing on tiptoe, could have seen out of them. Each window, he noticed, held a glass jar or two, still betraying at first sight their earlier career in jam or pickles, but now holding a bunch of wild flowers which were sadly doomed to wither soon, or a spray of what he knew of old as ‘everlasting flowers’, which were just as sadly fated to wither never.

At the lower end of each of these windows there was a large hopper, designed, it would seem, to let air spill out of the room rather than to let it in, and, above that, three huge panes, the topmost ending in a pointed arch, and the others supplied with stout cords, for some purpose which was not yet clear.

His curiosity about these cords was rewarded almost at once by the sight of a man in brown overalls, entering the hall at this moment and beginning to operate the cords in the opening and closing of the windows, for no reason that Moss could explain to himself. He was not slow to register, however, that the operation was accompanied by a delightful sound like the beating of a huge drum. Sometimes, he noticed, the window would at first refuse to answer to the cord so that the man was obliged to give a stronger pull, whereupon the bang that resulted was even more satisfying, echoing through the school like the Last Trump and testing the strongest nerves. Moss was to come to know this

system of ventilation well, and in the end to learn that it was able to provide only the extremes of an icy blast or a stupefying fug.

The walls, he noticed, were much like those at Sunday School, being painted to a level well beyond the reach of grimy hands in a negroid shade of brown, topped with an inch-wide black line. Above that line, the colour was one known to the trade as 'eau de Nil' – though surely no river, even the Nile, had ever achieved quite this bilious shade of green.

But he knew already, and had grown to accept without question, that the principle on which these colours had been decided was time-honoured, and one whose creed would appeal to every single soul in Hallamside. In the view of all the good folk of this town of soot and smoke, fabrics and colours were best chosen for their ability 'not to show t'muck' – not the most hygienic of practices, but understandable in a region where life was an unending war of attrition against 'muck' in all its aspects.

All this time Moss had been standing by the headmistress's desk, still holding his mother's hand but taking care to keep close to the desk itself so as to be out of sight of the headmistress – a stranger to him and therefore to be treated with caution. But when Lizzie's turn came, he could escape inspection no longer.

A head appeared above him over the desk, and he and the headmistress became acquainted.

'Come along!' she said. 'Come round here where I can see you! No, no, you'll have to let go of your mother's hand!'

This was not at all to Moss's liking, and his mother was obliged fairly to prise herself apart from her son so that he could mount the rostrum and stand face to face with this august personage whom, so far, he knew only by repute.

He was not at all comfortable to be so close to this woman, nor to the desk, of which he had heard fearsome rumours. He had already seen enough of it to learn that it was a most imposing edifice with an enormous lid behind which the headmistress virtually disappeared from time to time while she delved in its bowels for some tool of her trade.

But at this moment he had no eyes for all this, for they were fixed on the toecaps of his new boots, and the headmistress had perforce to place a finger under his chin and lift his face to hers. Then, apparently satisfied by what she saw, she turned her attention to his mother.

'Now, may we have the child's name?'

Lizzie nodded, and answered in a tone so subdued that the Headmistress was obliged to repeat the request. To speak truth, Lizzie herself – like most Hallamside mothers in such a situation – was more than a little in awe of headmistresses and the like forbidding personages, and tended to keep a respectful distance between herself and them.

This was Moss's first acquaintance with the impersonal first person plural, and he was a little puzzled to know why Miss Adams should say 'we' when she was the only person there other than himself and his mother. The time would come when that 'we' was so familiar to his ears that he would notice not the least incongruity when Miss Adams said, 'We don't use our sleeves to wipe our noses, do we, Maurice?' Now he merely put it

down to the strange ways of all grown-up people and returned to the inspection of his surroundings.

Then the great desk-lid was raised yet again and once more Miss Adams all but disappeared into its depths, to return with a thin volume that seemed to him to encompass quite the largest acreage of book that he had ever seen. This, as he was shortly to learn, was that most sacred of all sacred cows, the school register. With befitting ceremony, Miss Adams opened out the book on her desk so that now it occupied its entire surface, took out a clean sheet of blotting paper, picked up a pen which was nothing more than a raw corrugated cylinder of wood tipped with a steel penholder and nib, dipped the point of the nib delicately in the white earthenware ink-well, and at last looked up at Lizzie.

‘Of course! Mrs Garrett! We have had children of yours before, haven’t we?’

Lizzie felt herself reddening, as though caught out in some indiscretion. She could never quite bring herself to believe that it was altogether proper of her to have given birth to so many children, since large broods such as hers were held thereabouts to be the marks of women who were ‘no better than they should be’. In moments like this she would rage internally as the feeling of impropriety was brought home to her; it was one more reason for her hatred of coming to school, where somehow she could never avoid feeling gauche and inadequate. Beyond the school wall she could cope without any great difficulty with a world which at times was unfriendly, but once inside these walls her spirit would shrink within her, and once again she would begin to question her own presumption in ever supposing that she had the qualities needed to bring up a family.

Then she caught the headmistress’s smile and realized with a sense of relief that the question had after all not been barbed, nor designed to entrap. Miss Adams, it was now clear, was simply ‘mekkin’ conversation’. Lizzie smiled in return and nodded.

‘And this one is –?’ Miss Adams began, and reached over to look at Moss, who was once again cowering behind the desk. Now she came clearly into his vision as she leaned over still further to survey him. Moss did not care for such scrutiny, lowered his head and scowled.

‘It’s our Moss!’ said Lizzie, in a voice which mingled anxiety and pride. She gave Moss’s hand a shake of admonition, obliging him to look up and meet her eyes.

In doing so, the eyes of the headmistress also came into view, as she leaned over even further to view him.

‘Moss?’ she said. ‘Moss? I don’t believe I’ve met such a –!’

Lizzie collected herself quickly.

‘Maurice!’ she said. ‘It’s Maurice Edward, really. He’ll be five in three weeks!’

The face of Miss Adams disappeared from Moss’s sight and her voice was now less audible to him, though still clear as a bell to his mother, for Miss Adams had the practised projection which allowed her voice to reach the farthest corner of a playground with ease.

‘I see!’ she said. ‘You’ve brought his birth-certificate, of course?’

And of course Lizzie had not, and was forced into the humility of having to admit it. The headmistress’s too-understanding acceptance of the error was almost as galling to Lizzie

as a downright rebuke, and she agonized within as the headmistress, politely and without necessity, explained.

‘I’m sorry, Mrs Garrett, but we must have the birth-certificate. We’ll accept him provisionally in the circumstances, but I’m afraid I can’t actually enrol him without his birth-certificate, you know. Perhaps we could bring it tomorrow?’

Lizzie, crimson with mortification, was obliged to mumble that indeed we could, and hated the headmistress with even more fervour at that moment than the average Grimesmoor mother felt towards her partner in education.

Miss Adams now lowered over the desk again, and said, in a voice which seemed to Lizzie to imply that, though the mother was a broken reed, perhaps the four-year old could be relied on,

‘Now, Maurice, when is your birthday?’

But Moss had sensed his mother’s unease, and had caught some of her antagonism. Overcome with shyness, and thrown off balance by the suddenness of the question, he hung his head still lower, and shuffled his feet in the new boots. The colour of his cheeks matched the bright glow of his mother’s.

‘He’s a bit shy, Miss Adams,’ Lizzie ventured to say.

‘Oh, what nonsense!’ Miss Adams replied, in the sort of light-hearted tone that verges on the ponderous. ‘We must learn to lift up our heads and look at our teachers, mustn’t we?’

Lizzie could have told the headmistress that she would wait in vain for any favourable response from Moss to that kind of approach. He was always less mindful of the social necessities than his mother, and his first shyness had now given way to stubbornness, and to a conviction that in some way this stranger was trying to humiliate him. He hung his head still lower, but now mulishly.

Lizzie had met this bulldog tenacity in her small son before, knew that it would surely end in tears, and hurried to volunteer the information which Moss had refused to supply. Moss was duly accepted though not enrolled, the headmistress again, and unnecessarily, repeating that for that purpose she must have the birth-certificate. Then he was told to remain where he was, while Miss Adams dismissed his mother.

In one sense, the experience had been a blessing to him, for what he felt as humiliation had dried up the fount of tears which now would surely have flowed. He raised his head long enough to see his mother’s figure disappearing through the door at the far end of the hall. And, unlike most of the newcomers that day, though he felt the sharp pang of loss he wept not at all. Once more he began to inspect this new world with growing interest, and his present mood soon gave place to another.

The need for tears was gone. Moss had begun to take a liking to his new surroundings.

Brought up in such a family, there was one simple truth which so far had eluded him, either because he was too young to grasp it or because it was so obvious that it had escaped his notice.

The Garretts were a clever lot.

He had long grown accustomed to a brother and sister who went to 't'University', and it had never struck him that this was at all out of the way. Nor would he become aware for some years yet that he was the son of a man who, with no formal schooling worth the mention, was beyond doubt the best-educated man for miles around.

Any evening there might be a knock on the door as yet another resident of Grimesmoor came seeking Jim's help. If it were a near-neighbour the knock would, of course, be accompanied by the traditional lifting of the door-sneek and the question 'Are yer theer, Lizzie?' since it was always the housewife to whom the question was put. At which, Lizzie would leave whatever she was doing and go to the door, or, if she recognized the voice, would cry, 'Come in, love!'

On some occasions, the reason for such a visit would be a domestic or legal tangle which had defied the best efforts of the neighbour to solve. Nor was it always a near neighbour who called, for the Garrett family enjoyed a reputation for problem-solving which encompassed several streets in Grimesmoor.

Moss was well accustomed to such happenings, and supposed that they were routine in every household. He would come in from play, or from 'running an errand', perhaps, to find a workman standing by the kitchen table, often with his wife seated beside him, her very presence a mark of the gravity of the situation. More often, the visits took place in the evening, sometimes just before the caller had had his meal preparatory to going on the night-shift. In such an instance, he would already be dressed in his working clothes, the clogs, the hessian apron and the gleaming white sweat-scarf, and carrying on cheeks, forehead, nose and chin the pink patches which spoke of his calling even when in his Sunday best. Sometimes, it would be a turner or a fitter from one of the machine-shops, his greasy-black overalls exuding the smell of whale-oil.

Seated at the table with its covering of oil-cloth, Jim would be wrestling with some knotty legal point or some obscure phraseology while his neighbour waited patiently upon his Olympian judgement, turning his flat cap in his hands the while. Jim's counsel would be accepted without question and without effusive thanks, merely a nod and a quiet word of appreciation for the service. No more was needed. No more was expected.

In time Moss would come to know and to appreciate his father's special standing in the community, one which was altogether unofficial and quite unsought, but no less real. Jim Garrett was of a type universally recognized but not often found in such neighbourhoods, the man who was entrusted with the funds in the works football sweep, the man who spoke for a mate (though quite unofficially) in any dispute with the boss, the man to go to with any problem which defied solution – and, because of all this, the man who walked alone. He was known to be a teetotaller, thought to be 'superior' but not unapproachable, respected rather than liked, and trusted implicitly. If his workmates had been given to self-analysis, which on the whole they were not, they would have confessed to holding Jim Garrett a little in awe.

Jim himself was, needless to say, quite unaware that he held any special status or enjoyed any remarkable abilities; if there was one question he never seemed to ask himself it was where his children got their undoubted intellect. Lizzie, who was herself quick to learn, found his humility at once endearing and exasperating. But if Jim gave any thought at all to the prowess of his children, it was only with the bemused bewilderment of the mother duck who sees the changeling she has fostered soaring into the air, a beautiful, noble and unmistakable swan.

Over the years, none of this had gone unnoticed among the teachers of Grimesmoor Council School, though even they at length came to the same kind of casual acceptance of the Garrett children's prowess as Jim himself. As each of the Garrett brood passed through their hands they thanked God for another bright child who could for the most part get on with its own education without too much interference from them, and turned their attention to needier cases. No Garrett child was ever numbered in this last and most numerous flock.

Moss was about to show that he was no exception to the rule . . .



To one like Moss, accustomed to Sunday School ritual from the day that he could toddle, the school's morning assembly was a familiar ceremony merely set in new surroundings. He knew every syllable and note of 'Jesus Bids Us Shine' and was word-perfect in the Lord's Prayer, as Edith Adams noted with approval. She had long grown accustomed to 'Ahr Father wishart in 'eaven 'ow low be thy Name' and the like distortions, and was delighted to read from his lips a purer version. She noted, too, that his performance was automatic, and that his restless eyes meanwhile unceasingly surveyed his surroundings.

Assembly over, he was chivvied along with the other newcomers into the room at the corner of one of the arms of the 'L', a room known to all and sundry as 't'babbies class'. There his teacher made herself known to the round-eyed children as Miss Hanson, and at once began to school them in their first lesson in the social graces, a dialogue in which Miss Hanson said, 'Good morning, children!' to which they were to make suitable response. After some coaching, they managed to reply in ragged unison, 'Mornin', Miss 'Anson!'

Moss's first impression of his teacher was of a fairly elderly lady of obvious wisdom and maturity, but by no means as fearsome as Miss Adams. There was, of course, no way that he could know that Miss Hanson's apparent aplomb hid a quivering sense of her own inadequacy and inexperience, as she faced this the first morning of her teaching career.

Neither the ordeal of 'criticism lessons' under the eagle eye of the local inspector during her year as a student-teacher nor her 'school practice' at training college had quite prepared her for the daunting experience of facing her very own class for the first time, with no other adult in sight to support her. Twenty years of life, one year of student-teachership, and two years of training college now seemed frighteningly meagre as preparation for such awesome responsibility.

To Moss, as to all her charges, however, she appeared intimidatingly grown-up and more than a little awe-inspiring.

What Florence Hanson saw when her eyes first came to rest on Moss was a face inclined to peakiness, crowned with a cap of hair as dark as ebony and cut straight across in a fringe. Below the cap his small body seemed to run rather prodigally to bone in knees, elbows and hands.

It was the impression of a moment. Her eyes were drawn, as most eyes were drawn on first meeting Moss, to his eyes. A lustrous brown, set deep in the bone-structure of his face, they seemed to shine more brightly than those around him, having none of the lack-

lustre flatness of underfed body and mind to which the Hallamside of the time was no stranger.

Those eyes gave the observer the impression that Moss observed his world and those who peopled it through windows that gleamed out of some mysterious cave-depth of self. In the thin face they seemed almost too large, and were set – as Lizzie never tired of proclaiming – exactly one eye’s width apart. And, as Lizzie and all the world knew, this has always been the hall-mark of beauty.

To do her justice, not only Lizzie found those eyes worth the observance. There were others of her sex who had already felt envy, as Miss Hanson did now, of the long feminine sweep of the dark lashes. Eyes like that, she thought, will never go unnoticed among women. She tried to visualize them twenty years on, and wondered how they might disturb her profoundly then, as they disturbed her slightly now.

She took the first full impact of Moss’s grave and faintly apprehensive gaze, and was lost. Moss, all unaware of the potency of his small basilisk glance, merely decided that Miss Hanson was ‘awright’, before either had spoken to other.

She for her part felt suddenly less daunted by the enormity of some of her new responsibilities, and turned to face the ordeal of registration, every teacher’s first task at the beginning of a new term. This instrument of administration, only slightly less in acreage than the one Moss had already seen, was a single folded sheet as white and almost as large as a tablecloth. It seemed more suited by its size and complexity to the task of recording the Twelve Tribes.

Like all good head-teachers of her day, the headmistress of Grimesmoor was a firm believer in the principle that all young teachers should get their priorities right from the very start of their careers. And, in the view of those in charge of education in the ‘twenties, immaculate registration was the first and greatest of these priorities. It was common knowledge with these authorities that teachers, and particularly young teachers, were notorious for the abandon with which they altered ticks to noughts and vice versa, in casual defiance of the strictest injunction. Such offenders must be made to see that an error in the marking of a register was a breach which would call for something approaching a change in the bye-laws to amend it.

Since Miss Hanson was a new member of staff and, worse, fresh out of training college, she could hardly be trusted to carry out such an awesome task unaided. So Miss Adams must be present on this first occasion to oversee the whole process, to see that protocol was observed, and to impress upon the fledgling class-teacher that the class register was sacrosanct, and on no account ever to be defaced with the slightest error or alteration.

While such an immense undertaking was in hand, work must of necessity be found for other hands in the room, in case Satan provided mischief for idle hands to do. So Miss Hanson was instructed to give out sheets of newspaper, to keep the desk-tops clean; some square sheets of cardboard, to keep the newspaper from soiling the plasticine; and, finally, a ball of plasticine for each child in her care.

Each of these balls of modelling material had started life as a cylinder with its own individual though somewhat insipid colour, but had by long association with every other colour arrived at a uniform and universal shade of mud. However, the children were not

hypercritical, and Miss Hanson was soon free to attend to Miss Adams and the business of registration.

It was some time before Miss Adams was satisfied that her new teacher could be trusted to list the names of her charges and to complete her register without error – in the lunch hour, needless to say, since so much time had been lost already. Fortunately for Miss Hanson's peace of mind, her workmates took a liking to her and initiated her into the secret of immaculate registration, namely, the removal of all errors with the use of a household fluid named, perhaps, after one of England's great poets. Whether Miss Adams ever became aware of how often Milton came to the rescue of young teachers was a question which no one asked.

Plasticine was new to Moss, though he had heard stories of its attractions, and had looked forward to making its acquaintance. In no time at all he was absorbed in the fascinating task of making walking-sticks and bread-cakes, a pastime of which he soon tired and from which he moved on eagerly to more ambitious projects.

Even at this tender age his powers of concentration were awesome, a small death from which at times he had to be almost forcibly resurrected, with much show of impatience from him, and at times outright anger. There had been more than a few stormy passages of arms between him and his mother, until in the end she had come reluctantly to the conclusion that there was neither point nor common justice in berating him for not paying heed to her words when, in his utter absorption, he had simply not heard them.

With the departure of Miss Adams, of whose presence Moss had been almost unaware, the new teacher was free to move among her charges, admiring the fruits of their labours, until at last she arrived at Moss's desk.

He was lost to the world in his own project, one which Miss Hanson examined for some moments without being any the wiser.

'What is it, Maurice?' she asked.

There was no answer, and she had to repeat the question, with no better result, so that in the end she was obliged to lift his chin in the effort to win his attention. Even then his eyes still slid away, fixed upon his task.

'Come along, Maurice!' she said. 'tell me what you're making!'

And at last he looked at her, not at all pleased to be so interrupted, and without noticing that she had addressed him by name, even on such short acquaintance. He saw that she was looking at the plasticine with a question in her eyes, and wondered at the dull-wittedness of grown-ups who at times seemed incapable of grasping the simplest things.

'It's cricket!' he said, impatient to get back to his task.

'Cricket, Miss Hanson,' she replied. 'Always say 'Miss' or 'Miss Hanson', Maurice! Will you try to remember that?'

He turned crimson, and nodded. She smiled in what she hoped, no doubt, was a winning way.

'And please don't nod at me, Maurice! Just say 'Yes, Miss!' or 'Yes, Miss Hanson!''

‘Yes, Miss Hanson!’ he growled, half inclined to revise his earlier opinion of his new teacher, but won over by the smile which had tempered the mild rebuke.

‘I see! It’s a cricket match, is it?’ she went on.

‘Yes, Miss Hanson!’

‘And who is playing, Maurice?’

He rolled a walking-stick, broke off another player, and stuck him in place, wishing she would go away and leave him to finish his work.

‘It’s England an’ Australia, miss! For ’t Ashes!’

Miss Hanson looked again at the forty-odd players dispersed about the field, and asked,

‘How do you know about the Ashes, Maurice?’

He broke off from his task and looked at her sharply with drawn brows. It seemed impossible to him that she should not understand a matter so simple.

‘It’s ’ere, Miss! In ‘t’paper!’

And a small plasticine-soiled finger pointed to the sports page on which the board was lying.

‘I see,’ said Miss Hanson, though her tone belied her words. ‘there’s a picture, is there?’

He pointed out, not without some impatience, that there were no pictures. Miss Hanson took him by the shoulders and turned him to face her.

‘then how do you know, Maurice?’ Then her face cleared and she asked, ‘Were you told at home?’

He was beginning to find Miss Hanson’s obtuseness a little tiresome.

‘It says so, Miss!’

He turned from her grasp, pointed again to the newspaper, and was mildly surprised to see Miss Hanson’s hand go to her mouth and a look of astonishment, almost of fear, cross her face. Nothing had prepared Miss Hanson for this. The virgin sheet of the child’s mind on which she was supposed to leave her own loving imprint was far from being as empty as she had been led to suppose.

‘tell me what it says, Maurice!’ she said at length.

He failed to understand why she could not read it for herself, but obediently followed the words with a small finger, and read with no hesitation,

‘Australia wins the Ashes.’

‘And who told you it says that?’ she asked.

His brows came together again.

‘Nob’dy, Miss! It says so! Theer!’

And his finger pointed to the headline.

She had to be sure. She picked out other headlines. He read them, not always without stumbling, but clearly with understanding. And even when she took him from the simple vocabulary of the headlines to the body of the text, he still managed to read, with only the occasional hesitation, but clearly with no confusion.

Satisfied at last that his first effort had been no flash in the pan, she allowed him to return to his task. So he did not see the hesitancy in her eyes, and the sudden decision in eyes and mouth which sent her hurrying from the classroom. Moss had already dismissed the incident as one more example of the odd behaviour of grown-ups.

A few moments later she reappeared in the company of Miss Adams, whose face showed some impatience and evident disbelief. For his part, Moss neither heard the door open, nor saw the nod of the head with which Miss Hanson pointed him out, nor Miss Adams's answering nod.

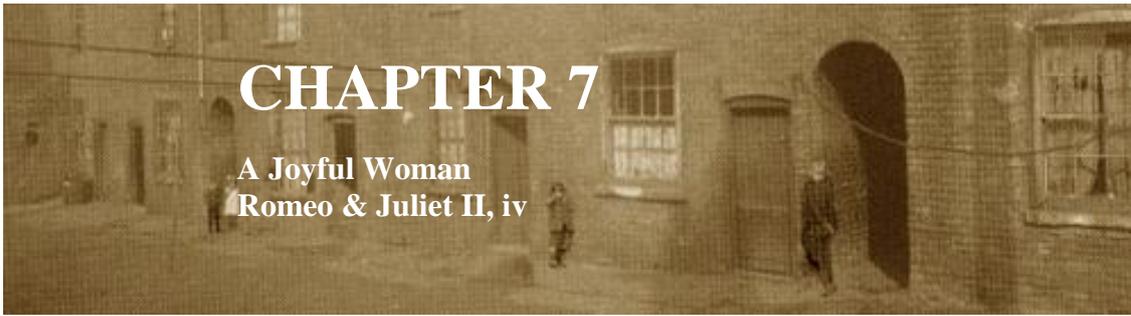
'thank you, Miss Hanson!' she said. 'there's obviously been some mistake here. I was given to understand that he was not yet five. I did wonder why his mother had not brought his birth certificate. I hope this isn't another case of a child being kept from school beyond the age of admission. It does happen, I'm afraid. I'll have a word with her tomorrow!'

Moss was allowed to go on with his work without further adult interference, until Miss Hanson clapped her hands and told the children to collect up their boards and plasticine, and to fold their newspapers, so that the real work of the day could begin.

This was not at all to Moss's liking. He had by no means grown tired of such absorbing work, and there was a small scene with him before he could be coaxed into a new occupation. Lizzie could have told Miss Hanson that Moss liked to finish what he had started, and that it led to an altogether easier life to go along with this.

However, he was soon absorbed in a new pastime, and again all but unaware of the world around him. Indeed, he was beginning to realize that the terrors of school had been much overdrawn. For his part, it was growing more attractive with every hour.

But more than once during the rest of that day he was aware of the eyes of Miss Hanson, fixed upon him with a look in them which he could not fathom.



Miss Adams took the birth-certificate from Lizzie's hand and inspected it with what seemed to Lizzie quite needless care, and with what she also took to be equally needless suspicion.

'I'm sure you understand, Mrs Garrett. We must check the date of birth with the official document. We do get parents, you know, who try to avoid bringing it. For reasons of their own, they want to send their children to school before they're entitled to attend.' She paused, and added meaningly, 'And there are some, I regret to say, who don't send them as soon as the child is eligible.'

Lizzie's only concern had been that the headmistress might have said that Moss was too young to start, at least until after Christmas. She said nothing. You'd think she goes on clockwork, she thought. All that fuss for a bit o' paper.

She turned to go, but the headmistress, it seemed, had not done.

'Oh, Mrs Garrett, you didn't tell us that your son could read!'

The tone was almost an accusation, and Lizzie, already none too pleased at what she considered an unnecessary journey, prepared to bridle. Miss Adams read the warning signs, and added hastily,

'We discovered it quite by chance, yesterday. We do like to know these things, you know. Fortunately, Miss Hanson reported it to me at once.'

Lizzie's failure to understand was as marked as her son's had been. What the hangment's up wi' 'er? she thought. Yer'd think as she was tellin' me as our Moss's got nits in 'is 'air. She searched with difficulty for some way to answer the veiled accusation. And then the light dawned.

'Oh, it's our Annie Ruth,' she said. 'Our Moss's sister! She's been teachin' our Moss to read!'

Miss Adams flushed.

'teaching is a job for properly qualified people, Mrs Garrett. It calls for a long period of training. A great deal of harm can be done by the use of wrong methods in the hands of untrained people!'

Clockwork again, thought Lizzie, and held her peace. Miss Adams clearly failed to recognize the warning signs in Lizzie's smouldering composure, and blundered on into the cannon's mouth.

‘Of course, we understand that parents wish their children to progress. We do understand that, believe me. But we would much rather that Maurice’s education was in the hands of competent and qualified teachers. Otherwise, we may find that he has to unlearn some unfortunate habits. He’s really much too young to be reading newspapers, you know. Most unsuitable, most unsuitable.’

Head-lice again, Lizzie thought. All her quivering sense of inadequacy in the face of authority was quickly melting away in the heat of her wrath. The headmistress saw the bright spot in her cheek, and quite misread its meaning.

‘there’s nothing to be ashamed of, Mrs Garrett, I assure you. On the contrary, it’s quite praiseworthy of your daughter to want to help her small brother. But you must understand –’

That’s far enough, Lizzie thought. A’m sick an’ tired of being told what A should understand. She broke in quickly before her mounting anger could rob her of the power of speech.

‘How old is our Moss’s teacher, Miss Adams?’

The headmistress was nonplussed.

‘How old is –? She’s –! I’m sorry, Mrs Garrett, but I really can’t see what that has to do with the matter!’

‘It’s got everythin’ to do wi’ it!’ said Lizzie. ‘A’m towd as ’ow she’s just out o’ college. Trainin’ college. Is that right? So she’ll likely be a bit younger than our Annie Ruth. Not that we’ll ’owd that against her! A reckon time’ll tek care o’ that!’

It was clear that the headmistress was bemused by the turn the conversation was taking, but before she could reply, Lizzie went on,

‘Any road, our Annie Ruth’s twenty-three –’

Miss Adams returned to the fray.

‘Mrs Garrett, that really is not the point! Miss Hanson is a trained certificated teacher!’

‘A should ’ope she is,’ Lizzie replied smoothly. ‘Na don’t get me wrong, Miss Adams. A’ve nowt against Miss Hanson. Our Moss seems to like ’er, any road. And A don’t ’owd it against her that she’s a bit young to be teachin’. We’ve all got to start somewheer.’

Miss Adams prepared to speak again, but Lizzie would have none of it.

‘And A don’t ’owd our Annie Ruth’s age against ’er, either.’

The headmistress felt that she was fast losing control of the situation, and broke in quickly.

‘It’s not merely a matter of age, Mrs Garrett. It’s a question of suitable training.’

Lizzie had led her opponent skilfully into a position from which she could deliver the coup de grâce. Now she was savouring to the full the sweets of inevitable victory, and Miss Adams, clearly quite unable to account for the look of triumph in her face, was just

as clearly becoming increasingly aware, for the first time since the interview had begun, of doubt as to its outcome.

She hastened at once to win back lost ground.

'I'm sorry, Mrs Garrett, but we must insist that your son's education is left in the hands of professionally qualified people! That's all I have to say! And now I really must be getting on –'

'Just a minute, Miss Adams,' said Lizzie, standing her ground and speaking with icy politeness. 'A've no wish to tek any moor o' your time. But A 'adn't quite finished! And you haven't answered my question!'

'Question?'

'A asked yer what yer'd call proper trainin'!'

It was now plain that Miss Adams was certain that matters had gone far enough. She closed the admissions register, as if to bring the dialogue to a close.

'Mrs Garrett, I really don't see what that has to do with the matter!'

Lizzie pitched her voice more softly.

'In that case, there'll be no 'arm in our Annie Ruth teachin' our Moss, will there? Seein' as she's professionally trained, A mean!'

The headmistress's open mouth made any answer unlikely, and Lizzie delicately placed her final thrust.

'Our Annie Ruth left University two year since,' she said quietly. 'she's a Bachelor of Arts! And she's got a Diploma of Education! Of coorse,' she added, graciously, 'you've not been 'ere long yerself, 'ave yer, else you'd 'ave known that!'

The headmistress's still open mouth was the measure of Lizzie's victory. A degree in Arts was more than she herself could boast, and she more than half suspected that this mother whom she had so under-estimated was aware of that fact. But in spite of the veneer that spoke of the eternal schoolma'am, Edith Adams was a teacher by choice and not by chance, and she respected learning.

'Good heavens, Mrs Garrett, why ever didn't you tell us before? We had no idea!'

Then she saved the day, and fully redeemed herself in Lizzie's eyes with her next words.

'Oh, I do apologise, Mrs Garrett! My goodness, you must be a proud mother to have a daughter with a degree!'

Lizzie could afford to be magnanimous in victory.

'We 'ave two,' she said. 'A mean, two wi' letters after their name. Our Jack's a Bachelor of Science. 'E's a metallurgist at Vickers's Works!'

Miss Adams, thoroughly abased, reached out an impulsive hand.

‘Mrs Garrett, what can I say? Two children with degrees! What a splendid achievement – for you and your husband!’

‘Oh, we’ve not done yet,’ said Lizzie, her face resplendent with pride. ‘Our Jimmy’s at t’Central School as well, an’ ’e’ll be goin’ to t’University next!’

The astonishment of Miss Adams knew no bounds.

‘Of course, they were all before my time, weren’t they? I know that Elsie is at Secondary School, of course. However did you manage it? It must have meant great sacrifices for you and your husband.’

‘Oh, we manage well enough,’ Lizzie replied. ‘Jim’s in reg’lar work, thank God. An’ then there’s the extra he gets from t’Chapil. Caretekkin’, you know. An’ now there’s our Jack an’ Annie Ruth ’elpin’ out.’

Miss Adams escorted Lizzie to the door.

‘It’s been a great pleasure, Mrs Garrett. No, a privilege! We shall follow Maurice’s career with great interest, knowing his background. Really, I’m delighted, delighted. And truly – impressed! Mrs Garrett, I’m proud and privileged to have met you!’

For Lizzie the journey home could hardly have been more unlike that of the previous day. She savoured every morsel of the sweets of victory recalling every detail of the meeting, tasting every tit-bit of the encounter. To speak truth, she had few opportunities to glory in her children’s achievements, for fear of providing fuel for accusations that she was putting on airs, of becoming ‘stuck up’ and ‘gettin’ above ‘erself’. She was undeniably proud of her brood, and well aware that her neighbours, though fully conscious of their success, had little idea of what it really meant, nor of the cost to her and Jim. It was milk and honey in her mouth to know that in Miss Adams she had met someone who knew not only the worth of the prize but the price that had to be paid for it. And now she found herself longing for the end of the working-day when she could retail every particle of it to Jim. Barely conscious of the occasional greeting from a neighbour, she floated along, luxuriating in the warmth that can always be counted upon to bathe mankind in complete well-being, the glow of self-esteem.

Moss, of course, knowing nothing of all this, was astonished and not a little alarmed when Miss Hanson, having been called from the classroom, returned a few moments later and beckoned him to her desk. He was to go to Miss Adams’s desk in the hall, she said.

Her words filled him on the instant with alarm. He went back at once over the day’s proceedings, trying to discover whether he might have committed some offence which could merit the ‘stick’ which, he had been told, was kept in that desk.

But when he presented himself at that Holy of Holies he was reassured at once by the smile that greeted him across the wide top of the headmistress’s desk.

This time Edith Adams gave her new pupil an altogether longer scrutiny than she had earlier bestowed on him, not without some difficulty that Moss himself had brought about. She, too, now noticed those eyes, and his trick of inclining his head a little and gazing at her gravely from under his brow.

‘Come along, Maurice!’ she said. ‘Come up here to me! I want you to read to me!’

He needed no second invitation. He loved reading and could not get enough of it, and he loved to show off his prowess in that department almost as much. As he scrambled up beside the headmistress, she reached out an arm and drew him closer so that he could see the book which she held.

Tentatively at first, for he was still more than a little in awe of her, he began to read. He realized at once that it was just 'a babby's book' and read with growing assurance. She took him next through the alphabet, which he reeled off with ill-concealed disdain, and then on to a few passages chosen at random from the school readers on the desk.

When she was satisfied, he stood patiently while she sat brooding for a moment. Then she seemed to collect herself and come to a decision.

'Maurice,' she said, with a suddenness that startled him, 'do you know your numbers?'

He looked blank. Then a tiny flag of doubt and concern showed in the dark eyes.

'D'yer mean countin', Miss?'

She nodded.

'Oh, A can count to a 'undred!' he said. 'Moor! Two 'undred!'

'And that's all?' she asked. 'Just counting?'

'A can add up an' all,' he said patiently, as though puzzled by such ignorance on the part of a grown-up. Then, conceding some reservation, he added,

'A sometimes gerrit wrong when A'm carryin'!'

She looked doubtful, and he added,

'A'm on'y just startin' on take-aways.'

Again she was silent and he waited uneasily, by no means understanding her preoccupation. Her next question surprised him with its unexpectedness.

'Maurice, do you know Miss Butler?'

He was about to nod, when he remembered Miss Hanson's words.

'Yes, Miss Adams!' he said, and pointed to Miss Butler's door.

She was about to chide him for pointing, but collected herself in time.

'I want you to go to Miss Butler and ask her – politely, Maurice – if she will come to see me. And then I want you to stand by Miss Butler's desk until she comes back. Can you do that?'

Again he was about to nod, and remembered just in time.

'Yes, Miss Adams!'

His studded boots scraped on the edge of the platform as he scrambled down, glad to be released from this strange situation. Miss Adams, with a curious expression, almost as though she were on the verge of tears, watched the small figure in the cheap jersey, the

thick sensible trousers and the thicker but equally sensible boots, clattering over to Miss Butler's door.

He remembered to knock and to wait until Miss Butler herself came to the door, not well pleased to be interrupted in her teaching. She listened to his message, and looked up towards the headmistress as she allowed Moss to enter. But Edith Adams had no eyes for her fellow-teacher at that moment. She was tasting one of the sweets of her calling, the knowledge that a child had been entrusted to her care who might well be exceptional.

A sudden tremor ran through her. She shook herself almost angrily. This is quite ridiculous, she told herself, but with no conviction. This is a good day, she thought. No doubt there would be others. And suddenly she knew beyond all doubt, that her feet had been set upon the right path. She was often prone to misgivings, and there had undoubtedly been times when she had questioned the wisdom of the Lord in dropping her in this backwater called Grimesmoor.

But one day like this could wipe all doubt clean from the slate.

Still at something of a loss to know what was going on, Moss stood by Miss Butler's desk, occasionally shifting from one foot to the other, gazing about him at these new surroundings, doing his best to ignore the whispered remarks of the children, and trying to avoid contact with their eyes.

On the top of the high cupboard behind Miss Butler's desk stood a strange collection of shapes, apparently made of wood, but serving no purpose that he could imagine. He knew neither their names nor whence they came, but he admitted to himself that they looked rather more interesting than the childish things in Miss Hanson's room.

Over to his right, against the end wall, a map hung from a wooden rod, with another rod at the bottom end, a yellowed and crazed piece of varnished linen bearing the legend, 'the Holy Land'. There was comfort in its familiarity. He had seen one just like it at Sunday School. The room no longer seemed quite so alien.

Round the walls hung small sheets of black paper on which groups of sounds had been chalked. He entertained himself idly for a few moments with 'oo' and 'cool' and 'pool' and the like, until that occupation palled, too.

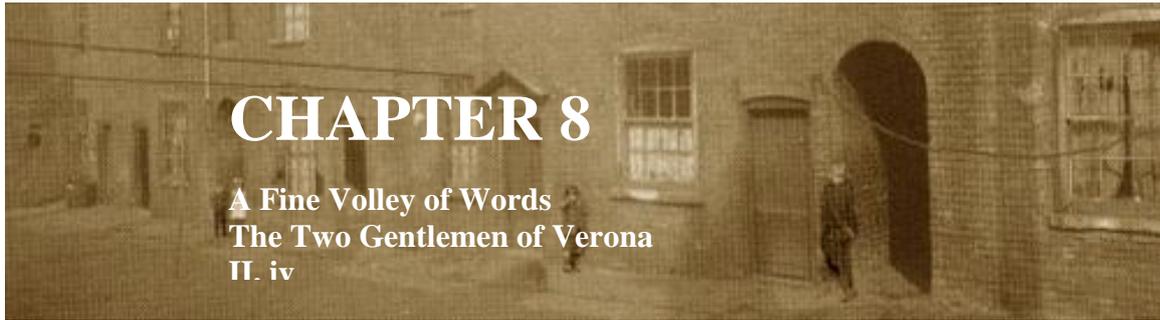
He sighed, and shifted his feet again, noting that, in spite of the teacher's prolonged absence, there were few signs of mischief in the air, apart from some shuffling of feet and the occasional guarded whisper. He recalled, with a stab of concern, that Miss Butler had a reputation for being 'strict'.

When the teacher returned, she looked at him for a moment or two with evident curiosity. Then she suddenly smiled, and the usually severe countenance was transformed. Moss, ever ready – given the least encouragement – to respond, smiled in return and decided that Miss Butler, like Miss Hanson, was 'awright'.

It was as well he thought so, for he now learned that he had left the care of Miss Hanson for ever, and moved to Miss Butler's class, for what reason he could not fathom. From now on he would be in the company of children a full twelve months older than himself. He was sorry to leave Miss Hanson, since he quite liked her, but not at all sorry to leave behind the babyish things they did in her classroom. There had been times during that

first day when he had come dangerously close to being bored. Perhaps things would be different in Miss Butler's class.

He clattered to the place in the front row to which she directed him, careless now of the buzz of interest which his coming had aroused, and the studs of his sensible boots struck sparks from the iron frame of the desk as he took his seat.



CHAPTER 8

A Fine Volley of Words The Two Gentlemen of Verona II. iv

Joe Garrett's attitude to his younger brother had so far been one of long-suffering rather than the off-hand affection which Moss's older brothers and sisters showed. But then, Joe had some small excuse for the odd show of impatience. Quite aside from having had his nose put out of joint by the arrival of the newcomer, and this after he had grown accustomed to being the pampered darling of his parents, he had borne a large share of Moss's upbringing during the past five years.

'tek our Moss wi' yer, our Joe!' had become a dreaded sound to his ears, to be followed by a weary buckling-on of ball and chain which the care of a lively youngster must always be to one who loves freedom. It was hardly surprising if there were times when the fruit of his exasperation fell upon the head of the innocent Moss.

For the care of Moss was no light burden. As soon as he was safely past the toddler stage, he discovered the delights of exploration of the streets, the 'jennels' or alleyways, and the backyards of Grimesmoor, and its immediate and eventually not so immediate surroundings. He took to wandering off for hours at a time, not to be missed until Lizzie raised her head from her chores and noticed his absence. Then, if her piercing cries at the entry-end failed to unearth her errant son, it was invariably Joe who was sent off post-haste in search of the happy wanderer. In truth, it was not always the impossible task that it might seem to be, for there was invariably some shopkeeper or some idler holding up the wall of the Three Crowns who could be relied upon for a clue to Moss's whereabouts.

It did not take Joe long to decide that there might be a lesser evil. It might, he decided, be rather less of a burden to take Moss along with him on his own jaunts and risk the displeasure of his friends, than face the inevitable command from his mother the moment he returned from school. Moss was not at all averse to the suggestion that he should wait at the school gate every day for his brother, and looked forward eagerly to the occasional excursions with Joe and his friends which always promised the exploration he loved with the added savour of new excitements.

In his efforts to achieve the co-operation of his friends in agreeing to a practice which found little favour in their eyes, Joe had several persuasive arguments. First, they had almost all suffered in like manner from the presence of a younger hanger-on in the family and could well understand and sympathize with Joe's exasperation. Next, Joe could lick any one of them with one hand tied behind his back. And finally, every one of the band knew that the commands from Joe's mother to find his brother had too often disrupted their jaunts with a popular leader. There were those, too, who knew from their own

experience that it was no joke to arrive home as hungry as a hunter, only to be told, in terms similar to those which greeted Joe, 'Yer can't 'ave any dinner till our Moss is found!'

However, Joe's all but reluctant decision and their own slightly more reluctant acceptance of it proved to have one consequence which they might not have foreseen, and which even Joe found unwelcome. They soon discovered that Moss's presence exercised a certain restraint on any devilment they might choose to plan, for fear he should childishly blab it out in the presence of his parents.

For Moss, however, the new régime was very much to his liking, his knowledge of the topography of Grimesmoor and its immediate surroundings being vastly enlarged, and his vocabulary enriched with words that his mother would certainly not care for, which he himself but dimly understood, but which had all the allure of forbidden fruit.

Lizzie was entirely ignorant of this widening of the field of her son's grasp of language until it was brought home to her on a visit to the home of the Sunday School Superintendent, a visit which would long be remembered by all present, and which eventually was to pass into the Garrett family folk-lore.

It was an occasion of no little moment. Albert Kirk, the pillar of Hensley Street Chapel's Sunday School, was not your vulgar run-of-the-mill working-man. Albert Kirk had his own business, dealing in fents and haberdashery, terms which all understood, but few could accurately define.

Albert Kirk also ran a 'bob a week' check business, an enterprise which consisted of Albert lending the client a pound sterling, which the client then repaid in sums of one shilling every week for twenty-one weeks, the extra week being regarded as the interest on the loan. The average citizen of Grimesmoor naively reckoned this to be an interest of some 5% on the loan, a belief which was a measure of the average citizen's lack of sophistication in money matters.

Albert, being a shrewd man of business, knew better, and did not disabuse them. It would have done no one any good, he argued, to know that not only was the actual interest almost 13% per annum, but that he also collected dues by way of discount on everything bought from the tied shops where the checks were spent by his clients. As Moss's brother Jack had been known to say, 'It must be the poor what 'elps the poor, 'cos it's certainly i'nt the rich'. It was a practice which the Hebrews – whose works Albert assiduously preached every Sunday, though not noticeably practising during the rest of the week – would have roundly condemned as the worst of usury. But if Albert Kirk ever suffered from the pangs of conscience on this account, there was little outward sign.

It was as well for Albert that the members of the congregation at Hensley Street Chapel were blissfully ignorant of simple mathematics, or he might not have been so widely regarded as a highly-respectable and highly-respected man, and a pillar of the Chapel. No one could say that Albert Kirk himself was ignorant of his own eminent respectability, nor of his own true worth, for he would often pontificate from an Olympian height about

the unwisdom of building a house upon sand with no regard whatever for the unwisdom of preaching what one does not practise.

It was, needless to say, an act of great condescension on Albert's part to have invited the chapel caretaker's wife and the two youngest members of her family to tea, and all the parties to the arrangement were conscious of that fact. If Joe and Moss were less conscious, it could only be put down to childish ignorance of such nice points. It was certainly not for want of telling from their mother.

It was as well, however, that no older members of the family had been included in the invitation, since Jack for one had let it be known that the Superintendent's surname might more fittingly have been 'shark', and that for his own part he would as soon give him a good hiding as a 'Good morning!' This was a view shared by all the more mature offspring, whose wider education had given them a distaste for the sickening hypocrisy behind the so-called religious practices of such as Albert Kirk. As much as anything else it was practices such as these which had persuaded them one and all to abandon regular observance in their 'teens, despite all their mother's pleas.

For Joe and Moss, it was necessary for special and unusual arrangements to be made in honour of the great day. Item: They were told that on that afternoon they would be allowed to miss Sunday School. However, their jubilation on hearing the news was short-lived, since they learned in the same moment that they must take a bath instead. They resented this greatly, having both been subjected to this ordeal on the Friday evening. The idea of a soak-and-scrub twice in one week was not at all to their liking. But Lizzie was taking no chances.

The bath over, they were put through the bothersome business of having their heads soaked in vinegar and then raked with a fine-tooth comb. Lizzie heard their protests, but turned a deaf ear, for she had a horror of head-lice, though quite unaware that such a scourge was no respecter of persons, being as likely to visit the rich man in his castle as the poor man at his gate, always depending upon the sort of company he kept. She reasoned with not the slightest compunction that if her peace of mind was to be purchased at the price of a little discomfort on the part of her children, so be it.

Once these preparations were complete and they were both dressed in their itchy Sunday clothes, they were told to sit still, and quietly, until she had finished her own toilet. They were solemnly warned what would happen if they disarranged so much as a hair of their heads or a crease in their suits or, worse still, woke their father from his customary Sunday-afternoon nap in the old rocking-chair.

Had Lizzie been entirely honest, she would have confessed that the honour of taking tea with the Sunday School Superintendent and his wife was hardly worth the long preparation for the event, or the nail-biting anxiety of wondering whether her cack-handed children would disgrace themselves – and her as well, by dropping a piece of Sarah Kirk's Crown Derby or by spilling tea on that sacrosanct front-room carpet.

But there it was. The invitation, not lightly given, was not to be lightly declined. All the participants knew that Jim owed his continuing spare-time employment to such as Albert Kirk. It is not always inferiors who are required to tug the forelock; indeed, almost never.

To Lizzie's great relief, the meal passed off without mishap. No small miracle, for it was 'a proper sit-down do', with rather more implements to be managed than either Joe or Moss were accustomed to. Tea over, and 'sided' away, Lizzie was heartily glad of Sarah Kirk's suggestion that Moss might like to look at a picture-book.

She had noticed her small son looking intently and curiously at Albert Kirk's florid face and listening to his Pooh-Bah utterances with the sort of expression that heralded comment or an awkward question. But she knew that she could count on his total absorption in a book, especially a picture-book which he had never seen before, and could then bend her eye to the quelling of any hint of mischief from her other son. Fortunately, Joe's acquaintance with Albert Kirk's eccentric appearance and manner of speech was longer than Moss's, so he was less likely to think them worthy of remark.

It must be confessed that the Superintendent's ways would have merited comment and even imitation from less observant children than Lizzie's. At some time in his career, at a time when he had decided that to become a local preacher might not be altogether bad for business, someone had unwisely advised Albert Kirk of the virtues of elocution, especially that part of it then described as 'expression'. It might have been less damaging had he chosen a teacher with professional qualifications, but the size of the fee which was mentioned had alarmed a man who was described by the good folk of Grimesmoor as one who would skin a flea. He had therefore chosen the cheapest tutor he could find, and – ever anxious to get the most value for the least money – had applied himself unstintingly to the tuition he received.

The result was excruciating to every ear but Albert's. It took the form of a curious sing-song delivery in which unimportant words were leaned on and the more important given lesser stress. One of the secrets of good diction, he was told, was clear articulation, which apparently consisted of coming down like a butcher's cleaver on every dental consonant. When all this was accompanied by a sort of nasal bray as a prelude to every statement the product was something that would have excited remark from duller-witted children than Lizzie's.

'Nyaa!' he would begin. 'Nyaa, Mrs Garrett-ah! Would-ah yer like a bit-ah more bread-ah and butter?'

This practice, perhaps because of its very singularity of utterance, was much admired – though not, it must be said, by all – and eventually helped him to achieve his ambition, and to spread the benefit of his elocution across a yet wider harvest-field. Such an ambition, coupled with so meagre a background, would have been ludicrous in an orator of faultless language; on the lips of Albert Kirk, who still retained all the Hallamside breadth of vowels, only long familiarity with it could rob it of its comic overtones.

Joe, being more accustomed to the sound, paid little heed. For her part, Lizzie continued to pray that the book would prove so absorbing to her small son that it would overcome

his earlier and all-too-obvious fascination with the Kirk oratorio. Her prayers proved her undoing, for the Superintendent, observing her lack of attention to his words, ran out of steam.

In the easiest of *tete-à-tetes* – and this one was far from that – there occur occasional silences.

Into this one Moss dropped a bomb-shell.

He was studying a coloured photogravure of the Charge of the Light Brigade, a spirited rendering of the event in which wild-eyed men, wide-nostrilled horses, and flame and smoke combined to give an effect which doubtless owed more to the imagination of the artist than to actuality.

But it had the publishers' desired effect on Moss. He drank in every detail of the scarlet tunics, the flashing sabres, the plunging hooves, the wounded men reeling to the ground, added a large helping of his own active imagination, and cried out into the silence,

'Gee up, yer buggers!'

There followed an even deeper silence, an appalled silence. Then Lizzie, her face flaming, caught up her youngest son, and with feverish and halting excuses about the need to be back in time for the evening service, hurried her two sons from the scene as quickly as she decently could.

Had it not been for one sobering thought, Joe would have been highly amused, and would have looked forward with delight to sharing the event with his cronies. But he had a shrewd notion who would get the blame for Moss's knowledge of such a word, one which had assuredly never been heard within the Garrett household. His mother could say, without fear of contradiction, that Moss had certainly not heard that word at home.

It was hardly to be wondered at that, from that day, Lizzie began seriously to weigh the unwisdom of allowing Moss to spend quite so much time in his older brother's company.



CHAPTER 9

A Strutting Player Troilus & Cressida I, iii

But to decide is one thing, and to act quite another, and Moss might have gone on enjoying the company of Joe and his cronies had it not been for a traditional festival, one which came during the Christmas holiday at the end of Moss's first term at school, and which provided for Joe a happy issue out of all his afflictions, at least where his small brother was concerned.

'Derby Tuppin' was an ancient custom, a lingering relic of the antique rituals of the Mummers – though few of the original members of those companies would have recognized the ceremony which Joe and his mates were about to celebrate.

The traditional companies having long vanished from the scene, their observances were now left to bands of boys, forming groups of strolling players for this one occasion in the year, and disbanding as soon as the ceremony was over and the spoils had been counted.

There were many parents who, for good and sufficient reasons of their own, put an interdict on such goings-on, and many were the groups of Derby Tupperers that broke up in wrangling and disorder when some member of the cast was flatly forbidden to dress up in the traditional garb, blacken his face with soot from the fire-back, and sally out on the morn of Boxing Day to take part in the ancient rites.

So Joe Garrett's small troupe counted themselves lucky indeed when Christmas Day arrived with no reported falling-off in the expected attendance on the morrow. As the acknowledged leader, Joe had opted for the part of Beelzebub, and no one challenged his right to cast that and the other rôles. So with due care he selected his assistant, Devil Doubt, and the supernumeraries, and the chosen few then prayed for a fine Boxing Day and generous neighbours.

The next day did indeed dawn fine and clear with an edge of frost in the air, but happily not enough to persuade a 'nesh' parent to keep her ewe lamb at home. The appointed hour of eleven o'clock arrived with all but two gathered in, only Devil Doubt and one of the walk-on parts having so far failed to put in an appearance. But no one yet was anxious. At that time boys of that age were often burdened with the title of 'family slipper' on account of the number of times they were required to slip and fetch some article of shopping, or even a younger brother or sister, and punctuality at any event was not to be expected.

The minutes passed, and Joe began to chafe. The first dread signs of dissatisfaction were becoming evident among his fellow-players.

Another five minutes. Then, with Joe's powers of persuasion beginning to show signs of wearing thin, the figure of Devil Doubt came into view.

Joe's heart sank. There was something in the sag of the newcomer's shoulders that boded no good.

'What's up wi' thee?' he cried.

The newcomer hesitated before replying, hating the message he brought and fearing what Joe might do to the messenger. Then, as they crowded round him, he blurted out,

'A can't 'ave me face blacked!'

Joe was scornful in defeat.

'tha what? 'Oo says so?'

The other's humiliation drove him to a desperate defiance.

'It's me Mam! A can come, she says. But A can't 'ave me face blacked!'

Joe could see authority slipping away from him, but he was not giving in without a fight.

'Are tha frettened o' thi mother then? Goo on! Don't be so bloody mardy! Goo'n get some soot from t' fire-back!'

But this time the would-be Devil Doubt was less in fear of Joe than of the wrath to come.

'A can't! She telled me Dad! 'E were even gunna stop me comin' at all!'

There was silence for a few moments while they all considered this facer. Their looks said as clearly as words that the whole enterprise was now in jeopardy. Devil Doubt was not the only one to have been threatened with unmentionable things if he dared to blacken his face, so there was no one willing to fill the shoes of the defector.

The fallen demon said hesitantly,

'A'll do it wi'out me face blacked, if yer like!'

But Joe had the desire for perfection which ran in the Garrett blood. He was not having any weak link in the chain of his drama.

'Don't talk so bloody daft! Goo on, bugger off! Thi Dad can 'ave thi! We're not 'avin' no Devil Doubt wi'out 'is face blacked!'

The disappointed Thespian did his best to get Joe to relent, and even tried to persuade some of the rest to plead his cause, but without effect. Joe knew full well that their support was being given to the luckless Devil Doubt only because they feared that they themselves might be drafted into the rôle. He was not to be swayed. Give way jus' once, he thought, an' next year we'll not be able to gerra Devil Doubt at all. So all men fear the establishing of a precedent.

Seeing that Joe was not to be moved, the sacked member shambled off, all but weeping with disappointment, his Boxing Day – to which no doubt he had looked forward eagerly – in ruins around him.

But Joe was now spiked on the horns of a dilemma. How to put on a Derby Tup without a Devil Doubt? And if he couldn't find some solution, and quickly, how to prevent the

members of his troupe deserting to other companies with a better hope of survival? Already there were mutterings around him.

‘Awreight!’ he said. ‘ We’ll do wi’out ’im!’

The others looked at him in amazement. ‘Derby Tuppin’ wi’out a Devil Doubt? It was heresy. Surely Joe must have a Devil Doubt up his sleeve, or some idea of recruiting one.

But they all knew how difficult it was to raise a company at all in the face of so much competition and unpredictable parental censure – at this late hour well nigh impossible. The prospects of finding even another walk-on supporter now were poor indeed. What hope of finding a Devil Doubt? On the other hand, there might be other groups in better shape. Perhaps they might welcome a few recruits?

‘Oo tha gunna get then?’ said one, before deciding to quit.

And then, when all seemed lost, Joe had an inspiration. He hesitated for a moment and then played his last desperate card.

‘A’ll fetch our Moss!’

There was, as he had feared, an instant hoot of derision. Moss? Moss Garrett? A babby? They began to give immediate signs of decamping. Joe hastened to convert them.

‘It’s awreight! ‘E knows it! Every word! An’ A’ll soon gerr ’is face blacked!’

It took all his skills in diplomacy, but in the end, and not without much evident reluctance, they agreed. All that was left was for Joe to fetch the young recruit. He remembered at the last moment to insist on their all accompanying him, suspecting that once his back was turned they might all desert.

On the way home he put a brave face on it, but secretly he was much troubled by misgivings. If an eleven-year-old could fail to win approval what chance was there of his getting approval from his mother to allow Moss to take part? There was only one solution. Strategy and silence were called for.

Fortunately for his purpose, his mother was deep in conversation with Maggie Willett when he arrived at Fern Street, having not seen her neighbour since Christmas Eve, and each therefore needing to tell the other how the festivities had gone.

Joe found his brother deep in a book. He put his mouth close to Moss’s ear and whispered, ‘Come outside, our Moss! A’ve summat to tell thi!’

Quickly he explained. Moss, his dark eyes alight with excitement, was only too ready to fall in with Joe’s plan. There remained only the problem of the make-up, and here again Joe met with no resistance at all.

‘Wait theer!’ he said, and slipped into the kitchen, where he made a pretence of rummaging among the objects on the mantelpiece with its collection of domestic trivia.

His mother, suddenly aware of his silence – always a bad sign in her experience – turned sharply from her gossip.

‘What d’yer want, our Joe?’

He had to think quickly.

‘A – A can’t find me mouth organ!’ he replied. ‘t’one as A got fer Christmas!’

Partly reassured, his mother returned to the conversation. Quickly Joe reached up inside the chimney with his free hand and wiped it across the sooty flue. Then,

‘A’ve gorrit!’ he cried, holding up the harmonica in the other hand, and was outside before his mother could comment.

The eager Moss, dancing from one foot to the other in his impatience, was only too ready to have his face blacked, and the dark eyes soon gleamed even more brightly against the sooty cheeks. Joe picked up his own props, the club and the dripping-pan, and stood back to consider the effect of his brother’s make-up.

The Sunday suit was hardly right for the role, but it would have to serve. To try to get Moss a change of clothing now would merely invite enquiry and possible discovery, the result of which would be certain prohibition. He grabbed Moss’s hand and dragged him off to join the rest.

He was only just in time. Without the moral support of their leader, the band was on the point of dispersal. They jibbed at Moss’s incongruous costume, but they had to agree that his face was satisfactorily Nubian. Joe thought it best to get the show on the road before their mutterings turned to mutiny, and they moved off to their first port of call.

Outside in the street, the Grimesmoor Silver Temperance Band was rendering with more enthusiasm than musical expertise a heavy-footed version of ‘Christians, Awake!’ – a superfluous and ironic message to the Christians in the neighbourhood, most of whom had already been up some two or three hours, and some of whom were even now awaiting impatiently the opening of the door of the Three Crowns. Joe calculated that the band’s collecting bag might already have drained what local charity there was, but that at any moment the members would be succumbing to thirst, for the word ‘temperance’ in their title had long lost its significance. The trick was to find out which streets the band had not yet visited and make a start there. Besides, he reasoned, it would be politic to put some distance between Moss and his mother before some neighbour or family friend saw Moss’s face.

Three streets away, in a slightly more prosperous part of Grimesmoor than their own, Joe’s troupe of strolling players edged into a backyard and took up position. Moss, as the smallest, was pushed well to the front; Joe, as the leader, directed the singing.

As A were gooin’ to Derby upon a market day.

A met the finest Tupsy as ever were fed on ‘ay,

Singin’ fay dee, fay dee

Fiddle falay deeday!

The first awkwardness now over, they were all singing with more confidence.

The butcher that killed the Tupsy was up to the knees in blood;

The man that ’eld the basin was washed away in the flood;

Singin' fay dee, fay dee

Fiddle falay deeday!

Now Joe stepped forward, brandishing Lizzie's copper-stick as the nearest thing he had been able to find to Beelzebub's traditional club, and in the other hand the customary dripping-pan. In ringing tones he proclaimed,

'Here come I, Beelzebub! Over my shoulder I carry my club;

In my 'and a drippin' pan! An' I think myself a jolly old man;

A jolly old man I seem to be;

I've got two sons as big as me;

When one comes in, the other goes out,

An' 'ere comes little Devil Doubt!

Moss, entirely green in such thespian matters and carried away by the enchantment of it all, was blissfully unaware that this was his cue, and Joe was obliged to drag him forward. He collected himself, and began in a piping treble,

'Here come I, little Devil Doubt,

Wi' me pockets turned inside out;

Money I want, and money I crave,

If you don't give me money

I'll sweep you to your grave!

But drama needs stage management, and here the haste with which the show had been mounted revealed a breakdown in Joe's management, for Moss lacked the traditional broom, the badge of Devil Doubt's office.

'Neer mind!' said Joe, in a stage whisper. 'Gerron wi' it!' And now, with the end in sight, the company sang yet more lustily in ragged unison,

'And now our song is ended, we 'ave no moor to say;

So please will yer give us a Christmas box to send us all away;

Singin' fay dee, fay dee

Fiddle falay deeday!

And then, a trifle unseasonably, but in confirmation of the request they added in chorus,

'Appy New Year! 'Appy New Year!

Plenty o' money and nothin' to fear!

A 'orse 'n a gig

An' a good fat pig

To serve yer all next year!'

And then, quite out of season and by way of finale,

'Christmas is comin'! The goose is gettin' fat!

Please purra penny in the old man's 'at;

If y'aven't gorra penny a ha'penny'll do;

If y'aven't gorra ha'penny

God bless you!'

And now it was time to knock on every door in the yard, and thrust forward the collecting tin. And here Joe had his second inspired idea, one destined to vindicate him fully in the eyes of every one of the company, for, instead of taking the tin himself, he pushed it into Moss's hand and shoved him forward.

Moss was nothing loath. And there was more than one housewife who opened the door with the words, 'Not today, luv!' on her lips, caught the gleam of those dark eyes in the sooty face, and opened both her heart and her purse.

When the Mummers decided that their performances must come to an end, since to stay out longer was to court certain trouble at home, they counted their takings. Their delight and Moss's amazement knew no bounds when it was revealed that they had collected no less than two shillings and threepence, a princely sum by any standards.

Joe shared Moss's gratification but his own was short-lived. In the general rejoicing he quite failed to notice that Moss had decided that such splendid tidings of comfort and joy would not keep and had set off for home to be the harbinger.

It was too late to call him back, and Joe's half-formed plan to spirit him back into the house and to remove the evidence was now in jeopardy. Grabbing his share of the spoils, he set off in pursuit.

But joy had lent wings to Moss's studded heels. As Joe rounded the corner by the entry-end he saw his mother waiting for him with a face like a thunder-cloud. He abandoned his few and meagre inventions and decided that he had no choice but to brave it out.

'Oh, theer y'are, our Joe! Jus' you wait, young man! Jus' you wait till yer Dad 'ears o' this! 'E'll give yer "Derby Tuppin"!'

Joe was conscious of some relief. Meeting his father's displeasure would be bad enough, but nothing like bearing the full brunt of his mother's. But she had not done yet.

'Jus' look at 'is best suit! Jus' look at it, will yer? Yer little pig, as ever A should call yer such a name!'

He knew now the full measure of his mother's wrath. The epithet 'little pig' on her lips was near-blasphemy to her, reserved only for those occasions when she had lost all control, or the offence was heinous beyond words. Wisely he kept his counsel, until the storm should abate.

The subsequent 'telling off' from his father was no picnic either, for where his mother could terrify with the white heat of her wrath, his father could freeze with the coldness of his contempt for such misdeeds. It was a sorely-chastened Joe who, by his father's command, went to bed early and fasting that Boxing Day evening, just as the rest of the family was gathering round the piano in the front-room for the customary sing-song.

Joe had not appreciated before how much he enjoyed these evenings, and to be excluded on this special occasion was gall and wormwood to his soul. As he lay dry-eyed in his bed and heard the strains of 'Come to the Fair', 'O Who Will o'er the Downs so Free?' and 'Cwm Rhondda' rorted out with the concerted power of the Garrett lungs, he felt himself a much-abused young man, and at last drifted to sleep, vowing never to take Moss anywhere with him again, not if his refusal got him a damn good 'idin'.

But the vow was superfluous. Lizzie had already made up her mind that in future there would be no more such excursions. After this, she told herself, our Moss isn't goin' anywher wi' our Joe again, choose 'ow much 'e wants to tek 'im.

Which merely goes to show how, where such belief is concerned, near-relatives can be far distant from the truth.



CHAPTER 10

A Necessary End
Julius Ceaser II, ii

Moss stood on tiptoe and jiggled the sneck, until the door gave way and he all but fell into the kitchen.

Annie Ruth was sitting by the fire, reading a book. Moss noticed this departure from custom and practice, and resented it. Without speaking to her, he crossed the kitchen and scrambled up the dark stairway to the bedrooms and the attic above. All three were deserted. It did not strike him as needful to search the front room.

Annie Ruth lifted her head from the book to reprove him for the disturbance he was causing, but he was too quick for her and got his spoke in first.

‘Eigh up, our Annie Ruth,’ he cried. ‘Wheer’s me Mam?’

‘she’s not here,’ she said, returning to her book.

‘A can see that!’ he said. ‘Wheer’s she gone?’

Annie Ruth did not lift her head.

‘she’s gone to Leeds!’

He was appalled. It was bad enough that his mother was not in her rightful place at the family hearth, but Leeds! It was intolerable. Worse, it was frightening. She belonged here, not braving the hazards of a distant city.

‘What’s she gone theer for?’ he asked.

Annie Ruth caught the tremor in his voice, looked up at once, and spoke more kindly, though in the carefully practised tones appropriate to her career.

‘It’s all right, our Moss! She’ll be back in the morning!’

If she thought to comfort him with that reassurance, she was wildly out. For his Mam to be away from home when he got back from school was alarming enough. For her to be away for a whole night was unthinkable.

‘‘Oo’s gunna get me tea?’ he asked, not unreasonably. But he gathered that suitable arrangements had been made for that, so he went on to the next most vital question.

‘When did she go, our Annie Ruth? An’ what’s she gone theer for?’

Annie Ruth was impatient to return to her reading.

‘she’s gone to fetch yer Grandma!’ she replied.

She could scarcely have thought of a poorer reply with which to stem the flow of his questions.

‘Mi Grandma? A ’aven’t got no Grandma!’

‘Oh yes, you have,’ she replied. ‘You’ve never seen her, that’s all!’

‘‘Ave you?’ he asked.

‘So I’m told. Mam says I was five or six. I don’t remember it, though.’

He retired to his seat at the table, rested his chin on his fists, and considered this earth-shaking turn of events. A Grandma he’d never seen? It was intriguing. But if it meant that his mother must be away from home when he got back from school and, worse still, absent for a whole night, he thought he could manage to get along without such relatives.

All his efforts to learn more, to discover how he could possibly come to have a Grandma of whose existence he had so far been unaware, met with failure. He had hoped that, in the absence of Mam, the weekly soap-and-scrub might be forgotten, but Annie Ruth had been carefully briefed and, like her mother, had a proper sense of duty. All his snivelling, and even downright defiance, availed him nothing. The large galvanized-zinc bath was brought out, the water heated in the copper and ladled out into the bath with the lading-can, cooled with water from the tap, and all was ready.

But no sooner was he undressed and soaking than there came an unwelcome and embarrassing interruption. There was a knock at the door, the sneck was lifted, and the voice of Maggie Willett was heard through the crack.

‘Are yer theer?’

With a proper regard for her small brother’s outraged modesty, Annie Ruth quickly drew the towel-covered clothes-horse from in front of the fire, and arranged it, together with the rocking-chair, in front of the bath, and signalled Moss with a finger to her lips to keep silence until Mrs Willett had departed.

But that was an event which depended on Mrs Willett’s decision, and there it seemed destined to fail. Maggie Willett was much too interested in the intriguing reasons for Lizzie’s absence to cut her visit short, and Moss’s bath-water cooled as she warmed to her subject.

For Annie Ruth, Mrs Willett’s probing questions were doubly embarrassing. She could not know, though she could make a shrewd guess, how much of the reasons for her absence her mother would want revealing, and she suspected it was much less than Maggie Willett wanted to know. She also knew only too well how every one of Maggie’s questions and her own hesitant answers were being digested behind the clothes-horse. There was not the slightest doubt that Maggie’s avid interest would be as nothing to Moss’s, but she could think of no polite way to bring an end to the questioning.

Moss, too, was torn. He was weighing the discomfort of sitting still and silent in the rapidly-cooling water against his desire to know more of the mystery surrounding the person of this new Grandma.

His restraint went unrewarded. Maggie’s many questions and Annie Ruth’s guarded answers left him little wiser.

‘A reckon she’ll be a bit of a ‘andful for yer Mam, eh?’ said Maggie.

Annie Ruth put on her best prunes and prism voice.

‘Well, she’s getting on, you know!’

‘Oh, A didn’t mean that!’ said Maggie. ‘No, A meant t’other thing. Yer know! Yer Mam were tellin’ me –!’

Annie Ruth made a non-committal sound.

‘A mean,’ Maggie went on, ‘yer Mam can’t be doin’ wi’ that soart o’ thing, can she now? What wi’ t’chapel an’ all?’

Another sound from Annie Ruth.

‘Mind you,’ said Maggie, ‘she’ll not find it all that easy to get ’er ’ands on it ’ere, will she? Yer Grandma, A mean –!’

But what she really did mean, Moss was fated not to learn, and when she finally took her departure the mystery was still unresolved. He was now more determined than ever to find the key.

However, it’s an ill wind that blows no one any good, and Maggie’s visit had done Moss an unlooked-for good turn. Annie Ruth had not the heart to condemn her small brother to remain shivering in the bath while she heated more water. So he was taken out and rubbed with a warm towel until the blood once more flowed freely through his veins, and that was the end of his ordeal by water for that week.

He had pictured his new-found Grandma as resembling the old ladies in such books as ‘the Water Babies’ – apple-cheeked, roly-poly of figure, and benevolent to a fault. He quite looked forward to making her acquaintance.

The reality was altogether different.

She was a character out of ‘Grimm’s Fairy Tales’ rather than ‘the Water Babies’, gaunt and frail, her skin cracked and sallow, her hair white and wispy, and her nose all but touching her chin. Moss’s disappointment was keen.

It might have been better had his parents taken him into their confidence, but it was not an age when such confidences between parents and children were thought needful or much encouraged. If they had told him in plain, round terms where she had been all this time and what she was doing here now it is probable that he would have registered the news without much concern and moved on to more interesting matters. But the silence and the meaning glances which surrounded the coming of this stranger would have aroused the curiosity of a boy far less imaginative than Moss. In consequence, his own speculations were far from the truth of the matter, and inevitably far more vivid.

What he quite failed to understand was a new and altogether unwelcome air of constraint between his mother and father, which seemed to coincide with the arrival of his grandmother. His mother went about her tasks in a tight-lipped silence and with an air of preoccupation far removed from her usual demeanour, and with her voice no longer lifted in song. And the moment his father appeared she seemed to busy herself in quite needless chores, as though idle hands at such a time were not to be borne.

Moss's father was silent, too, with a grimness of feature that Moss noted with not a little alarm and with a determination not to put it to any sort of test. Something told him that here was a sleeping dog best left to lie.

Little by little, however, his conviction that Grandma was the root and cause of the trouble between his mother and father seemed to be confirmed. And it did not take him long to see that the duties his mother carried out for Grandma were performed as such duties sometimes are, scrupulously but with little enthusiasm.

He noted, too, that his father was more than usually solicitous towards Mam, and that she seemed not to care for these attentions. It was like living with one of those volcanoes he had read about, that might erupt at any moment' He wisely kept his own counsel and out of the way of both of them.

But, being Moss, his curiosity could not long be contained. He decided to quiz Grandma, to see what could be discovered there.

The first opportunity came on a wet day that Autumn, a day when to leave the house was out of the question, so that Moss must needs kick his heels and grow savage with boredom.

'Ere, our Moss,' said his mother, 'yer can mek yerself useful for a change, instead o' sittin' theer mitherin'! Goo'n read one o' yer books to yer Grandma!'

He was about to make the routine protests when it dawned on him that the idea had possibilities. He rummaged among the slithering pile of books on the sideboard until he found one which he felt might be suitable, and went into the front room where Grandma's bed had been put up.

She was dozing, with her nut-cracker head lolling to one side, and the sound of his entry failed to stir her. He waited patiently by the door for what seemed to him an unconscionable time until at last her eyes opened.

When she saw that she had company she reached out a trembling hand like a claw and eased herself with much groaning into a more upright position on the pillow.

'Oo's that?' she asked, peering at him. 'Oh, it's thee, lad!'

'Me Mam says as A've got to come an' read to yer, Grandma!' he said.

'Oh, she did, did she? A'm surprised she gi'es me a thought at all! Aye well, A've nowt better to do, A reckon. Come on in!'

Moss settled himself in the chair beside the bed, taking care to keep a respectful distance between himself and this stranger, about whom he was still not altogether easy in his mind. The old lady pursed her lips, her old mouth resembling a walnut too long in store.

'What yer gunna read then?' she asked.

Moss help up the book for her to see, and the old lady cackled.

'Nay, lad, tha'rt wastin' thi time showin' me thi book!'

Moss's face was a study. The old lady cackled again, and began to cough weakly. It was some time before she seemed able to speak, and he grew alarmed, and wondered whether he should fetch his mother.

'Dun't tha know, lad?' she whispered at last. 'A can't read! Niver could!'

Moss was thunder-struck. He considered the astonishing news for a moment, and came to the conclusion that her earlier grin supplied the clue.

'Yer kiddin', Grandma!'

The old lady grinned again.

'Nay, A'm not, lad! Nob'dy niver learnt me!'

Moss's amazement knew no bounds. He had supposed that everyone in the world could do something so easy, if not before starting school, then at least not long afterwards.

'Would yer like me to show yer, Grandma?' he asked.

The old lady cackled with glee, and seemed about to go off into another feeble paroxysm of coughing. At length, she said,

'Dusta think tha could, lad? Nay, nay! A reckon A'm an owd bitch to be learnin' new tricks like yon!'

The unmentionable word gave Moss a twinge of unease. If his mother should come in and hear that sort of language he would be packed off at once, he knew. And he was beginning to enjoy himself.

'It wouldn't tek yer long, Grandma!' he said.

His words seemed to sober the old lady, and her face grew still.

'A reckon as A shan't have that much time, love! A shan't be troublin' anybody much longer, A expect – an' A shan't be needin' to read wheer A'm gooin', any road!'

Moss did not much care for the turn the conversation was taking, and his grandmother seemed to sense it, and changed the subject.

'Well, goo on then, lad! Read thi book!'

Moss began to read, but he found her a poor listener for she dozed fitfully, occasionally startling him with grunts and distorted fragments of speech quite unrelated to the matter of his reading. At last, when she appeared to have fallen fast asleep, he slipped from the chair and began to make his way to the door.

She woke at once.

'Are tha gooin' then?' she asked weakly.

'A thowt yer were asleep, Grandma!'

For a moment, it seemed that she might slip away again, but with an effort she roused herself and said,

‘It’s not thy fault, love!’

Then she seemed to brighten, and said,

‘But A’ll tell thi summat as tha can do fer thi Grandma –!’

Moss returned to the bed.

‘Yes, Grandma?’

‘Dosta think as tha could get me a drop o’ meths?’

‘What’s that, Grandma?’

The old lady considered the question for a moment.

‘Well, tha sees, it’s like this. Now an’ then, A gerra pain ’ere, like – ’ and she vaguely indicated the region of her stomach. ‘An’ then, dosta see, A ’ave to ’ave a drop o’ medicine –!’

‘An’ is that what yer want, Grandma? That what yer called it –?’

‘Aye, lad, meths! A’ve got to tek a drop of it in me ‘All’s Wine ’ere!’

‘Awright, Grandma,’ he said. ‘A’ll ask me Mam!’

The old woman reached out a quivering claw.

‘Nay, nay, tha moan’t do that, love! Thi mother’s got enough on ’er plate, A reckon. Nay, A want thi to get me two penn’orth from t’chemist’s. There’s no call ter goo botherin’ thi Mam!’

She scabbled beneath her pillow until she unearthed her purse, opened it and took out a few coppers.

‘‘Ere th’art,’ she said. ‘An’ tha can ’ave a penny fer thisen!’

A penny! A whole week’s pocket money! He needed no second bidding and was making for the door when she called him back.

‘Just a minute, love! Tha’ll need to find summat ter purrit in! As tha got a medicine bottle?’

‘A’ve got one as A use fer me liquorice water, Grandma,’ he replied.

‘Champion! Not a word to thi Mam, mind, else A shall cop it for spoiling thi wi’ pennies!’

His mouth effectively sealed, Moss found the bottle and was off.

But his errand was fruitless. News travelled as fast in Grimesmoor as anywhere else, and the chemist had a shrewd suspicion that this particular errand, coming as it did from the Garrett household, would not bear the light.

‘Who wants this methylated spirit then?’ he asked. ‘Is it for your mother?’

‘No, it’s not,’ Moss replied in all innocence. ‘It’s fer mi Grandma!’

The pharmacist shook his head, and handed back the bottle.

‘I’m sorry, Moss. Tell your grandmother I can’t serve methylated spirits to boys of your age. I’m afraid your mother will have to come for it.’

Moss returned with the tidings, and was not well pleased when the old lady took back all the coppers he had been given. After all, he reasoned, I did run the errand. It wasn’t his fault the chemist wouldn’t give him the stuff.

He went to return his liquorice bottle to the cupboard, and this time was less careful to avoid his mother’s eagle eye.

‘What yer got theer, our Moss?’ she asked, her look dark with suspicion.

She had the truth out of him with practised ease, snatched the bottle from his hand, and marched into the front room, slamming the door behind her. Through the closed door Moss could hear the familiar sounds of his mother reading the Riot Act, but this time to Grandma.

Nor was this the end of the matter. Lying in his bed that night, Moss heard voices raised in anger, culminating with the sound of his mother’s weeping, a sound which caused him to pull the bed-clothes over his head and to cover his ears.

But the events of the night were not over. Much later he woke to sounds of comings and goings downstairs, and could have sworn he heard someone using the front door. It must be something important, he told himself, and on that thought drifted to sleep again.

When he clattered downstairs that morning there was a noticeably subdued atmosphere at the table. He put it down to last night’s quarrel, for his mother seemed strained and withdrawn, and he remembered unhappily her earlier tears.

He was about to open the door of the front room to greet his Grandma when she rose and laid a restraining hand on his arm. He saw at once that her face looked strange and that her lower lip was trembling.

‘Don’t goo in theer, love!’ she said. ‘Not today!’

‘Why not, Mam?’

Lizzie took her small son by his shoulders.

‘Yer Grandma’s gone, son!’

‘Gone?’ he cried. ‘Gone wheer?’

She reached behind her for the chair.

‘she’s gone to be wi’ Jesus, love!’

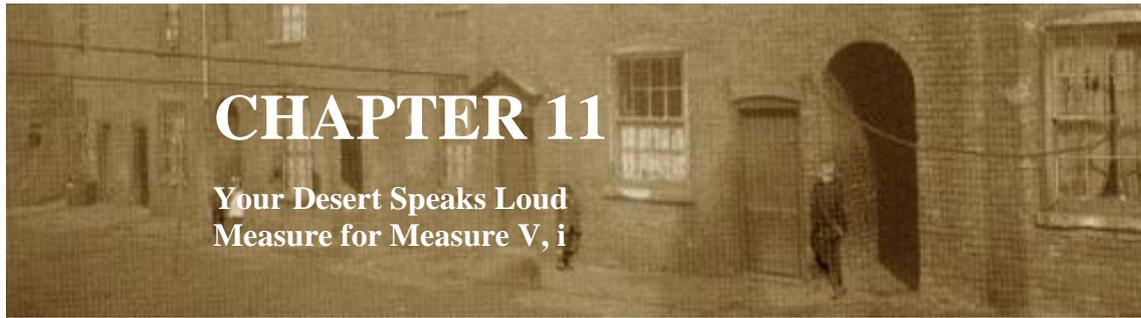
It was some time before he grasped the enormous fact that Grandma really had gone, but what he quite failed to understand was the reason for his mother’s distress.

The door-sneek lifted, and he turned his head.

It was Dad.

He, too, looked strange and distraught. But something else had changed. His mother rose unsteadily to her feet and ran to him. His father's arms reached out and around her, and Moss was swept by an enormous wave of relief.

Everythin's awright again, he told himself. An' Grandma's gone to be wi' Jesus, so she's awright as well.



The pulpit that dominated one end of Hensley Street Chapel was gone, apparently buried beneath tiers of benches which reached almost to the roof and which blotted out the large Alpha and Omega adorning the wall behind the pulpit. Not that their absence would be much noticed or regretted; in choosing those strange symbols, the architects may have over-reached themselves a little, for few of the congregation had the slightest notion of what the two symbols meant.

Moss was enchanted by the novel sight of the serried ranks of the benches, and by the revolutionary change in the layout of the chapel.

‘What’s it for, Dad?’ he asked.

His father explained that every year the chapel celebrated the anniversary of the day of its founding with a ceremony known as the Anniversary Sermons, when the whole congregation, old and young alike, joined in services of thanksgiving for another faithful year spent in the service of the Lord and in receipt of his bounty. It seemed to occur to no one that a careful observer would have been hard put to it to find much evidence of bounty in those years of the lean kine.

‘But what’s them things for?’ asked Moss, pointing to the tiers of benches, and from his father’s reply understood why the ceremonies were called ‘sermons’. He had thought the performance might be something like the chapel ‘Concerts’ which he thoroughly enjoyed for the way they provided a chance for the assembled congregation to show off their talents on the stage. There might have been some similarity between sermons and concerts, he thought, but for the one obvious drawback in the word ‘sermons’. He had had more than enough experience of these performances, and cared little for them.

But, as his father went on, it slowly became clear to him that this new event actually did promise to provide an opportunity for the minister to get another collection of sermons off his chest, and there were already rather too many such opportunities of that kind for his liking. It was all beginning to look rather less exciting.

And then, in the next moment his father let slip the added information that only the girls would be making use of the benches and Moss’s suspicions were confirmed. He lost interest at once.

However, when the time came for him to attend his first Anniversary Sermons he had to admit that it was something of an eye-opener. He had heard in the school playground a deal of talk among the girls about ‘mi new frock fer t’sermons’, but most of it had gone over his head, such matters not being of the kind to interest anyone but ‘lasses’. If he

noted them at all, it was only to marvel that a topic of such triviality could excite so much chatter.

But the event itself caused him to modify his first impressions, and gave him a better understanding of the reasons for the pink cheeks, the bubbling excitement and the near-hysteria.

On the first morning of the Anniversary Sermons the Garrett family members were early in their places, for Jim himself must needs be in attendance earlier than all the rest of the congregation and the participants who were to occupy the benches. One of his duties was to marshal the girls into their appointed places on the benches, a job which called for all the careful planning and organization of a sheepdog trials event. The rest of the family must needs, therefore, put up with a lengthy wait before the rest of the congregation began to assemble.

This was never anything but an unpalatable taste of tedium for a family of such active minds, and for Moss it was all but impossible to digest it. More than once Lizzie was obliged to warn her youngest son of what he might look forward to when the service was over if he did not learn to sit still.

When she could spare a little time from exercising her eagle eye upon Moss, she sat back to contemplate her brood with pardonable pride. Yer've got to admit it, she said to herself, they're a 'andsome lot. And it gave her no small satisfaction to know from the covert glances of those around her that she was by no means the only one to think so.

She was drawn to this thought by the sight of her first-born, Jack, in his smart blue serge, and only here tonight, so he said, out of deference to her wishes. However, Lizzie more than half suspected that the anticipated presence of Annie Allsopp on the platform might have more to do with it than any desire to please his mother. At twenty-eight, she thought, 'e can't be expected to live at 'ome much longer.

Happily, Annie Ruth was also contributing to the family coffers, and soon Jimmy, too, would be out of university. Elsie, soon to start there, would then be the only child of an age to earn who would still need their support.

Lizzie knew full well, as did all her sensible kind, that, even with such a large family as her own, there would be but a few years of their lives when she and Jim could enjoy a few comforts from the fruits of their family's earnings. They, more than most parents, had deliberately delayed the onset of that brief period, and in doing so had ensured that it would be even shorter, by their determination to see that every child of theirs got all the education it could soak up. Now, all too soon, they must accept that Jack would soon be flying the coop, and that Annie Ruth – already the target of many sighs and glances – would not be far behind.

All this posed many a problem in the management of a fluctuating income, never very large, Lizzie knew only too well that had she and Jim sat down to calculate the possibility of sending their children to university, ordinary prudence might have counselled against it. But, for her, and certainly in the matter of an education that she herself had not enjoyed, prudence was merely another name for timidity. She wouldn't have had it any other way, and she loved her man dearly for his staunch support of her own fierce desire to give her family the very best in the teeth of all those who advised caution.

There was a stir of activity over by the organ-loft, and Jim appeared, leading a gaggle of chattering girls, giggling and self-conscious in their new frocks. First came the infants, who needed to be helped up the steep ascent to their heaven near the roof. Not a few of them found this an anxious experience, and needed support from the older girls until they could grow accustomed to those dizzy heights and to the novelty of it all.

Moss, now wide-eyed with wonder, at last began to grasp what his elders saw in these Anniversary Sermons. His whole being responded to the strange and dazzling spectacle of the rows of benches, covered for the occasion in a maroon-coloured baize, and now slowly disappearing beneath a shifting mass of white.

When the last of the older acolytes had taken their places on the lowest benches of all, there was a an expectant pause which gave place to a murmur as the figure of the choirmaster appeared. Harold Roper, who doubled as organist with his choirmasterly duties, knew all about making an entrance, and he waited until his proxy had taken his seat on the organ-bench before he himself stepped forward and mounted the podium. He ran his eyes slowly over the ranks before him, cast a last look round the congregation as though to assure himself that they too were giving their full attention, and finally turned back to face the sea of white before him.

The chatter of so many female voices gradually died, as one girl after another nudged a neighbour and nodded in his direction. And at last every eye was upon him. He gave the now quiescent rows one last sweeping survey, tapped the desk before him with his baton, and raised both arms.

At once there was a sound like a long sigh, and the ranks of white rose to their feet.

It was like nothing so much as the breaking of a great wave, and Moss, quite transfixed by the splendour of it all, had to be sharply reminded by his mother, with a tap on his well-brushed head, that he was expected to stand, too. He scrambled down from his seat on the pitch-pine pew bench, took his mother's hand as the minister and his guests entered, and prepared to enjoy himself.

Only two items on the programme threatened to spoil that enjoyment, the first because it was long without being at all interesting, the second because it promised to be even longer, and even less interesting than the first. Ironically, both by their very nature seemed eminently suitable for a religious occasion, since both provided a foretaste of eternity.

Moss was to become better acquainted over the years with the custom of extempore prayer in the nonconformist church and to develop a hearty distaste for it, despite the fact that it was widely acclaimed as a histrionic performance for which some ministers and local preachers enjoyed a reputation.

The Reverend Albert Walters was of that number.

He prayed for the world, for our beloved country, for the King and Queen and all their ministers, their servants and their subjects, for the lands across the sea and especially for those lands where the blessing of Thy word has not come down on the souls of those who dwell in darkness, for missions abroad and missions at home, for seed-time and harvest and all the many blessings pouring down upon us from Thy bounteous hands, for all who labour in field or factory in the service of their fellow-men, and especially for all those whose labours are unseen but without whose loving service our lives would be the poorer,

for the police who guard our homes and our lives, for all doctors and nurses, for firemen and ambulance men, for all those who go down to the sea in ships and occupy their business in great waters, for those in peril on the sea, for all who lie on beds of pain and for those who in love and devotion minister unto them (overlooking the fact that they had already had a mention), for those who mourn the loss of loved ones that they may find succour and comfort and a happy relief from their affliction and their sorrow, and so on and so on – and all without a single note to keep the speaker on course, for it was a well-rehearsed, oft-repeated, and entirely predictable party-piece. If the attention of the Lord was not drawn to every creature who walked His earth it was not for want of a few reminders from the Reverend Albert Walters.

Or, rather, the Reverend A. Livingstone Walters, for the minister had adopted a practice which was rapidly growing, a practice more honoured in the breach than the observance. It consisted of reducing the first name to a single letter and giving the second a fuller, and preferably more sonorous sound. And if that second name had not been included at the baptism or a too-ordinary name supplied, then invention had been known to make good any deficiency. Albert Walters himself had begun life as Albert Edward, but Livingstone had seemed more in keeping, he reasoned, for a man with a mission.

It was a practice which Moss came to recognize, and even to his shame to practise, until the members of his family to a man and woman laughed him out of it.

But if the prayer was long, the sermon was even longer, so that the lusty singing of the final hymn owed more to a sense of relief than to a sense of godliness. And the congregation, whose firmly-held belief it was that medicine would do no good which did not taste nasty, could wend their way home to their Sunday dinner well content.

The following year, to Moss's delight, a long tradition was broken. For the first time in the history of Hensley Street Chapel there was to be a change in the ordering of the Anniversary Sermons. No longer would the girls have it all their own way. In the year of Our Lord 1924 boys were to take part.

But the Stewards, for all their piety, were not entirely unworldly. They calculated that Harold Roper would have enough on his plate with a mass of chattering girls and their younger brothers, without leavening the lump with young males who had reached the threshold of puberty, a stage of life where only their mothers could love them. No boy above the age of ten, they decreed, would grace the tiers of baize-covered boards.

So Moss joined the girls every Tuesday evening, to learn and practise the hymns. Best of all, this gave him the chance to meet for the first time a device called the 'descant', which required the boys to learn an altogether different tune from the one the girls would sing.

Harold Roper was an old hand at this game and had no illusions about the problems that would arise. He segregated the boys from the girls and took each through their respective tunes until he was assured that the members of each group had their own tune firmly embedded in their skulls, and particularly the boys, so that they might have some hope of carrying one tune while the girls sang the other.

As he fully expected, the first time the two camps came together it was chaos come again. Drowned by the shrill tones of the girls who were greatly in the majority, the boys began in bewilderment, continued in dismay, faltered, and sank without trace.

‘put yer ’ands over yer ears, lads!’ said Harold. ‘then tek ’em away gently, like, a bit at a time, till yer sure o’ the tune! Na then, you lasses, A want yer to sing a lot softer, d’y’ear, an’ give the lads a chance!’

This time it went a little better, and the next time better still. The sound of it so delighted and astonished Moss that he stopped singing, the better to hear and appreciate it. Unfortunately, so did the rest, and once more the descant sickened and died.

But at last they had it, and Harold Roper could rest content in the knowledge that, with a little more practice, all would be well on the day. He could now turn his thoughts to the solo items.

It was Moss’s known aptitude at committing words to heart that persuaded the choirmaster to choose him for one of the solo spots – that, and the knowledge that one of Jim Garrett’s offspring was unlikely to give him any heart-burning on the score of misconduct or absence from rehearsals, always a serious consideration in his book.

Moss’s pièce de résistance was to be a mercifully short and appallingly mawkish homily in verse, entitled ‘Never Mind!’ and written by some unknown hand with more enthusiasm than expertise in prosody:

Are there storm-clouds all around

Never mind!

Does the noise of strife resound?

Never mind!

When your enemies arise,

Lift your eyes up to the skies;

There you’ll see the victor’s prize!

Never mind!

There was more of the same, equally undistinguished, and Moss thought it marvellous. Without delay he set himself to the task of getting it by heart, and surprised even himself by the speed with which he contrived to do so. Only in later years would he learn the truth that no form of verse is quite so easy to commit to memory as doggerel. By the time the Anniversary Sermons arrived, the slogan enshrined in his sole effort was one which his family was finding it hard to observe, and which they would one and all have gladly consigned to the oblivion it merited.

Not for a moment did it occur to Moss that the satisfaction he found in committing such pap to heart and foisting it on an uncritical public was anything to be ashamed of. Indeed, he looked forward eagerly to the chance of showing off his prowess as eagerly as he looked forward to Christmas or Whitsuntide, and gloried in the certainty that, come the appointed day, he would be, as always, word-perfect.

But the whirligig of time brings in his revenges. The true poets who must have been whirling in their graves to hear such stuff were to be well satisfied in the reception it met with at Moss Garrett’s début.

The hymns, raucously revivalist or lugubriously sentimental, seemed to Moss to be even longer than their usual sum of verses. The minister's prayer-fest threatened to stretch out to the very edge of doom. Moss yawned and fidgeted, and did his best to ignore the butterflies which had invaded his stomach despite his earlier confidence. Even the now-familiar descant had lost some of its charm as he waited with ill-concealed impatience for his chance to shine.

But at long last the Reverend A. Livingstone Walters rose to his feet.

'Hrrrm! I'm sure we've all noticed that we've 'ad a few changes this year, ha ha! And I 'ope it won't be the last time we see our little boys up 'ere, an' that they'll always be as well-be'aved as you boys 'ave been this year! An' now we're goin' to 'ear from one of our little boys. Michael Garrick is goin' to give us a little recitation called 'Never Mind!'

The unfamiliar name quite threw Moss off balance, and his neighbour had to nudge him before he rose to his feet.

Not for a moment had he thought it would be like this. Every eye in the chapel was fixed upon him, from the unctuous eye of the minister to the rheumy eye of Albert Smith in the back pew, for whom the Anniversary Sermons provided the only odour of sanctity to meet his nostrils in the entire year.

Moss began uneasily, and at once caught the eye of Mester Roper, mouthing 'speak up! Speak up!' But he had other and weightier matters on his mind. All consideration of speaking up and using 'expression' was gone with the dawning realization that there is more to public speaking than words.

Somehow he staggered through the first verse without actually breaking down, and by the end his voice was actually beginning to lose the quavering which had threatened to silence him.

And then disaster struck.

Instead of the familiar words of the second verse writ large in his mind there was only a blank sheet. He could see the page. He knew exactly where on the page the words of the second verse began, at the top of the right-hand page. But of the words themselves there was not a sign.

He forced himself to concentrate as he had so often been advised, unaware in his ignorance of such matters that he could have done nothing worse. He even mouthed the words of the first verse over again, in the hope that the words of the second verse might then appear, as they had always done before.

He looked around him wildly and caught his mother's eye. But she, poor woman, though having heard the lines ad nauseam, was too intent on feeling sympathy for her son in his all too apparent distress to be able to offer help.

In an agony of mind, Moss looked to Mester Roper and could make nothing of the words he was mouthing.

It seemed to him that he had been standing in this icy wilderness of misery and shame for an eternity before Mester Roper relieved him by surreptitiously waving for him to sit

down again. He slunk back on to the bench in an embarrassed silence, broken at last by the voice of the minister, charitably announcing the next hymn.

The service now dragged on to its appointed end, but Moss was all unheeding. By the time the worshippers filed out there were few who remembered or would very much care that one small boy had done himself less than justice on this occasion. But, for Moss, the shame of abject failure lay on his spirit like lead, and not all his mother's reassurances could comfort him.

The time would come, of course, when he would see it in perspective, when he would even be able to smile at the remembrance of it. But that time was not yet. In his heart he knew – and the years were to prove the truth of that knowledge – that he would never, never forget it.



It was accepted as a natural law by most Hallamside mothers that children were provided by a beneficent Providence for the purpose of running errands. There were few Hallamside children to be found, however, who gave thanks to Providence for this bounty. They would greet every request with the same words, 'Aw, Mam! 'Ave A got to?' The protest was to be expected, but the outcome predictable, for the law is the law. Their pleas fell on deaf ears.

In those days of straitened means, few housewives could afford to lay in a stock of provisions. Indeed, the nearest thing to a larder that most households in Grimesmoor possessed was a small dark area with a few shelves, at the top of the steps leading down to the coal-cellar, and known in local parlance as 't'cellar'ead'. Few indeed were the homes that could boast of provisions in any quantity lying on those shelves; anything bought before noon had usually been eaten before the sun went down. And if the housekeeping money ran out before Friday morning it was bread-and-scrape from the remaining remnants on the cellar-head until Dad came home with his wage-packet on Friday evening.

Every single item required, of course, the services of the 'family slipper' to bring it from the shop to the table, so there was an abundance of running of errands for Mam, and grumbles from her family. But even within such a narrow span of economy there were variations and subtle distinctions of social standing. In the three or four streets to the north of Fern Street, dwelt a stratum of folk who were, at least in their own view, superior to those in Fern Street, for their affluence might run to a tin of salmon for Sunday tea every week, where their less fortunate neighbours might see it only on high days and holidays.

The streets to the south of Fern Street, on the other hand, sported a sub-culture of those who had slipped down the social ladder. Here you might find the kind of man who, instead of bringing his pay-packet straight home on Friday evening and putting it unopened into his wife's hand, as a dutiful and respectable working-man should, would instead booze a sizeable part of it away before rolling home to a stone-cold meal and a blazing wife. These were the families who provided the local pawnbroker with much of his business, by taking Dad's best suit in on Monday morning to pawn it, only to retrieve it on the following Saturday, a practice which was made possible only by asking for 'tick' from the local shops throughout the week and paying off the debt when the depleted pay-packet came in. It was hard enough for a respectable housewife to manage the money; the stratagems to which her shiftless neighbours were driven would have given a professional accountant headaches.

So it was a common sight to see children of Moss's tender years running into one of the small shops on Carlisle Road, carrying a screw of paper containing the required money to the exact half-penny, and a pencilled note of the goods he was to bring back, a note which always ended with the two words 'And Oblige' – the lingua franca of those parts which corresponded to formal thanks. And woe betide any child who forget to check that he had the right change, or who tried to pocket it himself. Every half-penny counted, and every one was accounted for.

In due time, Moss served his apprenticeship to 'runnin' erran's' by accompanying his brother Joe on such outings – as the necessary prelude to becoming the 'family slipper' – until Lizzie judged that he could be trusted to go alone. He was now under orders to make his way home directly from school at noon or half-past four o'clock in the certain knowledge that there would be at least one errand to run.

In the course of a single day he might be required to make excursions for such things as 'a ha'porth of pot 'erbs' (which, being translated, meant a couple of smallish carrots, a slice from a small swede, one small onion and, if fortune smiled on Lizzie, one small stick from a root of celery). All of these added up to the ingredients for a saucepan of hash, the standard dish on the Monday wash-day which used up the remnants of the meagre Sunday dinner.

On another occasion it might be a quarter-pound of 'ot udder' for Jim's meal, a delicacy which, one supposes, no longer figures in any list of household necessities. Then again, it might be a pound of medium treacle, in which case Moss was required to take an empty jar, to be filled from the barrel behind the counter of the Co-operative Stores and then covered by the assistant with a small square of greaseproof paper to 'keep out t'smuts' on the journey home.

Or Lizzie might require two ounces of 'barm' (the yeast required for the making of home-made bread). And on rare occasions there might be a need for a piece of cobbler's wax, a sovereign remedy for removing a wood-splinter (known locally as a 'spell') from finger or thumb, when all efforts to dislodge it with a sewing-needle had failed.

It would never have struck Lizzie, or any other Grimesmoor mother, to store up these requirements so that her child could encompass them in a single journey. It had long been established that errands were the household duty of the youngest child as soon as that child had reached an age where it might take over the duty. Joe was, understandably, delighted to see his younger brother preparing to take over his rôle, and was assiduous in training him so that the transfer might be sooner rather than later.

Moss, with a certain measure of pride and some illusions born of ignorance, raised no objections. Not that it would have mattered; he was an imaginative and adventurous child who found it no burden and much to exercise his mind and his sense of wonder in the expanding world of Grimesmoor, the university of the street – at least, until custom staled its infinite variety. Besides, it had not yet dawned on him that, with no younger child in the family, he was like to serve a longer stretch than most of his friends as the 'family slipper'.

He took over the role some eight years after the night of the Zeppelin. Joe graduated from the post into adolescence and freedom, and his younger brother in his turn eventually grew to dread the sound of his mother's voice calling him from play with a cry of 'Ere, our Moss, jus' slip 'n fetch me three pound o' pertaters!'

On his accession, one of Moss's regular duties was the Friday evening visit to 't'stoors', the local branch of The Hallamside and District Co-operative Society Limited. He had long known his mother's 'stoor's number' and could pipe up 'three seven four six' without hesitation or fear of error long before he knew what the symbols meant. He knew, too, to guard the ten-shilling note in his clenched fist with his life, and always to remind the assistant to wrap up the change in a piece of paper so that it should arrive home with him intact.

He also knew how, with the application of elbow or steel-capped toe, to defend his turn at the counter against the sort of unscrupulous grown-up who would push small children to the rear of the throng at the counter if they thought they could get away with it.

To speak truth, it was a long time before Moss tired of this duty. There was much to see in the crowded shop and all of it absorbing, from the sawdust-covered floor to the sides of bacon hanging from the ceiling. There was the 'railway' which carried the Stores check and the ten-shilling note along singing wires from the counter to the office high up in the rafters, to return miraculously a few minutes later with the same check and the exact change. He deeply envied the nonchalant assistant as he stuffed the note and the check into the metal cup, fastened it to the carriage with a practised flick of the wrist and then, with one smart pull on the cord with the polished wooden handle, sent it flying unerringly to its destination.

Then there were the barrels of butter which were rolled out from time to time from the store-room at the rear of the shop. It was always a red-letter day if his weekly visit coincided with this event. He would watch round-eyed as the top was prised off and one by one the barrel-staves were pulled apart so that a huge round of butter could be cut off and transferred to the marble slab on the counter. Nor was this the end of the entertainment. The assistant would then cut off a piece of the required weight (Moss never ceased to marvel at the accuracy of his judgement), proceed to pat it into shape with a pair of wooden paddles, and finally, on the larger orders, finish with a flourish of the special paddle which left the slab of butter delicately sculptured on its face with a life-like bas-relief of an unmistakable cow.

Sadly, Friday night was a bad night for this entertainment, for the assistants were usually too 'throng' to bother with such refinements. Moss wondered how they could have the heart to refrain. For his part, he would gladly have served butter all night for the privilege of imprinting those cows, and could think of no occupation in the world so worth-while.

Then there was the cheese, yellow and hard as soap or white and crumbly, cut with an entrancing length of wire fastened to two wooden handles from a block that would have fed a regiment, and then cut smaller still on a block with a fixed wire cutter.

There were the treacle-kegs behind the counter each with its own small tap, and labelled respectively dark, medium and light. There was the hessian-covered lump of barm on the counter, an essential item in every household's requirements, for any housewife who did not regularly bake her own bread was counted no better than a slut, on a par no doubt with a husband who drank much of his pay-packet on the Friday evening.

There were the grain-hoppers in the room at the back of the shop which always made him wish that his parents kept hens, so that he could see the dusty-haired assistant scoop the Indian corn out of the container beneath, allowing a fresh supply to cascade down.

For Moss it was a cornucopia, a feast not only for the sight but for the nose, too. He could never tire of observing the suet, the tinned tomatoes, the pullet eggs for cooking purposes only – real eggs were something of an Easter treat, being reserved for Dad the rest of the year, though the youngest in the family might look to get the top of his Sunday-morning boiled egg – and, on rare and delightful occasions, a half-pound of bacon, cut on the huge machine with the great wheel and the fearsome blade with its reputation for removing careless fingers ‘just like that’ – though the assistants all seemed to carry a full complement.

Years later, when the visual memory had dimmed with time, one whiff of the odour of an old-fashioned grocer’s shop could whirl Moss back through time and space to this weekly ritual, and become almost a matter for tears.

There were other and farther errands to which Moss came in his turn, and which all three of his older brothers had known before him. And there was one which in view of its regularity and distance might have caused resentment in the breast of another boy. Moss, who had his own liking for jaunts, rarely jibbed at it.

It was the custom in those parts for the respectable housewife to see to it that her man had a hot dinner every day – dinner, of course, being the mid-day meal. It was out of the question for him to come home for the meal, since the restricted length of the noon break made this impossible. So each member of the family in turn had taken Dad’s dinner to his place of work, with varying degrees of rebellion and all of them disregarded, for the practice was one that Lizzie, like any dutiful wife, respected.

The traditional dinner-basket testified to the endurance of the practice, for long usage had achieved the ideal shape for the purpose. It was a container of basket-work, light and strong, and in shape resembling a loaf of bread with a hinged top. When the interior had received the basin which held the meal and which was then covered with a snowy-white cloth, the lid was fastened with a crude but effective loop and peg device, and the basket could now be carried upright by means of the handle in the centre of the lid. And woe betide any child foolish enough to swing it around on the way to its destination, since the evidence of the offence made itself only too plain in the spilt contents.

Moss would then set off on the fifteen minutes’ walk to the steelworks, to stand at the gates and wait for the sound of the hooter that signalled the end of the morning stint. A few minutes later, and his father would appear, in waistcoat and shirt-sleeves, working-shirt collarless and open at the neck, and still wearing the coarse apron and the gleaming white sweat-scarf that marked off the steelworker from the rest of mankind.

His father would reach down a hand as brown and hard as an unpeeled walnut to take the basket from his son, lay the other hand on his dark head and say, ‘Right! Off yer goo, son!’ and turn to go at once, clumping away down the cobbled yard in his wooden clogs with their sled-runner irons.

On rare occasions, Moss would have a ball with him, to kick all the way home and to while away the time and the long journey. More often, he would have to content himself with a small stone, dribbling it along the pavement, flicking it against the wall, and outwitting half-backs and full-backs by the score on the inevitable way to the goal.

Then, once every month, came the regular errand to collect the wine for the chapel, for it was one of the caretaker’s duties to arrange the supply of wine for the Sacrament service,

the nonconformist counterpart to the Eucharist. The ritual of the service was as yet a closed book to Moss, and he was apt to wonder at times what the chapel wanted with wine. It was his understanding that the chapelgoers believed that wine was a mocker and strong drink was raging, so the need for this monthly errand was something of a mystery. He knew, because he had seen his father doing it, that eventually the wine was poured out into small glasses each little larger than a thimble and then set out on a tray. But what the ultimate purpose of these arrangements might be quite escaped him.

Years later, when he made the acquaintance of the Communion service in a church of quite another denomination, he was astonished to find that the congregation all drank from the same silver flagon. But, unlike the practice which obtained in that later church, he came to learn that the wine used at Hensley Street Chapel had to be non-alcoholic. The worshippers at this shrine could never have brought themselves to believe that the Man who had founded their faith some nineteen centuries earlier had been given to strong drink.

But it had to look like wine, and it had to taste like wine so, having found a reliable source of home-made blackcurrant wine, guaranteed non-alcoholic, they were glad at heart and stayed with it.

It was on one such errand that Moss was accosted by Alec Willett.

‘Eigh, Moss, wheer tha gooin?’

‘A’m off to t’erbalist’s fer t’wine fer t’sacrament!’ Moss replied.

‘Can a come wi’ thi?’

‘Aye, if thi mother’ll let thi!’

Permission having been granted, they set off, not without some anxiety on Maggie Willett’s part, and with the customary instruction to behave themselves to which they paid little heed. There was in the breast of every Hallamside mother a rooted conviction that, left to himself, every boy was drawn to mischief as by a magnet.

Alec was curious as to the reason for Moss’s errand. Wine was not a commodity that figured at all largely in the lives of Grimesmoor folk, and both boys were aware of the fact.

‘Nay, A don’t know,’ said Moss. ‘But mi Dad says as A’ve allus got to goo theer!’

‘Well, that’s daft, A reckon,’ Alec replied. ‘there’s any amount o’ beer-offs between ’ere and t’erbalist’s. A know they sell wine theer, ’cos mi Dad got some las’ Christmas!’

‘Aye, ’appen so,’ said Moss, ‘but A’d better goo wheer mi Dad says. It’s not fer ’im, it’s fer t’chapel, tha sees!’

Alec failed to see the difference. Moreover, if Moss was right, he argued, and the chapel folk had the wine in little glasses, they’d not see any difference either.

‘Aye, A know,’ said Moss. ‘But tha knows mi Dad!’

This silenced Alec for a moment, but he soon returned to the point with a telling thrust.

‘A’ll tell thi summat else. If tha goos ter t’beer-off in Pashby Street, she’ll gie thi a ’andful o’ spice! She gies every kid a ’andful when they goo in fer summat fer their mothers!’

This was almost a clincher. Sweets were a luxury, and sweets in mid-week almost unheard of. The thought of sweets for nothing was unbearably seductive.

Alec could see that Moss was wavering and delivered the coup de grâce.

‘An’ if tha goos in fer summat as cosses as much as wine, she’ll ’appen gie thi a extra big ’andful!’

It was not to be borne any longer. Moss’s last scruple vanished. They made their way quickly to the off-licence-cum-grocer’s-cum-general-store, and waited in a torment of impatience while a tremulous old woman in a shawl, ruminant with gossip, made a few meagre and leisurely purchases.

‘No, love,’ said the old woman behind the counter, as the old chatterbox edged out of the swing-doors, ‘A don’t keep blackcurrant wine. But A’ve gorra nice port-type, like!’

‘Aye, that’ll do!’ said Moss, all discretion abandoned in the lust for sweets.

And, true to Alec’s promise, on receiving payment from the twist of newspaper. she not only gave Moss a handful of sweets of lurid colour and doubtless equally exotic taste, but Alec too. This further gladdened the heart of Moss, who had been calculating the price that Alec would extort for the information.

It was Alec who remembered to ask Moss just in time about the label on the bottle, and thus saved Moss certain embarrassment when he got home with the wine. The herbalist’s brew, Moss recalled, being made by his own hands, bore no label of any kind.

By dint of much spit and scratching they eventually managed to remove the tell-tale label. Moss’s conscience troubled him as he handed over the bottle at home, but only for a moment, since it was accepted without question.

But by the next weekend, when the wine was to be put to use, Moss was troubled by doubts, plagued by uncertainties, and mortally afraid of what might happen should his father find out. He rushed home from chapel on the Sunday evening and actually volunteered to go straight to bed, a submission which caused his mother to raise an eyebrow which caused his heart to miss a beat.

Monday morning came, and nothing was said. Monday evening, and still his father’s brow was clear. The wine must have been all right after all.

The next time he was required to fetch the Sacrament wine, he went straight to the off-licence in Pashby Street, and this time his conscience scarcely troubled him. He took it a little unkindly, considering that he had carefully omitted to invite Alec, that the old lady gave him only the same amount of sweets as before. But some spice, he told himself, is better than no spice at all.

On the following Monday morning, now all but free of the prickings of conscience, he was up and dressed before his father left for work.

But something was wrong. Something in his father’s eyes told him.

Nothing was said, however, until, as he was leaving the house, his father said over his shoulder,

‘When I get ’ome ternight, mi lad, A want a word wi’ you!’

Moss felt a sudden, sickening stab of alarm but tried not to show it.

‘What about, Dad?’

Jim turned round and looked his small son firmly in the eye.

‘Yer know that as well as A do, A reckon! An’ if yer don’t, then yer’d better search your conscience between now an’ tea-time. A ’aven’t time ter stop now! Just search yer conscience, that’s all!’

But of that there was no need. Somehow, as Mester Shepherd at Sunday School never tired of saying, his sins had found him out. He spent the long day in an agony of remorse and self-recrimination, so that when his father at last came home he could bear the burden no longer.

‘Dad,’ he blurted out, ‘A’m sorry about t’wine! A know A shouldn’t ’ave done it, but it’s such a long way, an’ t’woman at – ‘

His father broke in.

‘Wine? ’Oo’s talkin’ about wine?’

‘t’sacrament wine, Dad!’

‘Oh, aye? Goo on!’

‘Well, A know A shouldn’t ’ave gorrit from t’other shop. But A didn’t think it’d matter!’

‘then yer thowt wrong, didn’t yer?’ his father said, sharply. ‘In future jus’ you gerrit wheer A’ve telled yer ter gerrit!’

‘Yes, Dad!’

‘No, what A want a word wi’ you about is t’state o’ them pews at t’back o’ t’chapel! They’re downright disgraceful! Yer’ve been dustin’ them pews as yer thowt would show an’ letting t’reast go hang. Yer ought to be ashamed o’ yerself, that yer should!’

He stopped, and lifted Moss’s bowed head with one work-scarred finger beneath his chin.

‘Now, jus’ you listen to me, will yer? Next Sat’d day A want to see all them pews – all of ’em, mind – properly dusted. An’ yer don’t get yer Sat’d day penny till they are, d’y’ear?’

In any other circumstance Moss might have bridled at the thought that the Saturday chores and the weekly inspection were to be thus extended and tightened. But, with a boy’s sense of rough justice he saw that the extra burden of work might go some way to expiate his sin in the matter of the Sacrament wine.

On the Saturday afternoon he worked longer and more industriously than he had for some time. When at last he called his father to inspect the work the afternoon was far spent.

His father grunted, but Moss knew that it was not a grunt of dissatisfaction.

‘Na that’s moor like it!’ he said, when the inspection was complete. ‘A couldn’t ’ave done it better mesen! Na you listen to me, mi lad! Don’t you ever think again as a job as isn’t seen doesn’t matter. There’s plenty o’ that soart o’ workman about. Jus’ you see as you’re one o’ t’other soart!’

‘Yes, Dad!’

‘Right! ’Ere’s yer penny! Off yer go!’

Then, on mature consideration, he delayed Moss with a hand on his shoulder.

‘Look, son,’ he said, ‘A’ll tell yer what we’ll do. Next Sunday night yer can stop back at t’chapel fer t’sacrament service. Yer’ll not be able to tek part – not for a few years yet. But it’ll do yer no ’arm to see what ’appens!’

So Moss attended his first Sacrament service, and found it a novel and strangely moving experience. He took in every detail of the ritual with utter absorption, and became so immersed in the experience that he quite forgot that the wine which the chapelgoers accepted in quiet humility and reverence was the same wine that he himself had fetched. These ordinary folk in their neat, severe Sunday best were sipping the wine – the wine, he now reminded himself, that he had brought to them – and seemed to take from it a satisfaction which he saw clearly but which was quite beyond his understanding.

As they left the ugly brick chapel, his father was stopped by Albert Kirk.

‘Jim-ah! A minute-ah o’ yer time-ah, if yer please!’

Moss was dimly aware that his father was not well pleased to be so greeted.

‘A’ve been meanin’ to ’ave a word-ah with yer about-ah ’t ’wine,’ the Superintendent went on, heedless of Jim’s smouldering impatience. ‘It’s very – well, variable. Very variable! A ad-ah thought it were gettin’ a bit-ah better this last time or two. But ternight – ah – well, A didn’t think as it were quite so good-ah!’

Moss felt his father’s hand tighten around his own.

‘Mester Kirk,’ he said, ‘t’wine came from t’same place as it allus does. Made bi t’same man, an’ all. Our Moss ’ere – ’and he slipped an arm around Moss’s shoulders, ‘ – ’e allus fetches it, an’ it’s allus t’same order!’

Albert Kirk was clearly disinclined to submit quite so easily.

‘that-ah may well be, Jim. But-ah A’m seriously considerin’ recommendin’ ter t’s stewards as we mek a change-ah. It-ah so ’appens as A ’ave a friend-ah ’oo’d be ’appy ter supply us! At t’right price, too!’

Jim faced the Superintendent, still holding Moss by the hand, and drew himself up to his full height.

‘Mester Kirk, t’wine we’re gettin’ now is t’right price. It’s made from t’best ingredients by a member o’ this congregation. A doubt as t’s stewards’ll want ter change that!’

And he strode away, dragging Moss with him, before Albert Kirk could reply.

As he trotted beside his father, Moss said,

‘Dad, A didn’t get t’wine from t’same place!’

They went on in silence for a few moments, and then Jim stopped and turned Moss to face him.

‘A know what yer thinkin’, son, yer know! A told a lie, didn’t A?’

He grinned sheepishly, and went on,

‘A know, A know! A’ve told yer as yer must never tell a lie, ‘aven’t A? Yer must allus tell t’truth, eh? An’ so yer must, even if it gets yer into trouble! An’ A’ll give yer a damn good ’idin’ if yer don’t, d’y’ear?’

Then he suddenly looked sober and grave.

‘But A reckon as yer’ll allus be forgiven if yer tell a lie to get somebody else out o’ trouble, d’yer see?’

‘Yes, Dad!’

‘A know A shouldn’t ’ave said that to Mester Kirk. but – well, yer can see what we’re all up against, can’t yer? An’ if you ever ’ave t’job of ordering t’sacrament wine, you see as y’allus get it from t’same place. You see, A ‘appen to know as it cosses Mester Scholey moor money to mek it than ’e charges us. On’y ’e doesn’t want it known, and you’ve got to keep it ter yerself, d’y’ear?’

‘Yes, Dad!’

‘A’ve seen ’im mekkin’ it, son. ’E does it wi’ such – such care. There can’t be a better job done than one as is done that way, na can there? An’ A reckon as A s’ll be forgiven for a thunderin’ good lie in that cause!’

But Moss needed no one to remind him for whom the lie had really been told. Conscious now of the enormity of his offence and desolate at the knowledge that he had escaped its deserved consequences, he could think of nothing to say.

And Jim Garrett, looking down into his son’s face, a face for the moment older than the sum of his years, was astonished to see that his eyes were filled with tears.



CHAPTER 13

Fair is Foul, and Foul is Fair
Macbeth I, i

Toys played but a small part on the stage of Moss's world. Toys cost money, and Grimsby had other and more urgent uses for its money at that time.

But there were games in plenty, for games cost nothing, or at the most the kind of outlay that could be covered by the Saturday penny. The household chores and the running of errands which children were asked to do were all done for love, at least in the sense of a tennis score. Few parents – even supposing they could have afforded to do so – would have dreamt of paying for their performance. But it was accepted by all that, once these tasks were done, a child was entitled to its play. And, for the more imaginative child, even the tedium of running errands could often be lightened by arranging matters so as to give them at least the flavour of play.

Their desire for play was the more understandable since games at school were virtually unknown. That part of the school curriculum which later came to be known as 'physical Education' was called in Moss's day, 'Drill'. And drill it was indeed, and may have been a bright idea hatched by some half-educated politician who had served as an officer in World War I. (A private soldier might have been better informed).

In an age where every teacher was called upon to teach every subject in the curriculum, 'Drill' had the merit of not requiring any great skill on the part of a teacher, consisting of little more than arms up, arms forward, arms sideways, marching on the spot, and marching and counter-marching. It was 'Drill' which introduced Moss to a new and far from welcome experience, one with a taste scarcely to be washed away by the tides of many years.

He had moved by now from Miss Butler's class, by way of a Miss Sarson and a Miss Connolly, to the junior school and the care of a Miss Mearwood, the first teacher for whom he felt no bond of affinity. In this he was not unique among his classmates for Miss Mearwood was one of those spinsters with whom life had dealt harshly. She had lips which were thin and bloodless, and her smiles were as rare as eclipses of the sun.

Neither Moss nor his class-mates could have known that on the morning of this particular day Miss Mearwood had been called before the headmistress and reprimanded for an error in the marking of her register, a failing which, to do her justice, was a rare event in her case. So in this one instance at least she might have been forgiven for feeling that the reprimand was out of all proportion to the offence. Throughout her lunch-hour she smouldered under the injustice until it assumed monstrous dimensions. It was a dangerously unbalanced woman who led out her young charges for the afternoon lesson in 'Drill'.

The day was bitterly cold, and the children clumsy and fractious. For their part, many of them were ill-clad to cope with such weather and, for her part, Miss Mearwood was bitterly abstracted except for an obsession with injustice. The lesson ended early with the teacher in the grip of an icy and near-hysterical rage and quite incapable of dealing kindly and generously with children, of whom more than a few were ill-fed and poorly clad. She marched her thirty-six children back to the classroom and systematically caned every one, guilty and innocent alike. In a few minutes the room resembled a casualty-clearing station, with children moaning and crying bitterly, and squeezing their hands into their armpits in a vain endeavour to ease their suffering.

It was Moss's first taste of this too-common form of 'punishment' for, to speak truth, he was easy to teach and usually too much interested in his work to give trouble to any teacher. So the burning pain in his hands was matched only by the burning sense of outrage in his soul. He knew that nothing he had done had merited this, and, along with every one of his fellows, he hated Miss Mearwood to the depths of his being.

He could not know that she, poor creature, had derived no relief for her own soul from her outburst. She was not so far steeped in iniquity as to be unaware of the enormity of her offence – even though that offence lay not only in its severity but also in the fact that she knew that she dared not enter the details of it, as the law required, in the school's 'punishment book'. She knew only too well what retribution might be inflicted upon her if the knowledge of her onslaught upon the children became known. Even in a world where 't'stick' was administered all too often and much too casually and with an appalling lack of imagination or compassion, this was extreme and she knew it, and feared the consequences.

But it has to be said in mitigation that Edith Mearwood herself was no stranger to injustice, even if the headmistress's reproof had not been given. Life had been more than ordinarily unfair to her. She was one of those women left surplus to requirements by the slaughter of many men, any one of whom might have been a suitor to her hand. Now she faced a future bleak indeed, as the unmarried daughter left with the task of eventually caring for aged parents. If Moss and his classmates suffered, she suffered, too. And, unlike theirs, her tears would not pass.

The incident might have ended there had Lizzie not noticed her son's hands as she washed him before bed.

'Eigh up! What yer been doin' to yer 'ands, our Moss?'

The bitterness of the recollection was still too near and too keen to allow Moss to dissemble. He was not at all sure whether this was the sort of affair which could be revealed, or whether he could not in safety tell all. The decision was taken out of his hands by the tears which came unbidden. Lizzie lifted his chin, saw them, and lost no time at all in learning the truth.

If Moss was outraged it was nothing to the emotion his mother felt. But she kept her counsel from her son for the moment, and made up her mind to discuss the matter no further until Jim should return.

He, though fully sharing her sense of outrage, took a more sober view of the steps to be taken. Lizzie's insistence that this was a matter for the headmistress met with quiet but firm resistance.

‘A don’t owd wi’ runnin’ to bosses like that,’ he said. ‘If anybody wants talking to, it’s ’er as did it! But yer know as well as A do as a can’t be tekkin’ time off work to go to no school!’

‘Awright!’ she said. ‘A’ll goo mesen!’

‘Yer’ll do no such thing!’ he replied.

It was a tone which she had learned was not to be gainsaid. But she seethed inwardly, and in the ensuing days used up much nervous energy trying to devise ways of having the wrong righted in some way which would not run counter to Jim’s wishes.

Jim had not brushed the matter lightly aside, but he had his own way of dealing with it. Before Moss, still not wholly awake, had dressed for breakfast the next morning, his father came to his bed and lifted him out to stand on the cold oil-cloth.

‘Yer Mam tells me as yer got t’stick yesterday!’ he said.

Moss looked up quickly, torn between the need to avoid his father’s eyes and the desire to read what was there. He could not doubt the kindness which he saw, and it all but undid him again. His father took his shoulders in firm hands.

‘Did yer deserve it?’ he asked.

Moss was now quite beyond speech, and could only shake his head.

‘Are yer sure o’ that?’ his father went on.

‘A didn’t do owt, Dad!’ he blurted out, his tears beginning to flow again.

‘A see,’ his father said quietly, appearing to give Moss’s answer due consideration. Then, after a long pause, he went on,

‘tell me, son, ’ave y’ever done owt at school befoor as deserved t’stick? A mean, summat as wasn’t found out?’

Moss looked up at his father again, uncertain of the purpose behind the question. He was forced to admit it.

‘And did yer think that were fair, eh?’ his father asked.

There was only one answer.

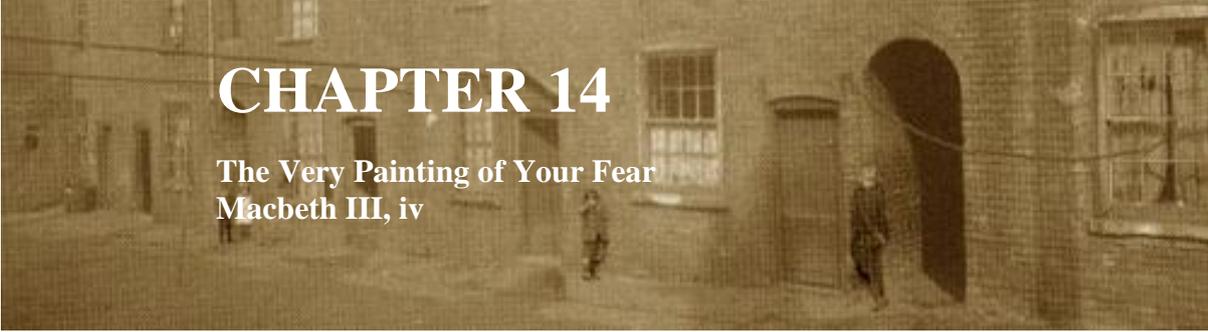
‘Well, na look ‘ere, son. Yer’ve played at cricket often enough, so yer’ll know what A mean. Sometimes yer’ll be given out ‘Leg befoor’ when yer weren’t out. And sometimes yer’ll be given ‘Not out’ when y’are. Now in’t that right?’

His son nodded, still not at all sure where his father was headed.

‘Well now,’ his father said, taking Moss’s head between his hands and looking into his eyes, ‘there’s allus a chance as yer’ll be punished fer summat as yer didn’t do. It’s that sooart o’ world, yer see. What yer’ve got to do is think on. Just remember t’times when yer got away wi’ it, an’ set one against t’other. D’yer see?’

Moss considered this without much success, for the continuing sense of outrage still clouded his mind, and shut out a better understanding. But he knew enough of his father to nod his head as though he fully understood, and went off to school after breakfast by no means convinced, yet oddly comforted.

Years later, when he had been called upon to suffer worse injustices and to bear even greater pain, he would recall the incident of 't'stick' and find himself able to smile at the remembrance. But by then he had learned the full import of his father's words, and could say 'Why me?' in moments of ecstasy as feelingly as in bouts of pain.



CHAPTER 14

The Very Painting of Your Fear Macbeth III, iv

Living in a age in which a state of uncertainty about the future was the only certainty, when a family might move from tinned salmon for tea one Sunday to bread-and-scrape the next, there were times when Moss, like others of his kind, had to learn to meet with disappointment and false hopes and deal with them as best he could.

But, though he might thus early in his career have taken to heart the knowledge that hopes may be dupes, he was slower to learn that fears may be liars, and his catalogue of childish fears was not made any smaller by much reading and a lively imagination.

All through his childhood a morbid and irrational fear of the dark had troubled his waking hours. The coming down of night on Grimesmoor, whatever it may have meant to the rest of its people, was to Moss the signal for all the forces of evil to compass him round and to threaten his very life. Away from the green glow of the gas-lamps in the street, and even between the lamps if they were spaced too widely, it seemed to him that every corner might conceal an attacker, and every entry-end a wild-eyed maniac with an appetite for small boys.

If he could have confessed them, such terrors might have been easier to bear, but that was out of the question. The merest hint of distress on his part was met with scorn, and the injunction not to be 'such a babby'. In time he came to accept that grown-ups were brave, and he was not. That was all there was to it, and there was nothing to be done about it.

His reading, which was voracious and quite indiscriminating from the moment he acquired the skill, did nothing to help, merely adding to his present fears more horrible imaginings. There were times when he chanced upon a story which common sense told him he should avoid at all costs, and which drew him instead like a magnet. The next few minutes would find him drinking in terrors with a crawling scalp and a horrified fascination. And, though he might swear to avoid any such stories for the future, he would return to them again and again like a drunkard to the bottle.

So, long before he reached his ninth year, Moss was by way of being an authority on the horrific. He knew more than he wished to know on the subject of slant-eyed and inscrutable Orientals slinking down Limehouse streets, a favourite ingredient of fiction at the time.

To him, London was merely an idea, for he had never been, nor was ever likely to be, within a hundred and fifty miles of the capital. But his knowledge of the Chinese quarter down by the docks, all of it acquired through the medium of cheap 'comics', a most unsuitable name for such retailers of the horrors, was detailed indeed. His belief in the

truth of the printed word had not so far been tested, and he knew every facet of that life, the oily waters of the Thames, the shifting fog, the noisome opium-dens – whatever opium might be, though he gathered it had some unlikely connection with poppies – and, above all, the wily minions of the Tongs, in their silken gowns with long wide sleeves, every one of which concealed a murderously sharp knife. And all these things were no less real to him for their having no roots in real life.

As long as such a world remained the stuff of fiction, however, his fears could be borne, no matter how awesome they might be. He could draw some small comfort from repeated assurances to himself – assurances whose power began to wane as the day drew to its close – that these things ‘on’y ‘appened in books’.

But when, as sometimes happened, real-life events threatened to break through that barrier and he seemed about to meet with the stuff of fiction in his own life, his fears took on frightening substance, sapped at his vitals, and threatened to drown completely all his self-assurance.

The worst of its kind came upon him one day like a bolt from a clear sky.

His mother called him in from play, cursorily checked his appearance before packing him off again, and in a few words casually shattered the ordered calm of the sunlit world.

‘‘Ere y’are, our Moss! A want yer to tek our Jack’s shirt ter t’Chinese laundry!’

‘Aw, Mam! ‘Ave A got to? It’s miles!’

Had she been less occupied with her own concerns at that moment, she must surely have seen the blanching of his face, but instead, with a helping hand at his back, she began to push him out of doors. As she had more than half expected, he showed signs of renewed protest.

Lizzie, her mind on other matters, hardly noticed his objections. Had she done so, she would doubtless have taken them for the routine ‘mitherin’ proper to any small boy called in from play to go on an errand, a response to be brushed aside with scant ceremony.

‘‘Ere y’are! An’ don’t forget ter bring t’ticket back!’

Moss now recalled that he had heard some talk of an event at ‘t’university’ that apparently called for his eldest brother to dress up like a trussed chicken in a thing he called a ‘dress suit’ and something unknown to Moss called a ‘dickey’. It was a form of clothing rarely seen in Grimesmoor, a place not much given to banquets and balls and after-dinner speeches.

What he had not understood was that the starched front, the stiff collar, and the shirt that went with the suit had to be laundered in a manner which was beyond his mother’s powers. They must be taken to a Chinese laundry.

The word ‘Chinese’ threatened to drain the last drop of blood from his body and the marrow from his very bones. He knew that laundry only too well, though until now only from hearsay. His schoolmates had curdled his blood and their own with colourful accounts of the unspeakable things that went on behind the drawn curtain of that awful door.

In other circumstances than the present, Moss could contain his fears and push aside these tales by giving the place the widest possible berth. If he chose, he could even avoid that street altogether. And, even if for some reason he was obliged to use it, he could always, like the priest and the Levite, pass by on the other side.

But now there was no such choice open to him. Now he was not only required to walk down that street, but to go up to that door, open it, and enter. He must actually cross the threshold of a place which had played such a lively part in his nightmares.

He had a sudden vision of that shabby door, with its glass upper panel and the dingy curtain behind it which concealed Heaven only knew what horrors. Even as he took in the realization of all that it meant, he knew he could not face it.

He wished with all his heart that he could tell his mother how he felt, how impossible it was for him to open that door, to cross that threshold, and to find himself separated only by a wooden counter from such things. But something told him she would not understand. Grown-ups never did. You couldn't talk to them about such things.

He set off with dragging feet, casting feverishly about him for some way out of this walking nightmare.

The sight of Alec Willett just leaving his own door promised a prospect of hope.

'Eigh up, Alec! Does tha want to come wi' me?'

'Why, wheer tha gooin'?' asked Alec, not at all anxious to buy a pig in a poke.

Moss explained, and found with sinking heart that Alec was not enthusiastic. 'Besides,' he added, as a final crusher, 'me Mam says as A've got ter stop in t'yard, 'cos us dinners's nearly ready.'

Moss pleaded that they could run there and back again in no time, but, weighed against Alec's knowledge of his mother's certain displeasure, Moss's pleas counted for little.

Moss had no more luck with other friends on whom he used his most persuasive promises and cajolings. With growing apprehension, he felt the jaws of the trap closing on him. And then, when all hope seemed to have faded to the merest flicker, his desperate efforts were rewarded.

It was nothing less than an inspiration.

He remembered another laundry, a large steam-laundry, admittedly much farther off than the Chinaman's, but doubtless staffed with good honest folk with pink cheeks and round eyes. He knew nothing more of the Snowwhite Laundry than its name and its whereabouts, for laundries were not a thing on which the average Grimesmoor boy could expect to be well-informed. But he needed no more than this. He set off with a lighter step and with joy in his heart.

'Me Mam wants this 'ere shirt 'n things doin' ' he said to the lady behind the high counter. 'Can yer do it?'

She looked at the shirt and its trappings, and then at the small boy with the grave, dark eyes.

‘special finish?’ she asked.

‘Aye, that’s awright!: he replied, having not the glimmer of a notion as to her meaning.

‘Ready next Thursday!’ she said.

For the life of him, Moss could not recall whether he had been told by what date Jack required the clothes, but he decided to cross that bridge when he came to it.

He was almost out of the door when the lady called him back for his ticket.

He had partly expected questions when he got home, but he was all unprepared for the storm which greeted the appearance of the Snowwhite ticket.

‘Eigh, what’s this, our Moss? This ticket’s not from no Chinese laundry!’

He began to explain, but his mother had not done.

‘D’yer think as A’m payin’ their fancy prices for a shirt? An’ when’s it gooin’ ter be ready, eh?’

‘Next Thursday, Mam!’

‘Next Thursday? Our Jack wants it fer Tuesday night! Yer can just goo’n get that shirt back, an’ tek it ter t’proper place, d’y’ear?’

‘Aw, Mam –’ he began, caught her eye, and knew it was useless to protest.

The lady at the Snowwhite Laundry was not well pleased to be put to the trouble of finding the shirt again. But Moss feared her evident displeasure not at all when weighed against his mother’s certain anger, and he soon had the offending articles once more under his arm.

And now it all began again . . .

Now he knew that all hope must be abandoned, and that there was no way of escape. Slowly, and sick with fear, he made his way to that door.

The bell above the door startled him half out of his wits. He crept inside, taking care not to close the door behind him. He must have at least the prospect of a quick dash to safety.

The shop was empty.

He stood by the half-open door, hardly daring to breathe. He scarcely noticed his surroundings, the shabby curtains and the peeling paint. His eyes were fixed upon that empty space behind the counter.

Suddenly, and with no sound, the Chinaman was there. In one hand he held a flat iron. The other held the cut half of a potato.

Moss stood rooted to the spot. At any other time, he would have taken in the trousers, the braces, and the collar-less shirt, far removed from his fantasies. But all he could see were the yellow skin and the slanted eyes.

The Chinaman put down the tools of his trade, lifted the flap of the counter, and advanced upon the shrinking Moss.

Moss had never known such fear. His mouth was dry and parched. His skin was cold. His bowels threatened to melt within him. Unable to move, he stood there as the Chinaman shuffled past him on slippered feet and closed the door.

Then, still without speaking, he returned to the counter, closed the flap behind him, and reached out a skinny hand for Moss's parcel.

Moss thumped down the parcel and turned to flee. But the latch would not yield to his fumbling hands. As he struggled with it despairingly, he felt a hand on his shoulder.

He wheeled round, white with terror.

The Chinaman was holding out to him a slip of pink paper. In a thin, high voice he said,

'Leady Sat'dee!'

Moss snatched at the slip, managed at last to open the door, and ran and ran until it seemed there was no breath left in his body.

He was still weak with fear when he arrived home.

And then the terror returned in earnest, for he knew that in two days' time it was all to do again. Come Saturday, he must return to that shop. He did not see how he could face it again, and he knew no way to avoid it.

He slept badly that night, and woke to the realization that only twenty-four hours remained before he must face the horror again.

The sight of Harold Roper collecting the chapel keys for his weekly organ-practice offered him a way of escape. He made his way, almost on the heels of the organist, to the doors of the chapel, crept in behind him unseen, and crouched in the family pew.

When Harold Roper finally closed the doors of the console and made his way from the chapel, he left behind him all unknowing the cowering figure of a small boy, afraid that he might still be discovered, and only easy in his mind when he heard the key in the lock and the sound of footfalls dying away.

Time passed slowly, but the dawning pangs of hunger scarcely troubled him. And it was not until the light began to fade that he realized that escape from one fear had delivered him into the hands of another. Darkness was coming down. He was locked in the empty chapel. It was growing gloomier and more forbidding with every minute.

And from this terror, he knew, there could be no escape.

As the evening air grew chill, the old building began to creak and whisper. His terror of the Chinaman was nothing to this. He crouched still lower in the pew, rigid with horror, expecting every moment he knew not what.

Meanwhile, back at Number Seventeen, Fern Street, his mother's suffering matched his own. As the slow hours passed with no word of her son, though by now half of Grimesmoor was searching every nook and cranny, her fears increased until she no longer knew what she was doing or why.

As the members of the family arrived home one by one, they were despatched to join the searchers, and all to no avail. When Jim at last came in from his work, he found a wife half out of her senses with grief and fear.

‘Look, love,’ he said, with more calmness than he felt, ‘sit yerself down an’ ’ave a cup o’ tea. Yer doin’ no good runnin’ around like a rat in a trap. Just sit yerself down, an’ A’ll goo an’ ’ave a word wi’ Bobby Hurditch.’

The name of the constable did little to calm Lizzie’s agitation, but at length Jim’s presence and his well-simulated air of composure restored her to something nearer sanity.

He reached up for the chapel keys on his way to the door.

‘A’ll not be long, love,’ he said. ‘A’m just gooin’ to attend to t’boilers at t’chapel. An’ then A’ll goo straightaway ’n see Bobby Hurditch.’

And so it was that Moss heard above the pounding of his heart the glad sound of the key in the chapel door. The next moment Jim Garrett was all but bowled over as a small figure rushed at him out of the gloom and buried his head in the rough cloth of his father’s waistcoat.

Before they left the chapel, Jim knew all. He sat in one of the pews in the half-light of the chapel and took his son on his knee.

‘Na look ’ere, son! A’ll tell yer what we’ll do. Tomorrer afternoon A’ll tek yer to that Chinese laundry, an’ yer’ll see that yer’ve nowt to bother yer ’ead about. ’E’s just a poor man scrattin’ fer a livin’, yer know. An’ A’ll tell yer what we’re gunna do now, befoor A tek yer ’ome to yer Mam. A’ve got to see ter t’boilers, an’ check all t’doors ter see as everythin’s properly locked. An’ yer gunna ’owd me ’and, like this,’ he added, suiting the words to the action, ’an’ we’re gunna goo all over t’chapel, an’ mek sure everythin’s safe. Awright?’

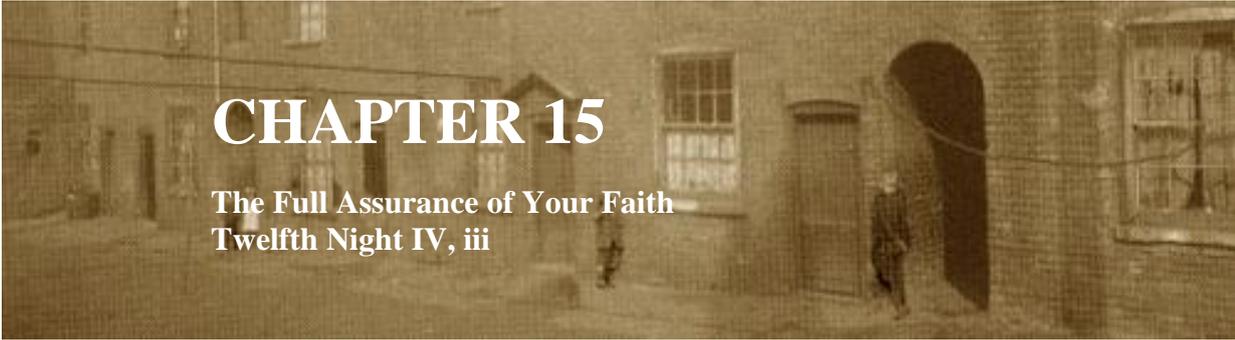
Moss was not entirely reassured.

‘In t’dark, Dad?’

‘Aye,’ his father replied. ‘A niver put t’lights on when A’m seein’ ter t’chapel. Why should A? There’s nowt ’ere in t’ dark as in t’ere in t’daylight, yer know. D’yer see?’

In truth, Moss saw but imperfectly. But with his small hand in the large and enormously comforting hand of his father, some of the terror of the day began to seep from his bones and his troubled mind.

And the fuss that his mother made of him, and the knowledge that he would not now have to brave the terrors of that Chinese laundry alone, sent him to bed happier that night than he could have believed possible that same morning.



CHAPTER 15

The Full Assurance of Your Faith
Twelfth Night IV, iii

The Superintendent of a Sunday school in those days could count on a sudden influx of converts twice a year, just before Christmas and just before Whitsuntide. He could be just as certain that every one of them would lapse again as soon as these festivals were over.

With each succeeding year, as the children's feasts came round again, more than one Superintendent would swear that this year he would stand firm. It was common knowledge that all these new adherents wanted to do was to qualify for the Christmas Party or the Whitsun Sing.

But, as the time drew near for decisive action, most of them would recall an earlier occasion when the children had been turned away. So for another year they would suffer the little children again.

Every child loves Christmas, but in those parts Whitsuntide ran it a close second for sheer enjoyment. On Whit Sunday morning there was singing round the streets of Grimesmoor – a sort of dress rehearsal for the morrow. Indeed, a true dress rehearsal, for on that day the children could wear their new clothes for the first time, and the girls in their Whitsuntide frocks and with thin rattan canes in their hands could parade before an admiring public gaze.

The boys were less enamoured of new clothes, but they had balls on elastic with which to plague the girls, and pea-shooters which enjoyed a brief, inglorious life, for they were confiscated as soon as seen. And more than one of them had a paper bag in his pocket, holding a ha'porth of marry-me-quick toffee, and a sad ruin it made of his new suit before the day was out.

But Whit Monday was the day. The children would wake to a misty morning. Clothes still stiff with newness would be put on, and protected with an apron of sorts while the family ate a hasty breakfast.

By the time they were all assembled outside the chapel the bright sun and the cloudless sky gave promise of another golden Whitsun. Then, as the children danced with impatience, the bandsmen took their places, the assembled worshippers were chivvied into some semblance of a procession, the huge silken banner was unfurled between its two upright poles, and floated out over the heads of the first ranks as they moved off.

As they approached the park, other schools appeared, moving in front or taking station behind. The tramcars, whole fleets of them, were drawn up on every track for miles, for this was the children's day, when everything gave place to them.

Through the massive cast-iron gates of the park streamed every school in turn, to be directed each to its own enclosure. And there they stood, the children sky-larking and fighting, their parents gossiping, until the massed bands struck up the first hymn.

And then the singing! What singing that was, to the thumping and booming of the band, and the extravagant gestures of the conductor, mounted on a farm-cart as rostrum, and savouring to the full his hour of glory. Moss would have given his ears to have taken his place.

Then the increasing heat and glare of the day, the smell of trodden grass, and the blissful anticipation of the beanfeast in the afternoon, with its potted-meat sandwiches and its great sustaining buns housed in brown-paper bags. And streams, rivers, oceans of hot sweet tea, as the florid helpers bustled to and fro, and the Superintendent policed the aisles, one eye cocked for any small boy who should dare to liven up the proceedings by blowing up and bursting his bag.

Then the races in the evening, in a field bright with daisies and the gold of buttercups, and a prize for every contestant, not merely for those who won. And dragging home, footsore and replete, as the long day faded and the first stars came out. Simple pleasures, born of a simple faith.

But, for Moss, this year's pleasures promised to be bitter fruit. With a child's lack of concern for harsh economic reality, he had supposed that this Whitsun would be like all the other Whitsuns. He was all unaware of the miseries and the wretchedness of the dark days of the late 'twenties. He realized that his father was now at home all day instead of going off to his work before the rest of the family was up and stirring, but then, so were many fathers, and a state of affairs so universal could scarcely be regarded as out of the ordinary. His ignorance was understandable, for there was little talk of such matters in the presence of children, since 'little pitchers have big ears' and children should be seen and not allowed to hear.

He could not fail to have heard at least some of the talk of something called 't'Dole' and he suspected that 'tea-leaf' had much the same meaning as 'Relief', for he was a noticing child. But what any of them meant or implied he could not begin to understand. Such things went on above his head without his thinking that they concerned him in the least.

And then the blow fell . . .

'A'm sorry, love,' said his mother. 'Yer'll not be able to 'ave a new suit fer Whitsuntide this year!'

To Moss, whose head had been filled for weeks with a new acquaintance called Midshipman Easy, and whose thoughts had in consequence been running on a sailor suit, then the height of juvenile fashion, the mere idea was unthinkable. However, he was well used to his mother's saying that things couldn't be done and then finding ways to do them, and he went back to his book.

But he soon found that this was no token resistance. There really was going to be no new suit for Whitsuntide.

And now a matter which would have caused him little concern at any other time began to assume monstrous proportions. This was not to be borne. There are few traditionalists

more hide-bound than children, and Moss was no exception. A Whitsun without new clothes was no more to be tolerated than a Christmas without a Santa Claus.

In all honesty, clothes were of no more than passing concern to Moss, who was always happier in the patched but respectable reach-me-downs which he wore to school than in the outfit which was known as his 'sunday best'. (A purist might have jibbed at the word 'best', arguing that where only two articles are concerned it is not good practice to refer to one of them in the superlative). But now that this was to be denied to him, and knowing that new clothes at Whitsuntide were the only new clothes of any year, the thought of the sailor suit loomed large in his mind, and added to his sense of outrage at this wanton flouting of a sacred tradition.

So, assuming that all that was needed was a firmer resolve than he had so far shown, he returned to the attack.

To his utter astonishment, his mother's defences gave no sign of crumbling. His surprise was understandable, for, in an age where children played no part at all in their parents' councils, Moss could not know how desperate was the state of the family exchequer at that time.

In one sense, Jim Garrett was worse off than his fellows. Ever a staunch provider, he had taken on the part-time job of chapel caretaker as a means of extra support for a large family, all of whom seemed destined to go on with their education at an age when other people's children were beginning to add some small share to the family funds. To do him justice, Jim had never looked upon his acceptance of such a state of affairs as in any way meritorious. It's what any man'd do, he would say, quite overlooking the evident fact that many men did not.

But now the extra money was to be extra no longer, as Lizzie learned to her dismay. She had counted on those few shillings to eke out the weekly Relief money from the Board of Guardians.

'What d'yer mean?' she asked, her eyes blazing. 'Are they goin' ter stop yer doin' t'caretkkin' then?'

Jim explained patiently.

'A s'll 'ave ter declare it, love! Y'ave to! Any money as yer get beside t'Relief money y'ave ter declare!'

'Awright!' she replied. 'Declare it then! That dun't mean yer won't get it, though!'

'No, but don't yer see? Whatever I earn above t'Relief money 'as to be tekken off us! Well, off t'Relief, if yer like!'

She looked at him dumbstruck, white and appalled at such injustice.

'D'yer mean ter say as they'll stop yer caretkkin' money out o' t'Vestry money?'

'Aye, lass, that's just what A do mean!'

'An' 'ave yer tow'd 'em yet? About what yer get for t'caretkkin'?''

He shook his head.

‘No, not yet. We s’ll ’ave ter wait till t’Guardian feller comes. Then we ’ave to tell ’im everythin’. That’s t’Law, d’yer see?’

Lizzie was all but beside herself with wrath and righteous indignation. And, to add to her store of fury, she knew only too well that her scrupulous husband would not for one moment be persuaded to hide the knowledge of his extra earnings.

Her own scruples, always more pliant than her man’s, were at once put aside as she set herself to devising ways of outwitting ‘them folk at t’Vestry’. It was into the teeth of this storm that Moss sailed, all unknowing, in defence of the tradition of new clothes at Whitsuntide, and met a gale where he had looked for a mere cap of wind.

‘Owd yer noise!’ said his mother, and to any but Moss it would have been clear that she was greatly preoccupied. ‘D’yer think as A’m made o’ money?’

Moss, still blithely unaware of the domestic climate, was not prepared to lower his colours so easily.

‘Aw, Mam –!’ he began, and then, suddenly brightening, ‘Couldn’t yer mek me one, Mam? Couldn’t yer mek me a new sailor suit? Wi’ blue stripes on t’collar, like?’

‘An’ wheer d’yer think t’money’s comin’ from ter pay fer t’material, eh?’

Then she saw the disappointment in his face, and said more gently,

‘Na, look, love! If A could get yer a sailor suit fer Whitsuntide, A’d get yer one. Yer know that! But we simply can’t affoord it! Yer’ll ’ave to goo in yer best suit! A’ll clean it up ’n iron it like, an’ nob’dy’ll know!’

She suspected that this was not the last word, and that she would be called upon to withstand a running fire of Moss’s ‘mitherin’ until Whitsun was safely past. But, to her astonishment, within a few days his complaints ceased, and for some reason she could not define, he gave no hint of returning to the subject. She could think of no possible explanation for this state of affairs, for Moss, made in his father’s image not to mention his mother’s, was nothing if not stubborn. This sudden capitulation was quite unlike him, and at length her curiosity overcame her better judgement.

‘A’m glad ter see as yer’ve accepted it, love,’ she said. ‘But wi’ times like this, there just in’t any money fer new clothes!’

‘Aw, that’s awright, Mam,’ he said, carelessly. ‘A’m gerrin’ a new sailor suit, any road!’

She turned him round sharply and searched his face.

‘Yer doin’ what?’

‘A’m gerrin’ a new sailor suit! A’ve sent fer it!’

‘Yer’ve done what!’

‘A’ve sent fer it, Mam! Mester Shepherd at Sunday School allus says as if yer pray ‘ard enough an’ y’ave enough faith yer can move mountains!’

‘Oh, ’e does, does ’e? An’ wheer does Mester Shepherd suppose as t’money’s comin’ from ter pay fer it, eh?’

‘Oh, yer don’t need any money, Mam,’ her son replied.

‘Don’t need any money? Are yer daft or summat?’

‘It says so in t’paper, Mam! On t’advertizement! Send no money, it says! Jus’ like that! Look, A’ll show yer!’

He ran to find the newspaper in which he had first read such wondrous tidings. What a surprise it’ll be, he had thought on reading it. What a surprise!

His mother followed the small finger on the page, and looked from the advertisement to Moss’s beaming face.

‘An’ you’ve sent fer this sailor suit on t’strength o’ that?’

‘Yes, Mam! It’s t’answer to me prayers! Yer just ’ave to ’ave faith!’

Lizzie hated herself, knowing that she must quench the light in his eyes. Carefully, she explained, almost in tears at what she must do.

‘Yer soft a’porth, our Moss!’ And he looked up into her face quickly, puzzled by the tenderness in her voice. ‘Don’t yer see as it’s just a trick ter get yer to send fer summat on tick? Nob’dy gives owt away in this world, love! Y’ave ter scrat fer it!’

The sudden kindness did what her anger could hardly have achieved. Moss broke into a storm of tears, no longer tears of anger or frustration but of bitter loss. Indeed, indeed, there would be no sailor suit for Whitsuntide.

Horace Parker, himself a worshipper at Hensley Street Chapel, and a postman and a Chapel Steward to boot, came with the parcel during school hours, and Lizzie, knowing what she must do, was grateful for her son’s absence.

‘A’m sorry, Mester Parker,’ she said. ‘It’ll just ’ave ter goo back!’ And she explained the whole sorry circumstance.

He understood only too well why she could not accept delivery. As one in secure employment himself, he knew what those less fortunate were going through. Every penny, every halfpenny counted. One small extravagance, one needless indulgence, and a family which now walked on a thin crust of decency and respectability could break through into a mire of debt and ultimate penury and degradation. And then, and perhaps the hardest of all to bear, the cold hand of charity might be stretched out to them, breaching their final defences and taking from them their last comfort, their pride and their independence.

All that day Lizzie was troubled by what she had been forced to do. It was not made easier to bear by its harsh necessity, and she wasted much of her store of nervous energy in trying to devise some way in which even now she might gratify her son’s wishes. She knew that to be without new clothes at the Whitsuntide Sing was the mark of real poverty. It set a child apart.

Suddenly she had an idea at once so appalling and so dazzling that she knew that, unless she took action at once, a second thought might stay her hand. She tore off her apron, put on her drab respectable Sunday coat, skewered her sensible hat to her hair with a jet-encrusted hat-pin, and set off.

When Jim returned from his chapel duties that evening, she let him eat his meal in silence before she opened fire.

‘When’s that Guardian feller comin’?’ she asked at last.

Jim put aside his knife and fork and looked up, startled by the suddenness of the question.

‘A don’t know,’ he replied. ‘We s’ll be gettin’ notice any day now, A reckon. Why?’

‘Well, when ‘e comes, yer to say nowt about t’chapel money!’

Jim picked up a book and settled himself to read. He had been expecting this, but, so far as he was concerned, the matter was settled and there was no point in further discussion.

‘Na, don’t talk daft, love,’ he said, mildly. ‘We ’ave to declare it! We ’ave ter declare everythin’! An’ we even ’ave ter declare t’pianner in t’front room! Everythin’, d’y’ear? That’s t’Law!’

‘Neer mind t’Law,’ she replied. ‘From now on yer’ll be doin’ t’chapel job voluntary!’

‘A’ll be doin’ what?’

‘Yer doin’ it voluntary! It’s all arranged!’

‘Oh, it is, is it? An’ oo’s arranged it then?’

‘ted Castledine,’ she replied. ‘‘Oo else? ‘E’s t’treasurer ter t’chapel stewards, in’t ‘e?’

Jim weighed the information for a moment.

‘Well, if that’s ‘ow they want it,’ he said at length. ‘Yer do realize, though, as it dun’t mek a ‘aporth o’ difference? We shan’t be any better off fer ’is arrangement!’

‘that’s just it,’ Lizzie replied. ‘E’s not gooin’ ter pay t’money ter you –!’

She stopped as she saw him putting down his book with studied deliberation. Then, knowing that this was the hurdle she must surmount at all costs, she went on,

‘‘E’s gooin’ ter pay it ter me!’

Jim rose to his feet, and began to speak quietly and incisively,

‘Na, look ‘ere, Lizzie! Will yer mind yer own business about chapel matters? A ’ave ter declare that money, d’y’understand? A ’ave ter declare it! Whether A get it or not meks no difference! A ’ave ter declare it! That’s the Law!’

Lizzie braced herself for the final onslaught on her husband’s uprightness, the quality she loved in him and which made him such an abiding tower of strength to her.

‘ted Castledine’ll tell t’Booard o’ Guardians as yer do that job voluntary!’

‘‘E never will!’ Jim replied. ‘Yer should know Ted Castledine better than that! An’ whether ‘e does or not meks no difference. A’m not tellin’ t’Booard o’ Guardians as A get nowt fer workin’ at t’chapil!’

‘Oh yes, you are, Jim Garrett!’ Lizzie said. She rose to her feet, faced him squarely and fought to keep the inner trembling out of her voice. ‘Unless, o’ coorse, yer want to mek a liar out o’ me?’

‘An’ what d’yer mean bi that?’

‘A mean as A towld Ted Castledine as ’e’s got ter tell t’Booard o’ Guardians as yer do that job voluntary!’

Jim’s face was a study.

‘An’ even if A did agree, which A shan’t, ’oo’s gunna tell Ted Castledine ter keep ’is mouth shut?’

‘there’s no call fer you to bother yer ’ead about that,’ she said, scenting victory at last. ‘It just so ’appens as A know Ted Castledine better than yer think. An’ A ’appen to know summat about ’im as’ll keep ’is trap shut, choose ’ow many Boboards of’ Guardians ask ’im about that chapil job. Neer mind what it is,’ she broke in, as Jim made to speak. ‘It all ’appened a long time ago, an’ it’s between ’im an’ me. But A’ll tell yer this much. If it ever got known, ’e wouldn’t be t’Chapil Treasurer no moor!’

‘that may be,’ Jim replied. But A’m not ’avin’ no lies on my conscience!’

‘they’ll not be on your conscience,’ she replied, smoothly, knowing now that the battle was won. ‘they’ll be on mine! An A’ll tell yer this, Jim Garrett, A s’ll lose no sleep over it. There’s folks in London as never ‘as margarine an’ condensed milk on their bread, but allus best butter an’ strawberry jam. An’ they’ve got a damn sight moor on their conscience than A s’ll ’ave on mine wi’ that one lie! Any law as can tell a man – a good man – as ’e’s got ter declare ’is family’s bread out o’ their mouths like that dun’t deserve to be kept. The good Lord’ll decide between them an’ me, an’ it’s nowt to do wi’ you. So you’ll keep yer mouth shut, d’y’ear? Unless yer want ter see me gooin’ down t’line?’

With that question, Jim was beaten and he knew it. The thought of prison for his Lizzie quashed his last forebodings. He knew, too, that he was no match for Lizzie in this mood. But he might have been astonished to know how much her victory had taken out of her, and how even now she was quivering inwardly from the effects of her ordeal. She knew how narrowly won was that victory, but she knew, too, that it was complete. Jim would never let her down, never.

They sat in silence for a time while dusk came down upon Grimesmoor, and Moss, coming in from play, was all unaware that he entered on a field which had just seen a momentous battle, and that life was returning, however uneasily, to normality.

The sudden rat-tat on the door startled them all. Moss ran to the window and pulled aside the curtain.

‘A think it’s t’postman, Mam!’

‘Don’t be soft, love,’ his mother said. ‘A postman? At this time o’ night?’

She began to rise, but Moss was before her, and it was his shout of pure delight that caused her to rise once more and hurry to the door.

‘Mam! It’s come! Me sailor suit!’

Lizzie lifted reproachful eyes to the postman as Moss brushed past her, tearing at the wrappings of the parcel.

‘It’s awright, Lizzie,’ Horace Parker said quietly. ‘It’s not a question o’ charity, or owt like that! So yer’ve no call to fret yersen!’

‘What’s it all about then, Mester Parker?’

‘Well, it’s like this,’ he replied. ‘A tow’d t’lads down at t’sooartin’ Office about your Moss an’ ‘is sailor suit. They did laugh, A can tell yer. An’ then one of ‘em said, ‘Ere, why don’t we ‘ave a whip round an’ give t’lad a present fer Whitsuntide? So theer it is, love, a present fer your Moss from t’lads down at t’sooartin’ Office, that’s all!’

He turned on his heel to go, his ordeal by diplomacy over.

‘Will yer come in an’ ‘ave a cup o’ tea, Mester Parkin?’ Lizzie managed to say.

‘No, thankyer, love. A won’t if yer don’t mind. A’m just on me way ‘ome, d’yer see? Besides, A reckon your Moss’ll be wantin’ all your attention in two or three minutes! Good neet to yer, love!’

And he strode off down the flagged walk with some of the regal dignity of those other Wise Men.

Lizzie turned at the door at her son’s insistent cry of ‘Look, Mam! Look!’

At first she did not see him clearly, for her eyes dazzled.

‘a tow’d yer, Mam! A tow’d yer! Y’ave to ‘ave faith, yer see! If y’ave enough faith yer can move mountains!’



CHAPTER 16

I Would Call It Fair Play The Tempest V, i

In their eager anticipation of Whitsuntide the godly of Grimesmoor were not alone. Their enthusiasm was shared by a greater number of their neighbours for whom the word ‘pentecost’ would have meant nothing, unless, perhaps, it happened to be the name of the favourite in the 3.30 at Doncaster Races.

For Whitsun in Grimesmoor was Feast Week, the dying remnant of a festival which might once have been accompanied by religious rites in an age when men were more pious – or perhaps more in awe of the priesthood than they were in the Year of Our Lord 1925.

Moss, in company with his fellows, knew nothing of any such association with the past. Like them, he celebrated the sacred and the secular with a happy impartiality.

There were few schooldays which dragged as wearily as that Friday, when every boy in the school was fully aware that the wagons would already be arriving, that even now the erection of the amusements and the sidshows would be going ahead in their absence on the ‘Rec’, the name which mocked the vanity of those officials who had baptised it ‘the Grimesmoor Recreation and Sports Ground’.

When they were finally released from bondage, the boys descended upon the fairground, where the grimy and red-eyed roustabouts greeted them with something far removed from a hearty welcome.

By the early evening, all roads in Grimesmoor led to the Rec, now covered with an assortment of fairground paraphernalia – roundabouts, coconut-shies, and sidshows – and in the background, hissing and pulsating like huge sleeping monsters, the steam engines that generated the power. All in all, a sight designed to transport any healthy boy to the seventh heaven of delight.

But the truth must be told. Grimesmoor Feast Week was not one of the engagements that had showmen fighting for the pitch. The sum total of the amusements amounted to little more than the ‘cocks an’ ‘orses’, the ‘chairyplanes’, a row of some six wooden swing-boats, and a small roundabout for the toddlers. Besides this, there were two coconut shies where the nuts seemed so firmly wedged in their cups that it was a popular belief that it would need a howitzer shell to dislodge them, one or two other sidshows, a palmist with an improbable name and of unconvincing appearance, for when once she had changed out of her finery she was indistinguishable from the other fairground wives who in the main resembled nothing so much as sacks of potatoes. Added to these delights, there were one or two rather seedy ‘wonders’ – for some inexplicable reason, bearded ladies seemed to be plentiful – and very little else.

But that little else included one character who never failed to intrigue Moss with his utter and complete singularity. He was a little man, even by Moss's standards, and was always dressed whatever the weather in a frayed raincoat, green with age, which reached to his ankles, a bowler which had once presumably been black but which was now edged around the brim with a band of funereal green where the dye had faded. He also wore, winter and summer alike, a dewdrop on the end of a long and beaky nose.

This showman's stock in trade was a small bagatelle table covered with a threadbare baize as thin as paper. In the centre of this table, when all was set up for business, was a billiard ball standing in a chalked circle and bearing on its upper surface a pile of pennies which varied in number according to the state of business, being reduced when business was brisk and increased when business was sought.

The customer was provided with another billiard ball which might once have been spherical and a stubby cue roughly one-third of the length to which billiard cues normally run. His aim was then to drive his ball against the one in the centre, thus causing one or more of the pennies to fall outside the chalk circle – on the face of it, an easy thing to do. But what the showman's customers never began to understand was that the showman's faith was backed by the natural law of inertia. He was betting that the law would work, and his customer was betting that it would not, and it was common to see a customer, red-faced with annoyance and exasperation asking for another penn'orth, and again failing to cause a single penny to fall outside the circle.

Moss quite failed to understand why this should be so, but he couldn't fail to notice that not once had he seen a customer so much as win his own penny back, a masterly demonstration of how, in human affairs, hope constantly triumphs over cold reason.

There was also a man who guessed your weight for a small fee. If he got it wrong, which wisely he contrived to do from time to time, he would present the lucky winner with a 'peruvian gold ring' – which, to Moss's eyes, was little different from the sort of thing he sometimes found to his keen disappointment at the bottom of a 'ha-penny lucky bag'.

Still, the meagreness of the entertainment was evenly balanced by the poverty of the customers. And if the standard of entertainment was unsophisticated, that too matched the expectations of those who came to be entertained.

To Moss, every item of the scene was lit by his own rich imagination. For weeks after the fair had gone he would be dreaming of the vagrant gipsy life, though he would have confessed to some uneasiness about the language used by the show-people, which was more colourful than he was accustomed to and of a kind which his mother would have forbidden him to hear, let alone speak.

Once he had drunk his fill of the wonderful scene on the Friday, he could hardly bear to wait for his Saturday penny on the morrow, and the fever of his impatience was not lost on his father. No sooner had Moss arrived at the chapel than his father called him from the pulpit where he was just beginning the first of his weekly duties. Moss trotted down the stairs and looked up at his father, who was standing there with a slow smile on his face and holding in his fingers two pennies.

'Ere y'are, son!' he said. 'A reckon yer can find a use fer this, eh?'

'Yes, Dad!'

‘Awright, off yer go then!’

‘What, now, Dad?’

‘Aye,’ said his father. ‘A reckon it’ll keep this once!’

Then, as his son set off with only one thought in mind, Jim called him back.

‘‘Ere! Just a minute! Aren’t yer forgettin’ summat?’

Moss looked sheepish. He realized at once that he ought to have remembered what a stickler his Dad was for what he called ‘gratitude’.

‘thank you, Dad!’

‘that’s better, son. But think on. The work’ll ’ave to be done. Yer can’t do it Monday because yer’ll be gooin’ ter t’park, so it’ll have to be Tuesday. Don’t ferget now!’

‘Awright, Dad!’

‘Right, off yer go!’

Moss would have promised anything at that moment, and quite forgot that in his eagerness to taste the sweets of today he might be mortgaging the sweets of the morrow. Whit Tuesday, too, had its delights, which he was thoughtlessly squandering.

Once arrived at the fairground, he made first for the ‘cocks an’ ‘orses’ which were his especial delight, and for a few minutes he was transported. He was always intrigued by the way the pipe-organ blared at him as he sailed past on his wide-nostrilled steed, and how the music then faded as he swept round to the far side. He loved, too, the small kick that came every time the horse reached the high point of its travel, and again at the low point. He was always torn by a desire to try one of the cockerels, but every time realized that it would mean forsaking the chance to ride on a beautiful horse, and at the last moment he always played safe.

Once the ride was over, and all too soon, he was now torn by all the ways in which he might spend his remaining penny. He had almost decided on a ride in the ‘chairyplanes’ – though, to speak truth, he was not at all sure whether he had the courage to try – when he heard a voice calling him and turned to see Alec Willett approaching.

The inward debate now became an outward one, with Alec, who was less imaginative and therefore less apprehensive, praising the merits of the ‘chairyplanes’ and Moss now fiercely pressing the claims of the ‘cocks an’ ‘orses’.

Alec tried another tack.

‘tell thi what –! Let’s both ’ave a goo at rolling t’pennies! An’ then if we win summat, we can goo on t’chairyplanes and tvcocks an’ ‘orses!’

Moss felt a pang of alarm. The chance of avoiding the hazards of the ‘chairyplanes’ was welcome, but he had a shrewd idea that he might be called upon to brave a greater hazard, his mother’s displeasure. He had a shrewd idea that she would regard rolling the pennies as gambling, and that his father’s view would be identical. The ‘thou shalt not’s’ of the

nonconformist faith applied not only to strong drink but to gambling in all its forms. There was little doubt in Moss's mind that rolling pennies was gambling, and he said so.

Alec poured scorn on such an idea, and at last succeeded in converting Moss to the belief that rolling pennies called for skill, just as much as the coconut shy. But even then, Moss was less than enthusiastic about committing his last penny to one short venture, and was only persuaded to it by Alec's agreeing to share any winnings with him.

The eager Alec took first turn, and was quickly abased. His penny, as if by intention, rolled straight down the slide to the corner of a square and sat there without any ceremony, covering two lines. The rake in the hand of the showman snaked out and swallowed Alec's entire fortune.

Moss immediately got cold feet, and would have withdrawn, but Alec was having none of it.

'Eigh up!' he cried. 'Fair's fair! Tha promised!'

Resigned, but with a heavy heart, Moss placed his penny in the groove of the slide, and allowed it to roll.

'tha's sent it too quick!' Alec cried. The penny was heading straight for the trough at the far side of the table, and Moss's heart all but stopped. Then, taking a wide sweep as its momentum lessened, the penny came round, began to roll in ever smaller circles, and at last sat down squarely in the centre of a square marked 'three'.

Before either could raise an exultant shout, the rake came out and swept the penny away. There was now no proof that it had ever been there.

Their cries were wholly of righteous indignation, but they fell on deaf ears.

'What's up then, marrer?' the showman asked.

'that penny were in t' three!' cried Moss.

The showman shook his head.

'Na look, son, if it 'ad been in that square A should 'ave paid yer, shouldn't A? But it wasn't, yer see!'

Moss was speechless with rage, and Alec was in no better case. But when all seemed lost, a voice behind them said,

'Eigh up, thee!'

The boys wheeled round. A stranger, and with his eyes on the showman.

'A saw that!' the stranger said.

The showman looked at the newcomer, and some of his professional assurance seemed to leave him. It had been on the line, he insisted.

But the stranger would have none of it. Though Moss did not know it, he himself was no stranger to the man, who knew and admired Jim Garrett.

Moss saw that the man was evidently a steelworker like his father, for he wore in his face the badge of his trade, the bright pink burn-marks on forehead, nose, cheeks and chin. He was also possessed of the sort of physique which could take a shovelful of silica, and quoit it thirty-odd feet to the back of a Siemens-Martin open-hearth furnace as though it were a feather.

The stall-keeper had clearly been taking this in, for he seemed to relent and tossed a penny towards Moss.

‘Awright!’ he said. ‘‘Ave it again!’

‘Bloody likely!’ said the stranger, coolly.

‘Awright then,’ said the showman, tossing over two more coins. ‘theer’s ’is money!’

‘tha’t not gunna gerraway wi’ that!’ said the stranger. ‘A’ve seen thi play t’same mucky trick twice!’

The showman protested. Where was the evidence? he appeared to imply. Anyway, even if it had happened, no one was complaining.

‘that’s up to them,’ said the furnaceman. ‘Anyway, if they don’t want to claim it, that can gi’e it to this lad ‘ere!’

This, it seemed, was something the showman was not prepared to concede, short of a fight, at least in the figurative sense. The steelworker quickly made it clear that for his part he was prepared to make the figurative literal.

‘tha can please thisen, tha knows,’ he said, in the sort of easy, good-humoured tone that seemed to imply that he was enjoying the conversation, whatever anyone else was getting out of it. ‘tek thi pick! Eether keep that tanner thisen, or else gi’e it to t’lad ‘ere! It’s up to thee!’

And then, as the showman still appeared reluctant, the furnaceman’s voice suddenly took on a cold edge.

‘But A’ll tell thi what –! If that dun’t gi’e ’im that other threepence, A s’ll come o’er theer an’ A s’ll gi’e thee a bloody good ’idin’ fer tryin’ it on wi’ a bit of a kid! So think on!’

The showman spent no time at all in thinking on, and with a bad grace threw the other three pennies towards Moss. Moss scabbled them up and turned with shining eyes to the stranger, to be rewarded with a fat wink.

He and Alec lost no time in putting some distance between themselves and the stall, before there could be any further change in their fortunes. Their delight was so intense that it was some time before they began to quarrel over the spoils.

It was decided at last that they would first sample the delights of the ‘chairyplanes’ and the ‘cocks an’ ‘orses’, and decide about the balance later.

With Alec beside him, Moss was obliged to screw his courage to the sticking place and take his seat in one of the small seats of the ‘chairyplane’. A showman in dungarees

showed him how to fasten the chain across the seat for safety's sake, a precaution which did nothing at all to reinforce Moss's shrinking spirit.

He was not to know it at the time, but years later, taking his seat in a plane for the first time, he would recall the 'chairyplane' and realize that then, as now, his imagination was dwelling on the possibility of disaster to the exclusion of all else. He could see his defenceless, cowering body being hurled out into space by some minor defect in the machine, and the image completely unnerved him.

When they finally reached terra firma once more, he returned Alec's 'Warn't it great?' with a fervour that was entirely feigned. The ride on the roundabout, however, made up for it and all that was left was to decide on the balance.

The decision was almost made for them by a raucous voice.

'Come along now, everybody! One more ticket for the Ghost Train!'

Moss edged nearer to the stall, his eyes on the winking light moving down the list of stations. Almost without conscious thought, he stepped up to the stall before it was too late, and his last penny was gone.

However, the game did not start at once, for the stall-owner had been working the old dodge of 'Who'll buy the last few tickets to give me a start?'

But at last the final ticket was sold, and the flashing light began to move down the list of stations in earnest, then flicking over to the other half of the destination board until it was no more than a blur as it gathered speed.

Moss looked at his ticket. Swindon. A town he had vaguely heard of, though he had no idea where it was. There was an icy feeling in the pit of his stomach. He was fervently wishing now that he had not been so impulsive, especially as he now saw that his last penny was gone and that Alec still had his.

The flashing light was slowing now, and it was again possible to see it flicking on and off behind the names of the stations. It approached Swindon, passed it, and flicked over to the left-hand list of names. Now it was moving much more slowly, and Moss saw with sinking heart that it was unlikely to reach Swindon.

It crept down the list of names on that side, flicked over to the right, drawing nearer and nearer to Swindon. But slowly, much too slowly.

Moving more slowly still, and, agonizingly, it stopped at Newcastle, seemed to hesitate for a moment, and moved on to Reading.

There it wavered for a moment, and moved on to Southampton. And there it stopped.

It was all over. Moss was almost sick with disappointment.

But no! As though by an afterthought, the light flickered behind Southampton, flickered again, moved on to Swindon, and stopped again.

Moss held his breath, but there was no need. Swindon it was.

It was Alec who first found his breath.

‘Moss, tha’s won!’

Every eye turned to Moss, and he scarcely heard the stall-holder’s words.

‘Any prize on the stall, son!’

It seemed to him that there had never been a day in the whole of his life so good as this. And something seemed to tell him that such a day, a day so special, so far removed from the commonplace, ought to have some particular sign, some remembrancer.

His eye ranged quickly over the tawdry gifts that crowded the shelves of the stall, rejected all those which in a more sober moment he would have craved, and settled on a teapot. A small aluminium teapot.

Alec was almost beyond words.

‘A teapot? What did tha want to get that for?’

Moss was ready with the answer.

‘A gorrit fer mi Mam!’

He was almost home before the thought struck him that his mother might object to receiving a gift which was the fruit of gambling. He made up his mind to compromise with the truth by merely saying that he had won it, hoping that there would then be no further enquiry.

Lizzie was both astonished and delighted by this evidence of her son’s thoughtfulness, the more so as there was a witness to the event in the person of Jim’s sister, or ‘Auntie Moll’ as Moss knew her, and something of a thorn in Lizzie’s flesh as Lizzie knew her.

‘Ee, that’s champion!’ said Moll, clearly envious of her sister-in-law’s good fortune. ‘How much did it cost yer to win it, Moss?’

The questions were coming too close for comfort, and Moss began to slide out of doors.

‘On’y a penny!’ he called over his shoulder.

‘Eigh up! Just a minute!’ his aunt called after him, and he was obliged to go back, to find Auntie Moll rummaging in her purse. She reached out a single coin and handed it to Moss.

‘Would yer like to see if yer can win me one?’

A single penny . . .

More to be away from further questioning and possible embarrassment than with any great enthusiasm, Moss took the penny and set off back to the Rec. But even before he got there, he had decided that sufficient unto the day was the virtue thereof, and that Auntie Moll’s penny would do nicely for another ride on the ‘cocks an’ ‘orses’. And this time there was no Alec Willett to argue him out of the decision, or to bear witness to his sin.

He ran home to break the sad tidings to Auntie Moll that it hadn't been her lucky day, and satisfied a bad conscience by telling himself that he would have been most unlikely to win twice in one day.

He found such stifling easy in the broad light of day, but it was a different matter when it came to bed-time and his prayers. The faith his parents practised, and which their children willy-nilly absorbed, had in it much fierce and uncompromising Puritanism. The sense of sin which a later age was to deride was something they cultivated in themselves and instilled into their children, and not always with the dire consequences later outlined by psychologists, social commentators, and similar acrobatic performers on the human scene.

As he lay there, seeing the shadows lengthening in the evening light, Moss began to fear that his conscience might now keep him awake until darkness fell, when there would be other matters to trouble his mind. True, he had not been brought up in the practice of the confessional, but he had been taught a lively belief in the certainty that his sins would find him out.

For a while he contemplated the possibility of going downstairs to see whether his mother was in the frame of mind when it might be possible to tell her all, and actually got as far as the head of the stairs in pursuing this intention.

But the sound of his father's voice gave him second thoughts.

He turned to make his way back to bed, feeling that though confession might be good for the soul, there were times when it needed to be tempered with a little discretion.

As he did so, he caught the gist of his father's words, and stopped dead. He realized on the instant that his mother was retailing the news of the afternoon's events.

'Miserable bitch!' he heard his father say, and was astonished and not a little shocked to hear such language from such a source. 'An' she gi'ed 'im nobbut a penny to goo'n win 'er one?'

There was a sound from his mother, but it was impossible to make out the words. His father went on,

'Yer mean ter say she din't even gi'e 'im another penny to 'ave a ride on t'cocks an' 'orses?'

Again, Moss could not catch his mother's reply.

'Well, A've on'y one thing ter say ter that,' said his father. 'A just 'ope as our Moss 'ad sense enough to goo an' 'ave a ride wi' that penny. 'E'd already gi'ed up one chance of a ride ter get you that teapot. A allus knew our Moll were stingy, but she gets worse. Serve 'er damn well right! She dun't deserve ter prosper!'

There was the scrape of a chair, but Moss was back under the bedclothes before the kitchen door opened. He heard the familiar footsteps of his mother climbing the stairs to the front bedroom, and a few minutes later the sound of her feet descending the stairs again.

And as the kitchen door closed behind her, Moss, now perfectly at ease with his conscience, settled himself to sleep.



CHAPTER 17

The Climber-Upward Julius Caesar II, i

It was Whit Tuesday. For three days now the steel mills had been silent, the furnaces cooling, the canyons between the workshops echoing and still. The May morning sun streamed down on a Grimesmoor and a people entirely unaccustomed to such clear air.

Moss had awakened with the sun in all the exuberance of his own Springtime of nine years. He clattered out of the backyard and along the entry, which rang to the sound of his studded boots like the inside of a bell.

The day promised to be a scorcher. Small pools of tar were already oozing up between the granite setts of the cobbled street. Cats dozed on doorsteps that on any other day would have been places of peril to them. The sooty iron railings on the sunnier side of the street were no longer chill to the touch.

The few children who were up and about were already on their way to the Rec, there to lead the blear-eyed and unshaven fairground workers a fine old dance. On any other Whit Tuesday, Moss might have been of their number. But not today. Today he had other and more momentous affairs in hand. He trotted down Fern Street, turned to the right in the direction of the Three Crowns, and stopped dead, almost robbed of his breath by the splendour of the spectacle.

There it was! The crown and the symbol of the day. Reared up behind the wall of the pub, a wooden mast, all of thirty feet high. The gleaming surface, almost white in the bright sunshine, planed and honed to a glassy smoothness, awaited only the soft soap, the contestants, and the crowd of onlookers.

And this year Joe was taking part – Joe, almost a man now, stocky and broad of shoulder. Not that his parents knew of his intention to take part in the annual event, for they would surely have forbidden him to appear in such an ungodly rite held in such an iniquitous place. Indeed, he knew only too well that he must not be seen to set one foot inside the yard of a public-house, so Moss had been sworn to secrecy, and hot irons would not have got the secret out of him. He found it easy to honour, for he was longing to see the contest.

But even an adoration such as he felt for his older brother, and a conviction that with Joe all things were possible, could not quite still all his forebodings. His faith was sorely tested by the knowledge that in this trial of strength and skill very few succeeded.

He had come by the knowledge from a most reliable source – Albert Smith, of the bad teeth, the devilish smile, and the pipe that was seldom lit, unless the tobacco were given. If Albert could be believed, he himself had in his youth been a mighty exponent of the art of climbing the greasy pole, and one of the very few to have claimed the prize, and the

cup that went with it. But that was many years ago, as even he conceded. Now in his age he was reduced to holding up the wall of the Three Crowns and boasting to small boys for want of a credulous audience.

‘Sithee, lad, it’s like this. Fust, tha’s got t’ave reight build fer it, dusta see? A gret lanky lad’s no use fer t’greasy powl. Tha wants a good stocky lad wi’ some solid timber in ’is legs. Tha sees, there’s a secret i’ this game, and it’s this – there’s no use i’ trustin’ to thi ’ands! It’s not a bit o’ good tryin’ to ’owd on wi’ them. Besides, tha needs thi ’ands fer gerrin’ t’soot out o’ t’bag, dusta see? No, it’s thi thighs. It all depends on thi thighs! If tha can’t keep a grip wi’ them, tha’rt done!’

Moss thought of Joe, doubtless still sleeping soundly at home, and wondered, not for the first time, if Joe had the thighs for the job. True, he was short and stocky, like his father, and strong enough to lift Moss clear of the ground, swing him above his head, and hold him there squealing, half in fear, half delight.

But Joe was up against much older hands at the game, young men of more mature years and wider experience, and all of them old hands at climbing the pole. Joe had only sixteen years to his credit and this was his first year in the contest. Worse still, Moss had heard his mother say, only as recently as the week before, ‘Our Joe in’t ’alf shootin’ up! Next thing, ’e’ll be coortin’, A shouldn’t wonder!’

Moss had no time for such fripperies as ‘coortin’’, which, in any case, was a term he but vaguely understood. But Joe’s height was an altogether different matter. If Albert Smith was right about its drawbacks, and his mother right about Joe’s ‘shootin’ up’, then his chances of success might be fewer this year, and next year might be too late.

He voiced his fears to his brother, to be rewarded with a curl of Joe’s lip. His brother, it seemed, did not share Moss’s opinion of Albert Smith as expert counsel.

‘‘Im? That boozy owd bugger? What’s ’e know about it?’

In vain did Moss recount Albert Smith’s former triumphs. In vain did he repeat Albert Smith’s insistence on stout thighs. In vain did he beseech Joe not to treat the advice too lightly.

‘’E does know, our Joe! ’E does! ’E won t’cup ’issen when ’e were a lad!’

To which Joe replied, with more than a grain of truth, that if all those who bragged of having won the cup had actually done so, it would need a much bigger cup to engrave all the names on it. He reminded Moss for good measure that there had been years when the pole had defied all efforts to scale it, and when the money prize – but not the cup – had gone to the contestant who was adjudged to have reached the highest point. Joe himself inclined to the view that much depended on the draw. If you were drawn early, he said, when the pole had its full quota of soft soap, you hadn’t much of a chance. Draw a higher number, he said, and a lot of the soap would have been removed by the earlier contestants. Then, given a bag of good rough soot mixed freely with fuller’s earth, you had a better chance.

Moss looked at the yellowed face of the clock in Roper’s window. Nine o’clock. He knew that the draw would not be made until eleven o’clock at the earliest, and wondered how he could fill up such a desert of time between now and then. He decided to make his way

home and see whether Joe was up yet, and whether he felt himself to be in good shape. It was a decision he regretted the moment his mother clapped eyes on him.

‘Oh, theer y’are, our Moss! Yer Dad’s been lookin’ fer you!’

‘What for, Mam?’

Lizzie was well accustomed to that ingenuous look on the face of her son.

‘Yer know right well what for! Yer’ve got that brass to clean at t’chapel, seein’ as yer got out of it last Sat’day. An’ well you know it!’

His heart sank. He had clean forgotten the promise made so blithely only three days earlier. Not for the first time he cursed his fate in having been born the son of a chapel caretaker. Cleaning the chapel brass was, he knew, a three-hour job at least. The greasy pole contest would be all over by the time it was finished. Worse; having been by Joe sworn to secrecy, an oath accompanied by lurid threats, he could not now plead the greasy pole contest in extenuation, or his mother might get to know of Joe’s part in it.

‘Aw, Mam, it teks hours!’

But even as he protested, he knew it was futile. He could not dispute the fact that the chore had been postponed from the Saturday by his father’s unexpected and welcome decision to award a holiday. That cat wouldn’t fight again, and he knew it.

His mother took in the situation at a glance.

‘t’longer you stand theer mitherin’, our Moss, t’longer it’ll tek yer!’

He ran headlong to the chapel, desperately searching for stratagems and dismissing them as soon as invented, and burst in upon his father, who was dusting the brown varnished pulpit, the very job that he himself had been called from three days before.

All but incoherent, and gasping for breath, Moss cried,

‘Dad, can A goo in time to see t’end o’ t’Feast Walk?’

Jim Garrett looked up and was on the point of refusing, and of adding to the refusal a rebuke to his son on the evil of neglecting his duties, when he caught Moss’s eye, and saw something there which caused him to temper his words.

‘Look!’ he said. ‘Yer’ve got a couple o’ hours almost. If A find yer’ve done a good job, yer can goo at twelve, an’ finish it after dinner!’

Moss’s scowl was purely for form’s sake. Inside, his heart was singing. Even this much grace far exceeded his expectations.

He clattered downstairs to fetch the box of cleaning rags and metal polish. Back upstairs, he tackled, as he had long learned to do, the hardest job first, the cleaning of the brass strip which surrounded the doormat in the chapel porch. It was a wearisome job, for the feet of the worshippers, bringing in the grit from the street, left long scratches in the metal. An enormous amount of elbow-grease was needed if the scratches were not to show tell-tale streaks of white in the polished surface of the brass when the job was done.

He decided to try harder than ever so as to ensure that he passed inspection, and became so engrossed in this, and his other tasks, that it was his father who told him that time was up.

‘Off yer goo then!’ he said. ‘An’ just remember this, son —! It’s allus duties first an’ rights after, d’y’ear?’

Moss scarcely heard him for he was already away, the fear of missing the contest lending wings to his studded boots.

As he drew nearer the Three Crowns he realized with dismay that the contest was already well under way. The sight and sound of the crowd spurred him on. He was in despair lest he had missed Joe’s attempt.

He skidded to a halt by Roper’s window, where the details of the draw were pinned up, written with immense care in Herbert Roper’s clerkly hand.

There were thirty contestants.

Joe was drawn twenty-fourth.

His heart gave a leap of joy. So Mester Shepherd was right, he told himself. If y’on’y prayed ‘ard enough, yer prayers were granted.

The crowd surrounding the wall of the pub yard was some twenty to thirty feet deep. Moss dived in among the trousered legs and the hopsack skirts and aprons, paying no heed to the cries of ‘‘Oo’s that? Come back ’ere, yer little devil, you!’ And at last he found himself in the front row, too close to the wall to see more than the top two-thirds of the pole, and heard the cry of ‘Competitor Number Eight! Ernest Cartwright!’

It was some time before Competitor Number Eight appeared above the pub wall, making his fleeting bid for fame. It was a vain bid. Barely six feet above the wall, the youth reached behind him into his bag for another handful of soot and fuller’s earth. But his sudden move was incautious and ill-prepared. The bag did not come easily to hand, and the sudden shift of weight was his undoing. His grimy hands clutched uselessly at the pole, his legs gripped it convulsively, but all to no avail. He plummeted down to land on the straw bales about which Moss had been told but which he had never seen. Competitor Number Eight’s bid was over for that year.

Moss’s eyes went to the top of the pole. The small Union Jack fluttered there, apparently still untaken – unless someone had already succeeded and the flag had been replaced. He called to Arnold Sutcliffe, on the other wing of the crowd,

‘Arnold! ’As anybody ’ad it dahn yet?’

Arnold shook his head, just as the announcement came for Competitor Number Nine.

Now began a time of agony for Moss. Fifteen more contestants before Joe appeared. Fifteen chances that the flag might be taken, and the next contestant then required to place the flag between his teeth and replace it. And if he, or any later contestant should succeed, there would have to be a decider with the cup going to him who then climbed the highest. He tried to console himself with the knowledge that a decider was a rare event, much rarer than for a single contestant to take the flag. But if anyone did reach it, and then Joe

managed it, there would have to be a decider and the agony would be prolonged. He could hardly bear to look.

But one by one the contestants were eliminated, and it began to look as though the flag might survive unclaimed. Moss began to wonder whether Joe had been right about the luck of the draw.

Number Twenty failed. Number Twenty-one. Then Number Twenty-Two, going great guns, climbed to within three feet of the top, inched up another foot and, with Moss below teetering on the edge of despair, clutched at the flag. It seemed to be all over but the cheering. But the contestant had been too eager. With his legs vainly clutching at the pole, he plummeted down, to roars of disappointed laughter.

Number Twenty-three failed long before the half-way stage.

Over the hubbub, the voice called,

‘Contestant Number Twenty-four! Joseph Garrett!’

Moss’s stomach lurched and tightened. He felt suddenly cold and sick.

A long pause. Nothing seemed to be happening. He wondered what could have gone wrong.

Then the familiar head appeared above the wall, moving slowly and steadily.

A voice from somewhere behind Moss growled,

‘that’s reight, lad! A allus fancy a slow starter, mesen!’

There was a murmur of agreement, mingled with uneasy laughter and some disapproval of the interruption. Moss kept his eyes steadfastly on the figure of Joe.

A third of the way and more, and Joe stopped.

There was an audible indrawing of breath. Moss’s breath seemed to stop entirely.

But Joe showed no concern.

Moss’s own thighs ached in sympathy with the grip of Joe’s thighs on the pole. Then, slowly and with great deliberation, Joe reached behind him for the bag and drew forth a handful of soot. Moss noticed with approval how sweetly the bag came to hand.

Still obviously gripping hard with his thighs, Joe reached up slowly and cautiously, and with his free hand spread the soot and fuller’s earth liberally over the surface of the pole above him. Nor was he satisfied with one handful. Then he replaced his hand on the pole and inched himself up another foot. Another eighteen inches. He stopped again.

There was a murmur of approval from the crowd, which rose to a clamour as Joe reached for the bag again. Once more, with painful slowness, he covered the surface of the pole above him, and now with three handfuls of soot. Once more he inched himself up another two feet, and stopped again.

The same voice behind Moss growled again.

‘Yon lad’s gorra ’ead on ‘is shoulders, tha knows! ’E reckons as there’ll be nobbut a skerrick o’ soot on t’top afe o’ yon powl!’

Moss caught his breath again as he remembered Albert Smith’s words about the dangers of climbing slowly.

‘A know, A know! It sounds awreight! But it’s a gamble, dusta see? Tha’rt gamblin’ on thi thighs ’owdin’ out long enough to get thi theer!’

And this, this was the gamble Joe was taking. Moss shivered with fear for his brother.

Four feet to go now. Less. Another two feet, and Joe might snatch at the prize.

But again he stopped, and again he covered the surface of the pole above him. Then slowly, more slowly now, for he was visibly tiring, he heaved himself up the narrowing, swaying mast.

Moss tried to lick his lips, but his mouth was too dry. Then, as if Joe had spoken to him, he knew what his brother was about. He had seen that earlier snatch at the flag and had learned his lesson.

He was now within reach of the flag.

His left hand reached up, up – and took a firm grip on the flat top of the pole.

Then with one last heave of his thighs, he reached up with the other hand.

And the prize was his.

The crowd which had lately been as silent as death, now let out its breath in one loud gasp, and erupted into prolonged cheers.

All but weeping with joy, Moss watched the white-faced Joe slide swiftly down the pole and vanish from sight. He told himself now that he didn’t care if someone else climbed the pole that Joe had so carefully prepared. Joe had done it. Joe had done it. It was all that mattered.

And now an extra savour was added to the crowd’s enjoyment of the event. Secure in the knowledge that whatever happened, the prize would be won this year, the onlookers could luxuriate in the prospect that even now Joe might find it snatched from his grasp.

But they were disappointed. Despite all Joe’s careful treatment of the surface of the pole, no other contestant came within six feet of the top. The flag was not replaced, and Joe was the undisputed winner.

One by one, the crowd melted away, only the more ardent staying for the prize-giving in the pub yard. Moss stood rooted to the spot, his eyes never leaving the gate through which Joe would eventually come, and through which he was expressly forbidden to go.

And at last the victor came, bearing the cup, and Moss ran to meet him, his own cup brimming over.

But Joe had no eyes for his brother. He was looking past Moss to someone else.

A voice called ‘Joe! A’m ’ere!’

A girl's voice. He turned back to Joe, followed his eyes, turned again, and saw the girl.

Ellen Armitage! A lass! And she the one to share Joe's triumph!

He turned on his heels and ran blindly, blundering into one and then another member of the departing crowd, and at last reached the haven of his own backyard. And there he rested his forehead against the rough wood of his rabbit-hutch, and gave himself up to his misery.

Lizzie Garrett spread the clean white tea-cloth over the pancheon of dough and set it in the hearth to rise. Then she crossed to the sink to remove the last traces of pastry from her hands. As she passed the window she caught sight of Moss, and noticed the eloquent droop of his shoulders.

What's up wi' our Moss, A wonder? she said to herself. 'E looks as if 'e's lost a bob an' found a tanner!

But then who would expect a woman, a mere woman, to understand such things?



In those years, the 'school' in Sunday School was no mere courtesy title. In the view of the Chapel Stewards and their minions, education ranked next after cleanliness for its nearness to godliness, even the Sabbath education of the amateurish kind provided at Hensley Street Chapel.

So the Garrett children, each in turn, were every year entered for the Hamelin Street Circuit Examination in Scriptural Knowledge, until in the fulness of time a full-time job, or a university education, or adolescent arrogance persuaded them that the time had come to put away childish things. True, there were those among their fellows who continued their studies along this path into adult life, but they were of the stuff from which Sunday School teachers and local preachers are fashioned. None of the Garrett brood, once childhood and youth as the offspring of a chapel caretaker were behind them, ever showed any desire to tread that road.

As Moss came to the age at which he was eligible to enter for the Scripture Examination he, too, was duly enrolled. Not that he chafed under this conscription. On the contrary, he looked forward with unfeigned eagerness to his initiation into the mysteries of 't'scripture Exam', and not least because of promised delights which went with the prize-giving ceremony.

Little by little he imbibed every detail of this event, until he knew that it entailed a journey to a distant and unknown part of Hallamside, not on one tram, but two – an unheard-of luxury. Then on the homeward journey, between the two tram rides, there was further bounty in the shape of a traditional ceremony which, in the eyes of the young candidates, made all the long hours of study worth while – the free meat-pie.

Not that Moss regarded the many verses of Holy Writ which he was required to stash away in his small head as a tedious chore to be endured for the sake of this final reward. Nor did he rebel at this age against the primitive and often unconvincing theology which the examination questions required him to trot out, and which an intelligent child of even Moss's tender years must sometimes have viewed with more than a passing doubt. Wax to receive and marble to retain, he was not at all averse to showing off his talents in that direction to a circle of admiring grown-ups, cooing over his prowess like so many pigeons.

In an age which regarded learning in much the same light as medicine, in that it could not be expected to do any good unless it tasted bad, the approach to education was universally held to call for stern endeavour and rolled-up sleeves. It was accepted that the Scripture Examination was certainly a hard furrow to hoe, and just as certainly no worse for that. So the noisy band which congregated on the first Tuesday evening was sadly depleted by

the time the evening of the written examination came around. It was not a matter which caused dismay in the breasts of the authorities, who had scriptural evidence for their belief that many are called, but few chosen.

The syllabus was arduous enough, even for a generation steeped in the Good Book, and far beyond the preliminary hurdles of the Twenty-Third Psalm and the Lord's Prayer, both of which the candidates had seemingly digested with their mothers' milk. They were now required to stow away in their mental holds, and eventually unload without fault, whole cargoes of Holy Writ, apparently chosen at random from the Law and the Prophets, with sizeable chunks of the New Testament for good measure. By the time the hard core of the faithful had reached their early 'teens, a few of them at least could call upon a veritable warehouse of verses from the Good Book, even if for most of them their grasp of the words was surer than their understanding of the meaning.

For some, and perhaps the majority, much of all this would be discarded and forgotten before they reached the age of indiscretion. For a minority, which would include Moss, a seam of gold-bearing ore was thus acquired which would run out only with the last syllable of their recorded time on earth.

It could hardly have been the prizes themselves which wound up the young candidates to a fever of anticipation as 't'Exam' drew near. They were well aware that all who won prizes would be allowed to choose whatever books they fancied. They also knew that unless Mester Shepherd and the Stewards fancied them too they would have to think again. To Moss, who had never yet in his life held in his hands a book he could call his own, this was a small consideration.

So it came about, more by good luck than good management, that the first prize he ever won at the annual examination was one of the few volumes in the approved list which could have been heartily recommended by more informed literary critics than his Sunday School teachers, and one which planted a seed in him which would bear rich fruit. Even at this tender age, he was not unacquainted with the ring of bright words, but until now his appetite had been too voracious and too indiscriminating for his own good. Now he had a book which he could read, mark, learn and inwardly digest.

It was fortunate for him that he had been reared from his early days on a steady diet of the Authorised Version, or he might have found Bunyan's language hard going. But the style of 'the Pilgrim's Progress' was by now so familiar to him that the words proved no obstacle at all, and he read and re-read the slim green volume (bound in real leather, a sumptuous offering, for it was the Third Circuit Prize), until it all but fell to pieces in his hands.

The result of this infatuation was a storehouse of quotation that was to astonish his doting parents and to furnish Moss himself with a source of enduring consolation in later hours of trial. Never after this, for instance, could he attend a funeral without hearing mental echoes of the trumpets sounding on the other side.

It was by no means the first book that Moss had loved, merely the first that he had loved and owned. An actual shortage of books in the Garrett household was unknown, even if they were all Scripture prizes, or school text-books, or library books. As each child grew and added another quota, there was no level surface in the entire house which did not bear its slithering pile, ever ready to cascade to the floor if a member of the family was so unwise as to try to add to, or subtract from, their number.

From time to time, Lizzie's protests, which usually went unheard, would come to a head. A pile of books would be exiled from the kitchen-cum-scullery-cum-dining-room-cum-living room at the rear of the house to the chilly 'front room' with its air of dungeon damp and its hermetically-sealed front door. There the offending books would be piled on the floor, there being no such luxury as shelving for books in the entire Garrett household. And there they would lie, and there (or so it seemed to Lizzie) they would breed, for their number grew with each succeeding child and each succeeding year.

In this respect, Jim Garrett was no example to his family at all, as Lizzie never ceased to remind him. He never dreamed of putting a book away, even supposing that he could have found a place to put it. Like all his children, he devoured every word that passed even fleetingly before his eyes, and his taste was nothing if not catholic. He would read a school text-book with as much evident enjoyment as a novel or one of his own library books. And, when he had read his own, he read the library books and text-books which his family brought home. And the depth of his total absorption in a book, while the clamorous Bedlam of a large family raged around him, was a source of never-ceasing wonder to Lizzie.

Moss, in company with the rest of his family, was by now so accustomed to this state of affairs that it came as a revelation to him, as he grew older and his horizons widened, to find that there were homes in Hallamside that were not at all like his own, homes where a book was as rare as a gold brick. So it was his father's example, rather than any exhortation on his part, which persuaded successive children to embark on the annual round of the Scripture Examination, until the examination began to look like a Garrett family preserve, and many were the black looks as yet another member of that clan staggered home with a load of prizes, to add yet more learning to the family store, and yet more fuel to the fire of Lizzie's complaints.

The Sunday School teachers who volunteered their services in preparing the candidates were on the whole more well-intentioned than well-informed, and it was not at all unknown for a Garrett child to be ahead of his or her tutor. But lack of knowledge on their part was unlikely to daunt the teachers, coming as they did from a generation which had been reared in the faith that all things are possible to them that love the Lord.

There was one memorable occasion, just before his first Scripture Examination, when Moss learned the hard way that where ignorance is bliss it is often folly to draw attention to it.

Mester Shepherd, having heard his rough-polled charges recite in turn the set passage from the life of Noah (omitting, of course, any reference to his nakedness), began to make use of the story to deliver himself of a homily on the evils of strong drink and intemperance. This word 'temperance' had been exercising the mind of Moss, for he had looked it up in the dictionary, and found the definition there impossible to square with what he was now being taught. But to the worshippers at Hensley Street Chapel temperance meant not moderation in all things but total abstinence. One Sunday in the year, given the name of Temperance Sunday, was the day on which hell-fire and damnation were to be preached, in the belief that it might stiffen the faithful against any recourse to alcoholic liquors. It was an occasion for the Band of Hope to bring to bear all its powers of persuasion in coaxing babes scarce out of their mothers' arms into renouncing for ever all indulgence in strong drink, and for some prim Miss or other to recite moving verse on the lines of 'think of the Headache in the Morning'.

Astonishingly, such homilies were listened to in all seriousness by the wide-eyed congregation.

Fired with a sense of superiority in his new-found knowledge, Moss decided to share it with Mester Shepherd by introducing him to the purer meaning of the word 'temperance', and received for his pains the customary treatment meted out to heretics the first time they raise their voices in public. He was told to be quiet.

He returned to the attack with more determination than discretion. Mester Shepherd, who had suffered Moss's importunities more than once, decided that sweet reason might be more effective.

'Now, lads,' he said, 'let's all think for a moment about what Maurice has just said, shall we?' And he bestowed on his charges the kind of winning smile that might have curdled milk, and which certainly caused the children to curl with embarrassment. 'I'm sure you all know that there are people in this world who try to pretend that it isn't really a sin if it's just a little one, eh? They don't drink beer, they say, only black beer from the herbalist's. Isn't that so?'

The boys made no answer, being not at all certain where all this was leading.

'But alcohol is alcohol, boys. Never forget that! Wine is a mocker, strong drink is raging, and the devil goeth about like a wild beast, to beguile us, to trap us, each and every one of us, not with a great big wicked temptation, but with a small one that will surely lead to a bigger one, and a bigger one still.'

By this time, the rest of the class had got Mester Shepherd's drift and, having heard it all before, were busy with their own affairs. Only Moss was still giving the teacher his undivided attention, and only then because he had a vested interest in trying to save Mester Shepherd from error.

'so you see, Maurice, it's just as much a sin to believe that temperance means only a little alcohol –'

The teacher was now lost to the world, carried away with an excess of missionary zeal in the cause of 'temperance'.

'– just as much a sin, Maurice, as to say – as some people do – that oatmeal stout isn't really wicked, because the oatmeal is an anecdote to the alcohol –'

He got no further, for Moss, not noted for tact on such occasions, hooted with laughter. Mester Shepherd, quite unaware of his unfortunate malapropism, mistook the reason for the laughter, and, in sudden and most un-Christian wrath, unceremoniously boxed Moss's ears.

He was all penitence at once. In spite of a prim and starchy respectability, an obsessive desire for conformity in the Nonconformist faith, a humourless excess of zeal in being about his Father's business, and a tendency to stiff celluloid collars that were all but suicidal, Albert Shepherd was a good man and gentle at heart. He was one who suffered children gladly, even though there were times at the end of these sessions when there was little left of his tether. Such an act in him was untypical, and there was not a boy in his class who did not know it and wonder at the sudden outburst.

Moss was by no means perturbed, for he had a shrewd suspicion that the act which had silenced him had also stopped Mester Shepherd's mouth. There was now no possible chance of the teacher's relaying to his father the story of his son's indiscretion.

But Mester Shepherd's penitence had unforeseen and unhappy results. In his efforts to atone for what he felt to be an act of quite unjustified savagery on his part, he went out of his way to make much of his pupil, holding him up to the rest as a model of industry and rectitude, praising too effusively the speed with which he committed his verses to heart, and generally over-selling Moss's stock until it had no value in the market, and his classmates hated him with a virulence which boded him no good. Moss, all unaware of the danger in which he stood, preened himself in the sunlight of his teacher's favour until he hadn't a friend in the entire circle.

Their chance for revenge came on the night of the prize-giving. It was well that Mester Shepherd had insisted on taking all the prizes home in his attaché case, or Moss's precious books might have suffered damage. Assured of its safety, Moss could now luxuriate in the prospect of the forthcoming treat, and, bloated with rectitude, was all unaware of what lay in store for him.

The presentation over, there was still to come the event which most of the candidates undoubtedly rated higher in the scale than mere prizes, which in any case would probably gather dust in some cupboard. After all, they reasoned, yer could allus get books from t'Library if yer want 'em. But 'ow often does some'dy buy yer a meat-pie?

No one could remember how the tradition had begun, or how the Stewards had been persuaded to foot the annual bill, but it was now an established custom for each candidate to partake of one meat-pie on the homeward journey. There were some uncharitable enough to suggest that some candidates had entered for the examination in the knowledge that, whether they passed or not, their mere presence at the examination qualified them to attend the prize-giving and to receive their pie.

Mester Shepherd always bought the pies from the same establishment, a small cooked-meat shop at the corner of Orchard Lane and, appropriately perhaps, on the opposite side of the road from the Education Offices. The proprietor, a Falstaff in a spotless white apron, and a splendid advertisement for the body-building virtues of his pies, would take each one in turn from the small oven which guaranteed that they would be piping hot inside, and then with practised care would pour a thin steaming gravy from a small jug into the holes in the lid of the pie. Imagination pictured the beefy juice permeating every crevice of the dark interior for, as every connoisseur knows, a meat-pie that isn't hot and moist inside is worse than a chilled claret.

As one of the youngest candidates, Moss was well down the queue, and he was in agony of mind lest all the pies should be sold before his turn came. By the time he held the small square of greaseproof paper with its burden of pie his mouth was watering copiously.

'Is that everyone?' cried Mester Shepherd. 'Come along then, boys, we can eat them on the way to the tram!'

Moss set off in high glee, determined to make his pie last as long as possible, by nibbling all round the decorated edge of the lid, then the lid, and at last the succulent heart.

So he was all unprepared for what happened next. It was so skilfully done that he would never be sure whether that act had been deliberate or not. At his side, Arnold Sutcliffe

tripped, seemed to recover himself, and tripped again. And this time he barged full into Moss.

The next moment all that remained in Moss's hand was the square of greaseproof paper. And, before he could debate with himself whether to salvage what he could of the fallen pie, a studded boot came down and pressed it into the flagstones.

His loss was harder to bear for the shout of laughter which greeted it.

'Eigh up!' cried a voice. 'Look what's 'appened to t'teacher's pet! 'E's dropped 'is pie!'

The chorus was taken up at once.

'E's dropped 'is pie! 'E's dropped 'is pie!'

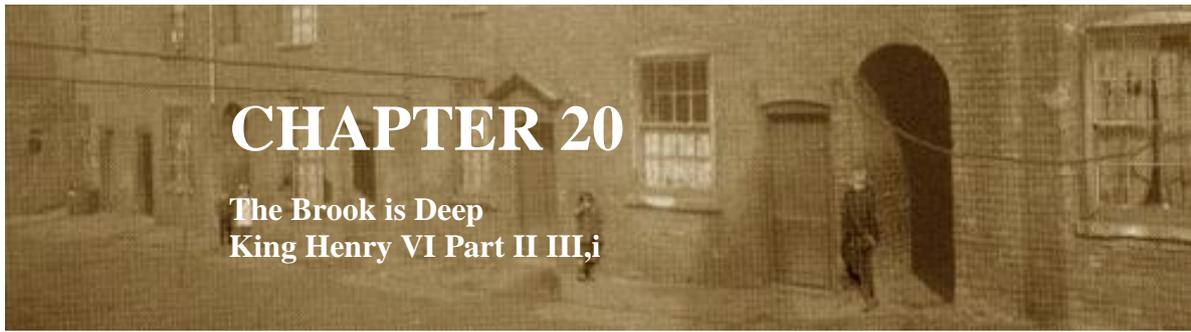
There was nothing to be done but to put the best face possible upon it, and Moss fought mightily to hold back his tears of anger and chagrin. But his performance did not wholly convince his tormentors.

Albert Shepherd was quite at a loss to understand the absence from Sunday School on the three Sundays following of his favourite pupil – an occurrence quite without precedent.

He felt it his duty to draw Jim's attention to his son's omission, and Jim dealt with the matter without lengthy enquiry, putting the offence down to a boy's natural tendency to sin.

For his part, Moss was well pleased to be out of Mester Shepherd's good books, even at the cost of his father's displeasure. Like Selina, drowned in a tub of goldfish, he had learned that a favourite has no friends, and he much preferred to have friends at whatever cost.

Besides, he reasoned, A'll mek sure as A 'owd on to mi meat-pie next year, choose what.



CHAPTER 20

The Brook is Deep
King Henry VI Part II III,i

Moss's first years in school had seen Alec Willett undeservedly neglected. A difference in age, which had gone unnoticed when Moss needed Alec's companionship for lack of any other, loomed larger now that he had friends in plenty.

And even when, in the fulness of time, Alec himself began his education at Grimesmoor Council School, they were still separated, for then Moss had already moved into the Junior School. Though they could not meet in class or playground, for the staff wisely maintained a separate play-time for juniors and infants, they were inevitably thrown together outside school, despite Moss's new-found preference for older company.

And now, to make matters worse, Moss learned that his mother had a new job for him, the one which had earlier chafed his brother Joe.

'Na, look 'ere, our Moss! Just you tek care of Alec, d'y'ear? Just you see as none o' them big lads knock him about, will yer?'

Moss, counting himself now among these same big lads, was moved to protest.

'Aw, Mam! 'Ave A got to? 'E's got plenty o' kids to play wi'!'

His mother was adamant, however, and Moss took up his cross, muttering curses not loud but deep.

He soon discovered, as his mother had suspected, that the chore was less onerous than he had feared. Alec was a sturdy child, tall for his years, and more solidly built than Moss himself. Moreover, there was a large helping of the dare-devil in Alec, so that times without number he needed protection against himself rather than the big lads. Indeed, having shown himself top-dog among his peers, he was now looked upon with some respect by boys who were older. Moss, who had steeled himself to some wet-nursing, was all unprepared for something quite different. He found himself constantly called upon to restrain his young charge when Alec expressed a desire to emulate the older boys, and without paying enough heed to the fact that, in Moss's eyes at least, he was 'still a kid'.

To make matters infinitely worse, Maggie Willett had a childlike and totally unjustified faith in Moss's ability to care for her son that would have alarmed Moss had he been aware of its extent.

In this overweening and altogether uncritical care for her son, Maggie Willett was quite unlike the average Grimesmoor mother. Where they went about their daily tasks in total ignorance of their children's whereabouts, not to mention what they were up to, Maggie lived in constant dread, whenever her ewe lamb was out of sight, of something untoward

happening to him. She could only find some easement of that dread if she knew he was with Moss – which, in the light of some of the devilment that he and his cronies got up to, is a striking proof of the truth of the aphorism about ignorance and bliss.

Summer had come to Grimesmoor, and with it came school holidays, pitch bubbling up from between the setts of the cobbled street, and adventure bubbling in the breasts of the young. The boys, casting about for suitable holiday occupation, made up their minds to go to Lynbeck, where there was paddling, fishing for minnows and sticklebacks, and, for the hardier sort, swimming.

There were those who, unwisely, let the word ‘Lynbeck’ escape from their lips in the hearing of their mothers and who were at once forbidden to go. Others, more discreet, merely let it be known that they were ‘off on a ramble’ while hinting at the tamer delights of Frith Park. So, in a world where the unwise seem always to be in the majority, it was not surprising that the party was eventually much reduced in number. By the time the day of the ramble dawned Moss’s party was down to three, Alec Willett, Arnold Sutcliffe, and himself.

Moss was not at all displeased at this turn of events, for Arnold was a big lad, handy with his fists, and fearless to boot. And, anyway, three is the magic number for a company of boys.

It was not often that the boys of Grimesmoor visited Lynbeck, and then only on summer days, since it lay some five miles from home, and the journey necessarily all on foot by reason of a chronic lack of funds. Even if they left, as they aimed to do, after an early breakfast, the sun would be high in the sky by the time they reached the cool shade of Lynbeck’s trees.

Lizzie welcomed Moss’s suggestion that they might ‘go on a ramble’, but insisted that he could only do so if he took Alec along. Since Moss had foreseen this stipulation and included Alec in his plans from the first, his scowl of protest was purely for form’s sake, a sort of banking of his resources in the hope that they might gain a little interest should the occasion arise when he might want to raise a stronger objection.

Maggie raised no obstacle, secure in her unshakable confidence in Moss’s ability to guard her precious offspring, and the preparations were put in train.

Alec, always more luxuriously equipped than other boys in the yard, was equipped with a large khaki haversack which had seen Army service in France, and better days, too. But at least it was a professional piece of kit compared with Moss’s brown-paper carrier, and he was glad of Maggie Willett’s suggestion that he should put his sandwiches in Alec’s haversack. Lizzie thanked her neighbour for the kindly suggestion, merely adding shrewdly that ‘our Moss’ll carry it.’

Then, just as they were on the point of setting off with high hopes, his mother’s parting words cast a blight upon Moss’s day.

‘An’ look ’ere, our Moss, don’t you dare tek Alec near any water, d’y’ understand?’

Since water was the main attraction of Lynbeck, this was a blow, the more so as one of his mother’s towels was already lining the bottom of Alec’s haversack, where Moss had secreted it. He had a convenient philosophy, which ruled that what was not expressly forbidden was by implication allowed. Now he would be called upon to disobey, which

would not have been necessary if his mother had omitted to mention the matter. He nodded and kept his counsel, deciding to deal with that issue if it arose, and not before. Perhaps A can tell Alec to stop on t'grass, he told himself, though not with any real confidence.

When they met Arnold by the paper shop he, too, had arrived complete with paper carrier. The obvious solution was to empty it and stuff the contents into Alec's haversack. Then all three could take turns to carry it, Moss and Arnold on the way out and Alec on the homeward journey – an arrangement which Alec at once vetoed, on the grounds that he had provided the ends and the others should provide the means. It was a solution which their parents might have thought unfair, but with a boy's infallible sense of justice, Moss and Arnold agreed.

First it was necessary to settle on the one who was to take the first stint. Moss claimed it by right of seniority, since he was all of three days older than Arnold. Arnold objected, and appealed to Alec, as the owner of the haversack, to decide. Then Moss had a brainwave which met with instant agreement.

'tell thi what! We'll do 'One Pertater Two Pertater'! Put thi fists up, Arnold!'

Arnold at once obliged, and Moss congratulated himself on his sagacity. He had long ago worked out this routine for any given number of participants. Given the right to start, which was never a matter for dispute anyway, he knew exactly which of the several fists to begin with, depending upon whether it was in his interests to win or lose. Considering how universal was this method of drawing lots, it never failed to astonish Moss that no one had ever sat down with a sheet of paper and a stub of pencil and worked out where to start counting for any given number of fists.

It had already occurred to him that at this stage of the journey the haversack was at its heaviest, and that he would have been wiser to concede Arnold's right to first turn. But at once he felt that some stratagem was necessary, in case Arnold should also decide that it was better to lose than to win. And, with only four fists to consider, it was ridiculously easy to engineer whatever result he chose.

He began by tapping Arnold's right fist on the first number, then his left fist, then changing hands to tap his own right fist, than tapping his left fist with his right hand again, and so beginning another round. And each round was enlivened by the refrain:

'One pertater,

Two pertater,

Three pertater,

Four!

Five pertater,

Six pertater,

Seven pertater

More!'

Moss started the count with Arnold's right fist, noticing as he did so Arnold's smile of satisfaction as he realized that the end of the round would see one of Moss's fists removed.

His glee was short-lived, for at the end of the next round which now required only three fists, his own right fist must go behind his back.

The last round, and the moment of truth. And, as Moss had calculated, the blow fell on Alec's remaining fist and Moss had won.

'tha cheated!' cried Alec, more from habit than conviction.

'Awreight!' said Moss. 'We'll do it ageean, then!'

But, of course, the result was no different.

And now Moss played his trump card. With an altogether assumed air of reluctance, he gave in.

'Awreight,' he said, 'A were just kiddin'! Tha can 'ave fust turn!'

Arnold's look of glee as he donned the haversack in triumph brought an equal satisfaction to Moss's breast as he congratulated himself on a clever piece of diplomacy. At once, and as if on an afterthought, he suggested that it was only fair that he should take over the haversack at the Five Arches and Arnold, whose face was eloquent testimony to his realization that the Five Arches was beyond the halfway point, readily agreed.

The first couple of miles saw them well past the sooty stone walls of the school, which was now as securely bolted and barred to keep a child out as it would soon be to keep him in. Soon they left Field Marshal Road behind them, and then came the brick-field, scene of many a day-long football or cricket match, and then the long climb up Walpole Road. When the crest of the hill was at last reached, they saw for the first time, beyond the distant Five Arches the even more remote prospect of football ground and factories behind which lay Lynbeck.

With one accord, they sat down to rest.

'tell thi what!' cried Alec. 'Let's 'ave us dinners|!'

Arnold, who was by now beginning to regret his own eagerness in taking over the haversack, was only too ready to fall in. Moss, who was eager to get to Lynbeck, was about to challenge the suggestion, when the thought struck him that the food which the haversack contained would thus be shared between three stomachs, and that the haversack would be all the lighter for it.

But he was too much of an old hand to agree at once, and made a show of reluctance, which, predictably, made the others the more determined, and in no long time the haversack was lighter for the loss of three bundles of sandwiches.

However, it was now no easy task to separate Moss's dripping sandwiches, Arnold's jam sandwiches, and Alec's more sophisticated sandwiches of sliced tomatoes, all of which had become somewhat conjoined on the journey. The decision was taken, and agreed, to have only one sandwich at this stage and save the rest for the afternoon, but, long before

they had finished the first sandwich, they were tempted to take the other – and, being three normal healthy boys, they fell.

Arnold abandoned the haversack readily enough at the Five Arches, and three tired boys at last crossed Maleham Bridge and climbed over the low stone wall that bordered the Lyn Beck. Their spirits revived at once at the sight of the stream.

By now the sun was high in the heavens, and blazed down upon a motley collection of children of all ages in various stages of undress. The water, shaded by alder trees except where it winked and sparkled in full sunlight, looked wonderfully inviting.

Come on!’ cried Arnold. ‘Let’s goo in swimmin’!’

Moss was thoroughly alarmed at this, especially as Alec was clearly losing no time in shedding his clothes. His intention had been to stop short at paddling, and knew that even this was forbidden in the absence of any grown-up. He also knew that Arnold was no swimmer, and that he himself was little better. And Alec, he knew, could not swim a stroke, nor was he ever likely to learn, since his mother would trust no one with her precious son in the swimming baths at Sutherland Road, let alone a river.

He himself had learned to swim after a fashion, as he learned to do most things, by reading a book. He had an abiding faith in the power of the printed word to teach him anything, a faith which he often put to the test and which let him down as often as not.

He had nearly come to grief the first time he entered the water at the shallow end of the swimming bath, secure in the knowledge that he had a great aptitude for swimming, born of all the reading he had done. He had changed hurriedly, conscious of an inward trembling, half of fear, half excited anticipation, put on the scratchy drawers provided by a benevolent Corporation, and ventured hesitantly down the steps into the water.

The book had not warned him of the gasping chill when his body entered the water. Nor did the water support him as the book had promised it would. So, after several visits to the baths, he had progressed no further than an ability to jump into the water and swim half the width of the bath, all under water. Despite his utmost efforts, he made little further progress, swimming easily and with great style as long as his lungs would hold out under water, but puffing and panting like a grampus as soon as he ventured to swim on the surface.

So he was less than receptive to Arnold’s suggestion, though unwilling to advance his real objection to it, which was his mother’s parting command. He cast about for a more acceptable argument.

‘We ’aven’t got no cozzies!’ he exclaimed.

‘We don’t need no cozzies!’ Arnold replied. ‘We can swim in us singlets an’ pants!’

It would have been a possible solution for Moss but for one inescapable fact. It was summer time, and underwear was winter wear only in the Garrett household. Swimming without some form of covering was out of the question, for Moss had all the delicacy about personal nakedness which was common at the time.

By this time Arnold was down to his underwear and Alec not far behind. Moss was in a panic.

‘tha can’t goo in, Alec Willett! Tha knows what thi mother said!’

But Arnold was already standing on the broad top of the weir over which the water, no more than an inch in depth, slid glassily before cascading down the steps of the downstream side in a flurry of bouncing white foam. And, before Moss could stop him, Alec had followed suit.

But he was inexperienced in such matters, and was all unprepared for the slimy surface of the rock. The next moment he had slid from the top of the weir and was into deep water.

Moss had a sudden, appalling vision of his mother’s anger if Alec arrived home soaking wet. There was only one thing to do. Before Alec’s body could vanish from sight, he jumped in, fully clothed as he was, and dived down.

He caught a glimpse of a dark green object, and grabbed for it. The next moment he had hauled Alec up to the surface, and guided his hand to the flat top of the weir.

Gasping for breath, he called,

‘Arnold! Grab owd of ‘im! Gerrim out!’

White-faced, Arnold hauled Alec, and then Moss on to the flat top of the weir, where they lay for a few moments, gasping for breath. And soon they were all three standing, silent except for the uncontrollable chattering of their teeth, on the grassy sward by the stream.

The incident had not gone unnoticed.

Agnes Mitchell, schoolmistress in retirement and with a house overlooking the Lyn Beck, had seen all. The sight of a small boy tumbling into deep water had all but stopped her heart but, even before she could move from her window, the danger was past.

She hurried out to take command.

‘Come with me, you boys!’ she cried, in a schoolmistressy voice which brooked no refusal. ‘Come along now!’

They recognized the tone of authority, and sheepishly trailed after her, wondering what fate awaited them. At the last moment Moss remembered the haversack containing his mother’s precious towel, ran back to fetch it and back again to join the others.

‘Miss!’ he called after the strange lady. ‘It’s awright! We’ve got a towel!’

‘Never mind that now!’ said Agnes Mitchell, who was beginning to enjoy once more the experience of handling children. ‘Come with me, or you’ll all get your death of cold!’

In the blazing heat of noonday it seemed an unlikely prospect to Moss, but he acknowledged the traditional fear of wet clothing and the ills that were thought to be attendant on it, and followed without further question.

As was customary in those parts, Miss Mitchell had a coal fire burning in the hearth even at summer’s height. Quickly she ranged them round it, and went to get towels. Then with understanding delicacy, she said,

‘Now I’m going to make a hot drink. So, while I’m gone, get your clothes off and dry yourself. You can wrap yourselves in the towels until your clothes are dry.’

When she had gone, they held a whispered consultation. Moss had already made up his mind that this unknown lady was 'awright', and the other two agreed.

Soon afterwards, they heard the sound of returning feet, and quickly adjusted their towels for maximum coverage as she entered, bearing a tray. She looked at the trio with practised eyes as they averted theirs.

'there!' she said. 'No great harm done, I think! Now I expect you'd all like a piece of cake!'

Cake! They looked at her wide-eyed, and without response, and she took their silence for consent.

'Here you are, then! Eat up, and drink this hot cocoa, and I'll get those clothes dried!'

Then she went off again. Gingerly at first, and then with growing confidence, they began to tuck into the plate of Sally Lunn's and fruit cake and soon polished them off, washing them down with steaming cocoa the while.

When their clothes were dry again, she brought them in, and again tactfully retired while they dressed. But this time when she returned she looked directly at Moss. Then, to his astonishment, she crooked a finger at him and signified by a movement of her head that he was to accompany her from the room. Puzzled, he followed her into the small back-kitchen.

'Where do you boys live?' she asked.

'Grimesmoor, Miss!' said Moss, without hesitation.

'so far? Well now, I think it's time you all went home. And I don't think any of you should play so near to water again. Not until you can swim much better. This stream is very deep in places, you know!'

'Yes, Miss!' said Moss, in his best meek tone.

'Now I think you should all collect your things and be off. Here's a shilling for your tram fares, and perhaps you could get some sweets on the way home.'

A shilling? It was riches untold. Twelve weeks' spending money! He had never known such wealth, and his eyes shone with gratitude. Then he seemed to hear his mother's voice, and at once remembered his manners.

'thank you, Miss,' he said.

Her eyes softened.

'What is your name?'

'Maurice, Miss! Maurice Garrett!'

'Maurice? That's a nice name!' Then she added, 'Maurice, that was a very brave thing you did. Things might have been much worse, you know, but for your quick thinking!'

This threw a whole new light on the subject, and one which Moss had not even considered. For his part, the act of rescue had been prompted not at all by motives of

nobility, but entirely for fear of the consequences if he should fail to deliver Alec Willett to his home clean, dry, and safe. He knew only too well the punishment for what his mother called 'downright disobedience'. But, he reasoned, if that were the case, if he really had performed a meritorious deed, then he was rightly entitled to the rewards.

He made up his mind on the instant to keep quiet about the shilling.

When they were safely away, Arnold asked the question which had clearly been occupying his mind for some time.

'Eigh up! What did she want thi for, Moss?'

Moss, startled by the suddenness of the question, was obliged to think quickly.

'Oh, well, she – she said – A mean, she said as we ought to goo 'ome, 'cos it's dangerous 'ere!'

Earlier, the other two might have disputed such a suggestion, but they had been suitably chastened by the events of the day and, besides, they agreed, they couldn't stop their without that lady knowin'.

Moss handed the haversack to Arnold, and they set off to walk home. On the way, Arnold recalled that they hadn't quite finished the sandwiches. A search proved him wrong, and they had to satisfy their pangs of hunger with the memory of Sally Lunn's, fruit cake and cocoa.

They were home suspiciously early for their parents' peace of mind, and there was inevitable speculation and questioning. Moss, aware of this, had been preparing the ground, and coaching his friends in the story. Some big lads 'ad started chasin' 'em, he said, so they'd 'ad to come 'ome.

Lizzie was still not entirely convinced by her son's too ready and too ingenuous explanation, for such an early return from Lynbeck was quite without precedent. But in the end, she expressed herself satisfied, and it was only the lack of appetite in her son when faced with his tea which aroused her suspicions afresh.

At length, and for lack of any other evidence, she allowed the matter to drop, and the incident might have passed without further remark. But the next day, by chance, she missed one of her towels, and the most careful search failed to turn it up. Quite at a loss to explain this, she suddenly recalled the excursion of the day before, put two and two together, and arrived at the only possible explanation.

'Look 'ere, our Moss! Did yer tek one o' my best towels to Lynbeck yesterday?'

His scarlet cheeks made answer superfluous. But she noticed at once that he was not so much defiant as alarmed, and suspected that there was more in this than met the eye. She decided to consult with Maggie Willett, in the hope that she could shed some light on the event.

There she learned all. Small boys are notoriously poor guardians of a secret, and this case was no exception. Maggie had easily wormed out of her son an account of the ordeal by water.

‘Na look, Lizzie,’ she said. ‘Yer mustn’t say owt to your Moss. If what our Alec says is owt to go by, your Moss saved ’is life yesterday. But ’e doesn’t want owt said about it, an’ A ’ad to promise our Alec as A wouldn’t tell anybody. So if yer say owt to your Moss, our Alec’ll know as A’ve telled yer. You won’t say a word, will yer?’

Lizzie weighed the news for a few moments, uncertain as to what she ought to do in such a noteworthy case.

‘Aw well,’ she said, at length, ‘it weren’t really one o’ mi best towels, any road!’

Moss, who had expected a command to go the very next day to recover the towel, was more than a little astonished that no further mention of the missing article was made. But, over the next few days, he caught his mother regarding him from time to time with a look which he could not begin to understand.

It was as well he could not read her mind, or his vainglory would have been altogether insufferable.



CHAPTER 21

Accounted a Good Actor
Hamlet III,ii

Moss was finding it hard to get to sleep.

Ever a single-minded child, he had heard Mester Caxton's words that day with a shock of delight that had driven every other thought clean out of his head.

He went over in his mind for the thousandth time the announcement which had begun it all – Mester Caxton lowering the lid of his desk, and scanning the rows of faces before him as he always did until the silence in the classroom could almost be felt. And then at last, in a tone so casual that it was quite unsuited to such momentous tidings,

‘sit up straight, everybody! Matthewman, sit up, or I'll give you something to help you, understand? Now then, are you all paying attention?’

The question was altogether rhetorical. None knew better than the teacher himself that a baker's dozen or so of his charges needed no such reminder, and that the rest were merely going through the motions of attending for fear of reprisals.

Then he announced the news that had Moss's spine straining like a bowstring and his right hand reaching for the ceiling in his desire to be one of the chosen few.

‘Now you all remember what Miss Hardy said to you this morning? About the School Inspector coming next month? Right! Well now, the boys of Standard Five are going to do a play, perhaps, for the Inspector to see when he comes –!’

The interested few looked at each other in mingled astonishment, delight, and bewilderment. A play! In school! It was unheard of.

The curriculum at Grimesmoor had not been designed with such fripperies in mind as the drama. Its form was simplicity itself. Arithmetic every morning until play-time, English until lunch-time (or, rather, dinner-time in local parlance). The afternoon could then be devoted to less vital subjects such as History and Geography. Thus, when sickness or age had contrived to make these pupils forgetful of all else, they would still recall Swale, Ure, Nidd, Wharfe, Aire, Calder, Don as the rivers of Yorkshire – though few could have named the squalid little beck which burred its way between houses and beneath old prams and cycle tyres not a hundred yards from the school gates.

Once a week there was Drawing – aptly named, for it required only octavo sheets of creamy cartridge paper with an HB pencil as the sole medium – except that on rare occasions, black paper would take the place of the white, and pastels would be given out, to be trodden underfoot by studded boots, causing a teacher to grind his teeth just as thoroughly and to swear never again. Such delights as Drawing provided were always

under threat, for at the approach of examinations or a visit from an Inspector appointed by the local authority, Drawing, and even History and Geography, would be relegated to limbo until the crisis had passed and normality could be safely restored.

But a play! And in school! Moss, more than most, was in the seventh heaven of delight. He was no stranger to the boards, having taken part in Sunday School concerts almost since he could mouth his first syllables. But a play! A play was different. He wondered whether the Inspector was aware of what momentous things were being planned in honour of his visit, and whether he would be properly impressed with the honour that Grimesmoor Council School was conferring upon him.

Mester Caxton was speaking again.

‘Miss Hardy and I thought it might be a good idea if you were to present a play about one of the stories in your history reader. So the play we’re going to do is about the murder of Thomas à Becket!’

It wasn’t the subject his flock, or rather those of his flock who showed any interest, might have chosen. Not perhaps what Mester Caxton himself would have preferred to tackle, but it had possibilities, Moss decided. At least there was nothing sloppy about it. Plenty of action, sword-play, and shouting, and one or two parts to tear a cat in. Just what a play ought to have, thought Moss.

‘And now,’ Mester Caxton concluded, ‘we’re all going into the Hall to read a piece for Miss Hardy! And then we will choose the parts.’

They were completely deceived by Mester Caxton’s deviousness, for not one of them suspected that his prime motive was to demonstrate the reading standard which the class had attained. The play came a very poor second. He had put up the idea of the play with some trepidation when Miss Hardy had said that she would like to ‘hear Standard Five’s reading’, and was neither astonished nor dismayed when she made it a condition of her agreement to the play that any failure on the part of Standard Five to attain the desired level of reading performance would assuredly jeopardize the prospect of consent.

Now she stood waiting for them to be chivvied into orderly ranks, with the smaller boys at the front. She was not at all certain in her mind that she had acted wisely in giving Mr Caxton his head. She was of the old school which held that the teacher’s prime duty was to turn out pupils who could write neatly, read fluently, and figure accurately. The rest of education was, in her view, merely icing on the cake.

In the eyes of Miss Hardy, the idea that any child should leave her care without a sufficient facility in reading was not to be countenanced for an instant, especially as it called for nothing more than diligent teaching and repeated practice. She had heard all the talk about ‘the ineducable minority’ and accorded it the same treatment as Nelson gave to his superior officer’s order at Copenhagen. In her opinion, any boy not actually an imbecile could learn to read – and should, while she drew breath. Nor was she alone in this. There are those in every age who count this the whole of education.

For Moss, who was far from ineducable, the reading test tried his patience sorely. He knew that he could not only read well, but could read with understanding, which was by no means the same thing. He was therefore disappointed that Miss Hardy seemed not to give any sign that she agreed. But at least she made some mark in the exercise book on her desk before moving on to Arnold Sutcliffe. He must then try to compose his soul in

patience until the other forty-odd had skipped or stumbled their way through their passages of prose, and the verdict could be announced.

But that, it seemed, was not yet.

The audition over, Standard Five was marched back into the classroom, where Mester Caxton announced that the Headmistress would decide on the parts for the play later, and would make her decision known at Assembly tomorrow. And not one member of the class knew, least of all the ingenuous Moss, that the reason for the delay was a mere pretence, that Mester Caxton had already cast his play, but that he himself did not know, until Miss Hardy had decided the matter, whether there would be a play at all.

He kept up the hollow pretence by having the books given out, so that the class could begin to read the play.

‘Now, boys,’ he said, ‘we’re going to read the play through. Sutcliffe, sit up straight, lad, or I’ll give you something to help you! Garrett, begin reading on Page One, and the rest of you follow in your books. And woe betide anybody who doesn’t know the place!’

This last remark caused Moss a twinge of alarm. He knew only too well that no one stood in more danger from this cause than he did. True, he ran no hazard while he was reading at Mester Caxton’s behest, but he knew, too, that once his turn was over he would find it impossible to dawdle along at the speed of the others. He would read on, lost to the world, page after page, far ahead of the passage which was being haltingly and laboriously recited, often in tones which proclaimed that the reader had not the slightest idea what it all meant. He never knew that Mester Caxton, good man, was well aware of his bright pupil’s failing and tended to overlook it whenever it was politic to do so.

On this occasion, however, Moss forced himself to stay with the rest, fearful that any peccadillo now might invite his complete exclusion from the ranks of the elect.

In his bed that night he emerged from his dream of the day’s events to the realization that voices were being raised downstairs, not in the usual rowdy clamour of family debate, but in the heated overtones of real anger. Unable to sleep, and ever curious, Moss decided that he must know the cause.

He slipped out of bed and made his way to the head of the stairs, where he sat on the topmost step, torn between the desire to know more and his morbid fear of the dark which plagued him still, despite his father’s assurances and his greater sum of years.

Jimmy, it seemed, was getting a ‘telling off’.

This was not altogether unusual, for he was of an age to challenge parental authority, and Moss dimly understood this. What was unusual in this instance, though, was that Jimmy was getting his ‘telling off’ jointly from his father and his mother – unusual, because Moss had heard his father say on many occasions, ‘Na come on, love! One dog at a bone’s enough!’

But on this occasion, the affair promised to be less interesting than Moss had hoped. Whatever had provoked it, he found the subject of the ‘row’ completely over his head.

‘Yer realize what it means, A suppose?’ his father was saying. ‘Yer can ferget all about goin’ ter t’University!’

There was some response from Jimmy, but too subdued for Moss to catch the words. His father went on,

‘Yer’ll not find that all that easy just now! Jobs don’t grow on trees these days, yer know!’

Now his mother spoke, and there was a note in her voice that Moss found strange and disturbing. Had he not known her better, he would have said she was crying.

‘A just ’ope she realizes what she’s done for yer, that’s all!’ she said, but his father broke in quickly,

‘Na, Lizzie, that’ll do! It teks two ter mek a bargain, yer know! No, A’m not gooin’ to condemn a young lass, an’ A’m not sidin’ wi’ this young – A nearly said summat as A shouldn’t! But we s’ll get nowheer that road!’

Moss’s eyes were growing heavy. It had been an exciting day, and he was still not too happy about what the hymn called ‘the encircling gloom’. Besides, there was nothing in this rigmarole to keep him any longer from his bed. He turned and felt for the knob of the bedroom door, and was soon warm again in the bed which he shared with Jimmy.

Long before his brother joined him, to lie dry-eyed and wakeful throughout the long night, Moss continued to sleep the deep and untroubled sleep of innocence.

Next morning, to Moss’s deep annoyance, Mester Caxton decided that Arnold Sutcliffe would make a more convincing Becket than his fellows, for he was fair of hair and countenance, and stood a head taller than they. So Moss, whose dark hair and brown eyes made an obvious contrast, had to resign himself to playing the part of one of the four Norman knights. But at least it was the main part, and, as he began to weigh the pros and cons of Mester Caxton’s choice, he began to appreciate the merits of the knight’s costume as against the plain robes of the Archbishop, and found himself after all not unduly depressed.

Learning his lines furnished no problems. Long before the night of the performance he was word-perfect, and could give the whole of his attention to the matter of his acting and, even more important, his costume and make-up. In the matter of this last, one of the Archbishop’s lines provided him with food for thought and the eventual key – ‘Out upon thee, thou swarthy knave!’

Being not entirely certain what the word ‘swarthy’ meant, Moss had recourse to the family dictionary, and then examined his face minutely in the cracked mirror by the stone sink in the kitchen. True, he was dark of hair and eyes, but swarthy –? Not in the least.

Something would have to be done about it.

Grease-paint was unknown in that household, and no mention of it had been made by Mester Caxton. It was Moss’s mother who eventually, and all unwittingly, provided the answer to his problem, by sending him on an errand to the chemist’s shop on Carlisle Road for a ‘penn’orth o’ permanganate’. He was vaguely familiar with this substance, since he had seen his mother pour a solution of the purplish crystals down the drain by the back door in summer weather – to ‘sweeten it’, she said.

Drains not figuring largely in Moss's scheme of things, he might have dismissed the matter from his mind had his mother not inadvertently spilt a little of the solution on the sheet of newspaper which she had placed just inside the back-door after donkey-stoning the step.

To Lizzie, the accident was an unconsidered trifle, but the young Autolycus snapped it up at once, for he noticed that the wine-dark liquid, instead of turning the newspaper to its own ruby shade, as might have been expected, had instead stained the page a deep chestnut-brown.

Once his mother's back was turned, it was the work of a moment to dip a finger into what remained of the solution. At once he saw to his delight that it had exactly the same effect on his skin. Here was the answer to his prayers, the clear high road to a satisfying swarthinness.

He rummaged in her duster-box and found a piece of old shirt-tail, and used this to apply the solution to his wrist. The result was as swarthy as any Norman knight could have desired.

And now he recalled that the pen-drawing of the knight that Mester Caxton was using as his model showed him bare-armed almost to the shoulder. Moss stripped off his shirt and quickly turned both his arms into swart limbs of which any fighting man could be proud. Another look in the mirror showed him the ludicrous contrast between his arms and his face. It was the work of a few moments to match them up. The next time he appraised the tout ensemble in the mirror his dark eyes gleamed out from a face which any Hindu would have accepted as that of a man and a brother.

And now he remembered that part of his legs would also be seen above the cross-garters. He transformed them, too, to the same dusky hue as his arms and face, and the job was done. There was no doubt about it now. He was certainly swarthy.

He strutted up and down for some time, intoning his lines and brandishing an imaginary sword, until the thought struck him that his mother would soon be returning and that it would be wise to remove his make-up.

And now he discovered to his horror that grease-paint is one thing and potassium permanganate solution quite another. Soap and water, of which he was no fonder than any normal boy, and even a painful scarifying with his mother's scrubbing-brush, availed him naught. In the end he was forced to the conclusion that all his efforts were fruitless. Swarthy he was, and swarthy he would apparently remain – perhaps for ever.

What was he to do? His mother must soon be home, and his sin would be manifest. He clattered out of the door, hurried down Fern Street, and along Carlisle Road to the chemist's shop.

Mester Simmonite seemed not to view the matter in quite the serious light that it warranted. Indeed, and much to Moss's annoyance, he seemed to find it a matter for mirth. Worse still, he had no solution to offer, real or figurative.

'A'm sorry, son, there's nowt A can do! But yer can tell yer Mam not to fret – it'll wear off in a week or two!'

With dragging steps Moss made his way home, where the glow of gas-light in the kitchen told him that his mother had returned. He lifted the sneck as quietly as he could, slipped into the kitchen, and seated himself on the sofa at the back of the room, as far from the revealing light as possible.

His very silence and circumspection undid him.

Lizzie's approach to child-psychology was a simple one. Children who were unusually quiet were usually up to no good, and her son's efforts to efface himself aroused her darkest suspicions. She crossed the kitchen, placed a finger under his chin, and lifted his head.

All was revealed.

To say that she was appalled would be an under-statement, and, in the face of her evident displeasure and her determination to know the why and the wherefore, Moss had no defence. Haltingly, he recounted the whole story, ending in tones of reassurance.

'It's awright, though, Mam! Mester Simmonite says as it'll wear off in a week or two!'

Lizzie, scornful of such easy assurances, dragged him off forthwith to the chemist's shop, but with no better result than her son. Slowly, and with the utmost reluctance, she began to accept that she must put up with a gipsy for a son for some time to come.

There was worse to come for Moss at school, where his novel appearance came in for some comment, none of it in terms of approval. Mester Caxton, who might have been expected to support his young pupil's efforts at verisimilitude, seemed to regard Moss's make-up as more appropriate to a nigger-minstrel show than a school play.

But the damage was done, and it was too late now to train an understudy in one of the major speaking parts. The play would have to go ahead with a Moor for a Norman knight.

Nor was that all. As the day of the performance drew near, Mester Simmonite's diagnosis was confirmed, and the dye began to fade. But it did so unevenly. Moss's face now promised on the night of the performance a more convincing clown than a knight in cardboard armour.

Fortunately for Moss's peace of mind, once the dye began to fade it proceeded apace. By the time the Inspector saw Standard Five's performance there was nothing in the appearance of any member of the cast to raise an inspectorial eyebrow.

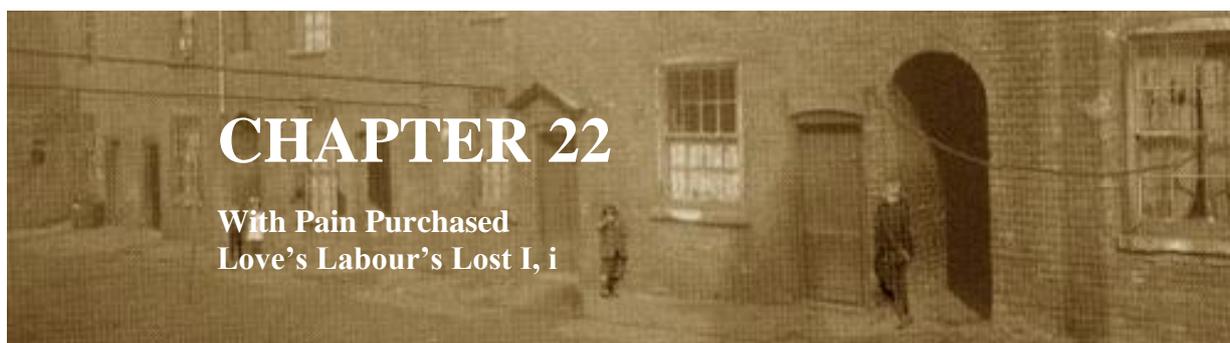
For his part, the Inspector watched the performance with evident interest. Then, remembering his responsibilities, he gave it as his opinion to Miss Hardy that – while this sort of thing was all very well in its way, you understand – he hoped that it would not cause the school to lose sight of the need to concentrate on essentials. By which the Headmistress understood him to mean the three R's, pure and undefiled.

Miss Hardy in her turn lost no time in conveying the Inspector's verdict to Mester Caxton, leaving him to ponder with no little bitterness on the supreme impossibility of pleasing some people even part of the time, and especially those dressed in a little brief authority. Thus, he told himself, as others of his calling have done so often, is good teaching bedevilled by petty officialdom.

Moss had enjoyed it all hugely, as indeed had his proud parents. And, as his father said later, there's not many lads 'as had a good tannin' as lasted t'best part of a month.

But as all these things were being enacted in the realm of make-believe, other events of greater moment were taking place on the stage of the real world. While Moss's attentions were entirely absorbed in his own strutting and fretting, another ceremony was being planned, unheralded and deliberately unsung.

For the first time since he had left his cot, Moss now had a bed to himself. In a brief and surreptitious ceremony in a register office, James Garrett and Elsie Hanwell were joined in matrimony, and now occupied the sacred front-room until other arrangements could be made.



CHAPTER 22

With Pain Purchased
Love's Labour's Lost I, i

It is never a simple matter for weak and sinful man to know what it is that the Lord requires of him. What, by all outward signs, he seemed to require of the faithful at Hensley Street Chapel was unremitting activity.

The more ardent among the chapelgoers took closely to heart the invitation from Thessalonians, 'Let us not be weary in well doing', so that scarcely a week of the year passed without the latest example of their activity appearing on the bill-board outside their small Shiloh. And what such posters most often trumpeted was an 'Effort'. There was the Sunday School Effort, the Bible Class Effort, the Young Married Women's Effort (though, strangely, no counterpart from the Young Married Men), the Missionary Effort, and other such delights in considerable number, all adding up to an assurance that no single member of the congregation (with the apparent exception of the Young Married Men), between lisping his first sentence and breathing his last, should avoid his rightful share of the Lord's work.

These 'Efforts' were not remarkable for variety or originality. There was a noticeable lack of histrionic talent, linked to an equally noticeable abundance of convincing performance. Fortunately, the chapelgoing audiences were not in the least hypercritical, and were always as ready to applaud the abysmal as the passable.

Each of these offerings had – at least, for those regular chapelgoers who furnished the bulk of the audience and who aimed to miss no single Effort in the year – a characteristic flavour which was at once recognized and favourably compared with that of last year's Effort. This was somewhat surprising, for it would have taken a keen observer to notice any marked difference between the two, each year merely adding a little to the sum of tradition.

If, for example, it should happen to be the Primary School Effort, the audience could expect to hear from thirty-odd piping throats that Jesus wanted them for a sunbeam to shine for him each day – a desire which every single parent found fully justified, and which some of their teachers in their less happy dealings with these offspring were tempted to reflect might have been a good thing.

If the occasion chanced to be the Young Men's Effort, the audience was sure to be regaled by an earnest young man with a head of hair that might have been French-polished, and wearing a suicidally stiff collar, who asked – in tones the composer had surely not intended – that he be allowed like a soldier to fall. An encore being not only expected, but prepared for, he would then inform his audience, teetotallers to a man and a woman, that in cellar cool at ease he sat upon a barrel resting, 'Companion mine the good red wine, Life's richest, truest blessing.' The assembled worshippers, who knew beyond all possible doubt that those lips had never touched liquor stronger than the Sacrament

wine, seemed to see nothing in the least incongruous in his choice of songs, and applauded him to the echo.

And, though these occasions were traditionally familiar and predictable, there was always the chance of something unexpected, something that might pass into the folk-lore of Efforts, to be recalled in years to come with suitable embroidery. It might well be the case that the possibility of such an incident persuaded at least some of the audience to attend, and perhaps even the positive likelihood of it in such surroundings, much as a circus audience watches with bated breath the antics of the acrobat, half hoping he will fall off.

There was, for instance, the memorable night when Cecil Fanshawe, playing his familiar and well-loved role of Simon the stone-breaker, threw down his property rock with such gusto that it went clean through the wooden stage and took Cecil with it. Or the night that Ted Castledine, already growing rather elderly to be playing juvenile leads, and labouring under the handicap of having that very day had every tooth in his head extracted, delivered himself of the memorable line, 'Come, let us be happy while we are young and good-looking!' and then leered at the audience winningly, and brought the house down.

Moss was well acquainted with Efforts, having taken part in them from his earliest days. But this year, the year of his tenth birthday, was different. It was the year of his first entirely solo performance since the disaster of the Anniversary Sermons.

He was carefully schooled by Miss Crowson, not only in the task of committing his lines to memory, but also in the important technique of 'expression'. This technique, obviously designed to guard against delivery in a dull monotone, and invented by some person deservedly forgotten, consisted of delivering lines of verse (and even, God forbid, prose) in a succession of vocal scales and arpeggios which owed much to music but little to meaning.

Moss, ever unquestioning in such matters, soon picked up the trick of it and in short order became appallingly adept. Three years later, he was to assault the ears of a schoolmaster with a rendering of Portia's speech on the subject of mercy which was rich in 'expression'. He met with disparagement where he had expected praise, and with the amused comment from old Hatband, 'Garrett, it is a novel experience for me to hear dear old Will's words set to extempore music! However, I'm bound to say, it is not an experience I would wish to repeat!'

But every theatrical experience rests upon a bargain or two struck between actor and audience. Hensley Street audiences would have been disappointed in a recitation entirely free of 'expression'. And, since learning by rote held no terrors for Moss, it allowed him ample time for the acquisition and abundant practice of the technique, to such excruciating effect that by the time the Effort was but a week away, he was barely comprehensible.

Then, on the Sunday morning before the Tuesday evening's Effort, he woke with an aching head and a sore throat, and all his efforts to conceal the state of his health were vain. By tea-time, he was clearly running a temperature.

Lizzie applied one of her sovereign remedies, half external, half internal. She smothered a piece of brown paper with goose grease and applied the plaster to her son's chest. Then she applied the medicament to a slice of bread and persuaded him to eat it, despite his lumpy throat. It was all to no avail. By the time morning came he was clearly worse, and

by Tuesday morning past caring, though as a rule he rather liked being coddled. Lizzie reluctantly decided that the case was beyond her ability, and that the doctor would have to be called.

It was no easy decision to take, for the doctor must be paid, and there were no funds in the Garretts' always meagre coffers for such a purpose. Jim had been out of work now for some months, and had gradually exhausted the statutory supports. Having passed the stage when he was still eligible for 't 'Dole', he was now on the more stringent 'tea-leaf' – the local euphemism for Parish Relief.

But when Lizzie called him and made known Moss's condition, he hesitated only for a moment. Then he nodded his head, and decided to cross the bridge of payment when he came to it.

Doctor Pringle came, and diagnosed tonsillitis. There was not the slightest chance that Moss would be well enough to leave his bed for some days, and he was rather short with Lizzie on the subject of 'auld wives' nostrums'.

But worse was to come. In his view, Moss's adenoids and tonsils called for surgical treatment – or, as Maggie conveyed it later to Maggie Willett, ' 'e's got ter 'ave 'is tonsils an' addynoids out.'

Hospitals were far from being a familiar experience in the Garrett household, nor for that matter in the homes of their neighbours. Moss's terror was almost equalled by that of his mother, though she strove with might and main not to let him see it. Like most of those among whom she lived, her knowledge of anatomy was less than rudimentary, and ignorance added greatly to her fears. So her comforting words to Moss rang hollow, and failed to carry much conviction, and Moss continued to suffer from the horrors whenever his thoughts refused to be diverted from the coming ordeal.

So when at last the dreaded letter in the manilla envelope arrived, it was his father who broke the news to him.

'Na, look 'ere, son! Nex' Monday yer Mam's gunna tek yer ter t'Royal Infirmary! An' A want yer ter promise me summat –'

'Yes, Dad?'

'A know yer upset about it, an' so's yer Mam. So A don't want yer ter goo upsettin' 'er even more, d'y'understand? So purra good face on it, theer's a good lad, eh?'

'Yes, Dad!'

'It could be a lot worse, yer know. Yer'll not be stoppin' theer! T'doctor says as yer'll be 'ome bi tea-time!'

Moss's eyes searched his father's face for any sign of duplicity, found none there, and, a little comforted, lay back again. Then a sudden thought struck him, and he looked up at his father again.

'Dad, shall A 'ave to goo in t'ambulance?'

It was one aspect of the operation about which he had mixed feelings. To most children in Grimesmoor an ambulance was a rare and an awesome sight, at once fascinating and

terrifying, and Moss was no exception. He recalled the few occasions on which he had seen an ambulance in Fern Street – few indeed, for in those days of ‘voluntary’ hospitals, ambulances were called out only in cases of dire emergency or death-threatening disease; in short, when there was no other conceivable way of getting the patient to hospital

Nor was Grimesmoor’s traditional aversion to ambulances a completely unfounded delusion, born of ignorance and superstition. All too often the presence of such a conveyance outside a neighbour’s home told a sad tale of hope all but abandoned after home nursing had done all it could. And all too often the ambulance parked at the door was but a prelude to a hearse.

So one part of his mind had been dwelling on the unknown horrors of ambulances, about which he was completely ignorant; another part had toyed, though only for a moment, with the glory such an experience might bring.

He remembered Bernard Simmonite being taken away on a stretcher, covered with a scarlet blanket, to some unknown destination known as ‘t’fever ’ospital’, there to be subjected to some process called ‘Izolation’. Moss had no more idea than his friends what unspeakable things such a term could imply, but he could scarcely doubt the truth of the story, since the ambulance reeked of the stuff called ‘Izal’.

‘No!’ said his father, ‘you n’ yer Mam’ll be goin’ on t’tram!’

Moss was not altogether certain whether to be reassured or disappointed. Certainly a journey by tram was a rare and delightful event, especially if he were allowed to travel on the front of the top deck, open to the winds of Heaven and the one the tram itself generated. But, though relieved to find that there was no fear of his being kept in hospital, he felt vaguely let down. It would, after all, have been something to brag about later, and to travel to something as important as an operation surely justified something more impressive than a City of Hallamside Corporation tramcar, something a shade less *infra dig*.

But his father’s next words at once cheered his flagging spirit.

‘Yer’ll be comin’ ’ome in a taxi, though! Yer Auntie Moll gev yer Mam some money ter bring yer back from t’Infirmery that rooad!’

A taxi? Now that was more like it! If he must be called upon to submit to something as vile as an operation, it surely justified transport as unique and dignified as a taxi. He had never been in a taxi in his life, nor, he was certain, had any of his friends. An operation and a taxi ride, and both in the same day would provide bragging-fuel for some time to come. He barely heard his father reminding him to thank Auntie Moll when he saw her.

The day of the operation dawned cold and raw, with a biting East wind. Lizzie could not hide her concern, for the doctor had stressed the importance of keeping the patient warmly wrapped on the journey home, and the thought of that long walk down the Infirmery drive haunted her throughout her preparations.

But when she confided her anxiety to Maggie Willett, she was met with scorn.

‘Nowt o’ t’sooart! Don’t talk so soft, love. Get t’taxi to come up ter t’door o’ t’ospital!’

‘A can’t do that!’ said Lizzie. ‘they all queue up at t’gates!’

‘Awright,’ said Maggie. ‘then leave your Moss inside wheer it’s warm an’ goo down and tell t’taxi to come up an’ fetch ‘im! They tek t’ambulances up ter t’door, don’t they? Yer can ride back up t’drive yerself then!’

All this merely provided Lizzie with more cause for concern. She had estimated as nearly as she could the cost of a taxi from the Infirmary to Fern Street, and, knowing her sister-in-law’s tendency to skin a flea where financial arrangements were concerned, she was apprehensive. Maggie brushed her fears aside.

‘Yer’ve got plenty, Lizzie! When yer get back in t’taxi to get your Moss, jus’ tell ‘im wheer yer want ter goo, and see as ‘e dun’t start tekking yer t’long way round. An’ don’t give ‘im a penny moor than that ‘alf-crown!’

Lizzie weighed the advice, and was a little comforted. Something told her that things were not quite done this way in the world of taxis, but it sounded sensible advice.

Then a fresh anxiety invaded her mind.

‘Eigh up, Maggie, love! What about t’tip?’

Maggie’s lip curled.

‘tip? Tip? Nowt o’ t’sooart! Yer not joy-ridin’, yer know, tekkin’ your Moss ter t’Infirmary! Tip? A tell yer, any driver as expected a tip from me’d gerra flea in ‘is ear! An’ quick!’

No news could be kept secret long in Grimesmoor, no light hidden under a bushel. There was a fine muster of neighbours in the street to witness the departure of Moss and his mother for the hospital. They saw them off with repeated good wishes, assurances that they would be back before they knew it, that all would undoubtedly be well, and that God was good. This last and oft-repeated remark seemed to come most readily to the lips of those who never saw the inside of church or chapel, except at christenings and weddings.

Now that the hour was upon him, Moss was subdued. Had he been less preoccupied, he might have seen that his white-faced mother was in no better case, and needed, like him, little persuasion to break into sobs.

All this time, the prospect of the operation had bulked so large in Moss’s thoughts that he had supposed that he would be alone in facing this hour of trial. He was astonished therefore to see, gathered in the echoing Out-Patients hall of the Infirmary, children to the number of some two dozen or more, all of them, he supposed. there for the same purpose.

Few of them seemed to be viewing the event with any more equanimity than he, and, for their age, they were an unwontedly silent group. Like him, they looked about them anxiously for any sight of fearsome instruments and the like terrors and, on the whole, their mothers were in no better case.

The business of signing the consent forms finally snapped their tenuous self-control, for it required their mothers to leave them unattended in the hall while they were signing the forms in the nearby office. Moss’s carefully-schooled self-restraint was sorely tested as one child after another broke out into loud wails, which grew even louder when their mothers did not appear at once.

Moss was no less sorely tried than they, but, remembering his father's words, he managed somehow to fight back the tears, and the effort was clear to Lizzie as soon as she came through the door. She noticed the down-drawn brows and the half-sowl, and read it aright. At once she sat beside him, slipping an arm about his shoulders, and Moss, for the first and last time that day, gave way to his grief.

Wisely, Lizzie cradled his head more tightly and was silent, and by the time his name was called his tears had ceased. She gave him a quick hug, surreptitiously wiped his eyes under the pretence of wiping his nose, turned his face to hers and gave him a reassuring smile.

At the behest of the nurse in her crackling white apron and blue dress, he took off his jacket and jersey and his stout boots, and left them with his mother. Then he padded off after the nurse's retreating figure, the swing doors closed behind him, and Lizzie, close to tears herself, settled herself for what she had been warned would be a long wait.

On this occasion, Moss's natural curiosity was wholly suspended by ignorance, and by fear of the horrors he might see if he looked too closely. He looked neither to right nor left as he followed the nurse, but, even so, he could not miss the word 'theatre', and his heart all but stopped, only seeming to beat again when the door was left behind and instead he was led into a large hall.

The next moment the nurse had turned him round sharply so that he faced her, and quickly tied round his neck a kind of short white cape which fairly reeked of hospitals.

Moss's jaw ached with his shivering, and he yawned hugely. The nurse, seeing this, and becoming aware of his manful efforts to control his feelings, smiled encouragingly, patted his shoulder, and told him to climb up on to the table. He did so, lay back as she had indicated, and quickly closed his eyes.

'there's a good boy!' a deep voice said, but Moss' eyes remained tightly closed.

The next moment he became aware of something soft and light covering his face. Startled, he opened his eyes, and the same deep voice said,

'Close your eyes, there's a good boy, and breathe deeply!'

At once there was an overwhelming smell, the same that he had noticed on the white cape. He gasped, and began to choke and to struggle. Immediately, strong hands clamped down upon his wrists, and held them firmly down on the table.

The choking increased. There came the rushing of a mighty wind. He was turning over, faster and faster, inside an enormous echoing drum. The roaring grew. And now it came in huge waves out of some vast wilderness, breaking on remote shores over aeons and aeons of time, drowning him. Then he knew no more.

When he began to come to himself again, his first sensation was of distant voices calling across vast frontiers of space. At length these voices became clearer, until at last they resolved themselves into the cries of children.

'Nurse! Nurse! A want a drink o' water!'

Almost conscious now, he became aware of an intolerable ache in his throat. Then he drifted away again and, when he next became aware of his surroundings the ache was

there again, but this time accompanied by the certainty that he was going to be sick. He tried to struggle to a sitting position, and the next moment an arm was slipped about him and held him as he vomited into the basin.

He lay back again, the ache in his throat now worse than ever. Someone bent over him – a nurse, her face professionally calm and not yet quite clear to his swimming vision.

‘A want me Mam!’ he whispered.

The head above him nodded.

‘You just have a little sleep now, there’s a good boy! And when you wake up your mother will be here!’

Obediently, Moss closed his eyes, and the sounds of ‘Nurse! Nurse!’ faded as he drifted into sleep.

When he woke again, his mother was there as the nurse had promised she would be.

‘Come on, love!’ she said. ‘It’s time to go ’ome!’

Home . . .

He began to scramble up from the straw palliasse on which he was lying, but his head swam again. He reeled and seemed about to fall, and Lizzie was obliged to support him until he was a little recovered.

He looked dizzily around him. The floor was covered with straw-filled mattresses, on each of which lay a child. Some, like him, were now beginning to sit up, some still lay sleeping, and some were crying noisily. A few, like Moss, were white and silent.

His one overwhelming desire was to be out of this awful place and home. Home, where Mam would surely be able to do something about this intolerable ache in his throat.

He remembered little of the journey. There was a pad of clean linen over his mouth, held in place by a woollen scarf. He was to hold it to his face tightly, his mother said, so as ‘not to catch cowl’. He was scarcely conscious of the long-anticipated ride in the taxi. He wanted only to be home, home.

But when at last he was tucked up in his own bed, where Mam could minister to him, to his and to her heart’s content, he found that not even Mam could do anything for the ache in his throat.



CHAPTER 23

Once Again Assail Your Ears
Hamlet I, i

Neither Moss nor his parents were aware at the time of the link between the event at the Infirmary and the ‘gatherings’, as Lizzie called them, in Moss’s ears in no long time after the operation.

Some six or seven months later, Moss awoke one morning earlier than was usual with a feeling of discomfort in his right ear. He lay for a time, weighing the chances of turning it to his advantage as an excuse for missing school that day.

He knew that his mother’s first act of diagnosis would be to feel his forehead. He tried it now. Nothing to hope for there. Next she would look at his throat, but there was not yet enough light in the sky to allow him to put that to the test. He coughed violently, hoping that the strain on his tubes might affect his vocal powers to the point where his condition would be audible. But, though he coughed long and loud, the only result was a certain amount of discomfort, and no semblance of a convincing croak.

Earache’s useless, he thought. Nobody can see it. Nobody but me can feel it. And even he had to admit that he couldn’t fairly claim that the pain was unbearable. On the contrary, there were times when he was hardly aware of it any more. It was just a mild sort of uneasiness in that region that might, or might not, develop into something worth-while.

Suddenly he recalled that it was Tuesday, and Tuesday meant Composition. He liked Composition. It gave him a chance to show off his spelling, and to earn plaudits from Mester Caxton.

He decided on the instant not to be ill after all.

But, by the time he came home from school at noon, it was not with Mester Caxton’s praise that his ears were ringing. There was no need for pretence now. His right ear really was hurting, and he told his mother so.

Lizzie looked in his ear, but saw nothing there that might help her to establish whether or no this was genuine other than a slightly pink appearance. This, she told herself, might well be just another of those flights of fancy which her son dreamed up whenever, for some reason, he wanted to get out of going to school. Clearly, a little guile was called for.

‘What did yer get inter trouble for this mornin’, our Moss?’

His wide eyes and his blank stare convinced her even before his reply.

‘Nowt, Mam!’

And then, quickly becoming aware of his mother's drift, he added,

'An' A got nine out o' ten fer mi division sums!

'An' what lessons 'ave yer got this afternoon then?' she asked.

But she had lost the advantage, and he was ready for her now.

'It's Drawin', Mam! An' Mester Caxton says as if A do another good drawin' this week, 'e'll purrit on t'wall again like 'e did las' week! An' then A'll get another two team marks!'

Lizzie, still not wholly convinced, took another look in his ear, and pronounced judgement.

'Well, A can't see owt! But A'll purra drop o' warm olive oil in it. An' if it in't better termorrer, we'll see!'

And with that Moss had to be satisfied.

Indeed, he was not entirely displeased, for with a little luck he might make the next morning's performance convincing enough to be allowed to stay at home. Wednesday was Drill, and he hated Drill, especially on cold days. Perhaps, he thought, it might be a good idea to start tilling the ground now, in the hope of harvest on the morrow.

But next morning there was no need for pretence or play-acting. He awoke even earlier than on the previous morning, and by now the pain was severe.

Lizzie, still a trifle suspicious, looked in his face and saw there the unmistakable signs of distress. She warmed a little olive oil, poured it into his ear with a spoon, and tucked him up in bed once more.

For a time, the warmth from the oil and the flannel pad which his mother had told him to hold against his ear, gave him a short respite, and his tears ceased to flow. If only the pain would go away, he told himself, he might begin to enjoy the luxury of lying in his bed while the school bell summoned his less fortunate schoolmates to their lessons – and especially the hated Drill in the schoolyard.

But the pain grew worse, and now there was no place for doubt or suspicion in any mind. As the hours passed, the agony increased in intensity until his entire world was condensed into a core of pain in his right ear, a core that throbbed and throbbed with every pulse of his life-blood, every throb bringing a stab of pain worse than the last.

Lizzie's concern was now real. In desperation she tried every remedy she could think of to ease his pain, even, on Maggie Willett's recommendation, putting the core of a boiled onion inside his ear.

But all to no avail. Nothing helped. Her son, all too clearly in a state of high fever, and moaning continually in his suffering, was beyond all she could do. She was powerless to relieve his suffering, even by a little, and her own mental suffering almost matched his physical torment. When Jim at last returned from his chapel duties, it was not only Moss whose eyes were wet.

Through the hours of that long night he slept not for a moment, tossing and turning in his bed in an unavailing effort to escape the torment which racked him. And now there were not even brief periods of respite when the agony abated sufficiently to promise him a little peace. He grew light-headed, moaning and sobbing in the grip of the unremitting pain. Lizzie, heavy-eyed by his bed, was in despair, her only comfort Jim's promise to get the doctor, choose what, if in the morning Moss was no better.

And then, as the first light of day began to show round the edge of the curtains, his cries ceased abruptly. Inside his head there was a sound as of a rushing mighty wind and the bursting of a great barrier, and the pain ceased on the instant.

There was no need to tell his mother that the agony had passed. His face was eloquent testimony.

She gently removed the pad from his ear, saw the flow of blood and pus, and knew that, after all, Jim's promise to get the doctor in would have to be honoured.

Doctor Pringle snapped the catches of his bag, and reached into his inner breast-pocket for his pen. Lizzie, mindful of his reproaches on the previous visit, of the added cost of this visit, and of her long night's vigil, thought he had given her son but scant attention.

'Is there owt as A can do, doctor?' she asked.

'Aye, there is that!' he replied. 'Ye can tak this bairn doun tae the Infirmary, and let the ENT folk tak a look at the lad! I'll drop them a line, an' they'll tell ye when ye're to go! An' if ye'll tak my advice, ye'll no be meddlin' wi' auld wives' nostrums!'

The unknown initials and the knowledge that they had not done with hospitals served merely to add to Lizzie's terrors. Apparently becoming aware of the fear and the bone-weariness in her, the doctor spoke more kindly,

'Ye've no cause for alarm, Mrs Garrett,' he said. 'the bairn has otitis media – middle ear disease. He's in need of a course o' treatment, that's a'! I'll just give ye a note to tak wi' ye!'

Lizzie, somewhat reassured, saw the doctor out and returned to her son.

Now that the agony was over, or so it seemed, Moss could begin to enjoy bad health. All that day he luxuriated in his mother's obvious and loving concern, and her almost constant presence. The only cloud in a blue sky was that mention of the hospital. The memory of the operation was still close enough to make any idea of a return to those portals far from palatable. So, as the day drew near for his visit he began once more to suffer all the terrors which an active imagination could provide.

He pictured white-coated figures probing inside his ear with fearsome instruments, every touch of which brought exquisite pain. He told himself that after all, perhaps, his ear might still get quite better and the dreadful prospect which disturbed his nights and haunted his days might then vanish.

It was a white-faced boy who passed through the swing-doors on the appointed morning, though had he been less concerned with his own apprehension, he might have seen that his mother was in little better case than he. For Moss's powers of imagination were entirely inherited.

But in the event his fears proved groundless. True, those same white-coated figures might have been a little gentler with an ear still tender, but at least there were none of the dreadful instruments which he had pictured.

There was one horrid moment when the doctor pushed a small funnel into his ear, apparently in preparation to pour in some scalding medicament which would have him screaming in pain. But all that happened was that he looked down the funnel with a light, ingeniously reflected from a lamp before him on to a mirror strapped to his forehead. Then he grunted, scribbled something on a pad, called a nurse to him, and handed Moss and the slip over to her, without in all this addressing one word to a living soul. All rather disappointing, thought Moss, now that the danger seemed safely past.

But he was not yet free to go. First, the nurse must instruct his mother in the treatment she was to give.

He was told to bend his head over and turn it sideways, and to hold an enamelled kidney-bowl against his neck, so that the nurse could drop some kind of liquid in his ear. Moss, who had thought himself out of danger, now cringed, expecting the agony to begin after all.

But all that happened was a gentle bubbling and tickling in his ear, intriguing and by no means unpleasant. Then the nurse said, in a cool, matter-of-fact tone,

‘Now just hold it like that for a little while, and keep your head quite still.’

And now she turned to Lizzie, and showed her how to make the probe by twisting a small piece of cotton wool round the roughened surface of an aluminium wire. Then, turning back to Moss, she gently inserted the probe, quickly mopped out his ear, repeated the whole process until she appeared satisfied that the ear was now quite dry, put in a loose plug of cotton wool, and all was over.

Moss, who had missed not one particle of the entire performance, was jubilant now that all his perils were over. Far from being called on to bear unspeakable pain, he had been provided with enough raw material for bragging to last him for many a day. He would make his schoolmates green with envy of his unique adventure, at least until his frequent recitals had driven them all into a state of apathy.

He could hardly wait to get home and begin.

Had he known that this experience was but the start of some twenty years of recurrent trouble, his spirit might have been less exalted. Throughout that long period his life was to be punctuated by bouts of agony so intense that he came to an intimate knowledge of pain. And only the later curiosity of a scientist brooding over an apparent accident to a culture plate, that same man’s blessed sense of wonder and the need to find an answer, would eventually bring Moss’s long ordeal to an end.

Aye, God moves in a mysterious way, said Lizzie, when that day came. Moss, remembering the days and nights of pain, nodded, but said nothing.



Apart from family good wishes, birthdays met with scant ceremony in the Garrett household. But, though Moss's tenth birthday went all but uncelebrated, even within the immediate family circle, it did not go unheralded by the teachers at Grimesmoor Council School. Uplifted by a hope of success that 1927 seemed to promise, they said to themselves that this year, surely this year, we shall have at least one 'scholarship'.

In those days, the bye-laws of the Corporation of the City of Hallamside required every child not a congenital idiot to be presented, between his tenth and eleventh birthdays for examination in the skills of Arithmetic (Practical), Arithmetic (Intelligence) and English Composition. The claim for this requirement was that it would provide equality of opportunity — as, indeed, it did, if only in the sense that a time of famine provides equal opportunities to starve.

The process of selection consisted of two hurdles, at the first of which a great many more than half the contenders were eliminated. From those who remained, a second hurdle weeded out a fraction almost as large. And so, at the close of this somewhat unequal contest, by an exercise of tactics which only political man could devise, exactly the right number of children survived to fill that year's vacancies in the first year of the Hallamside Secondary Schools.

It was sufficient comment on the system that, in the ten years of Moss's life, with one or two remarkable exceptions, the only children to have been selected from Grimesmoor Council School came from his own family. An impartial observer might have concluded that a sieve so rigorous in its ability to eliminate the unwanted could only have been justified by those who believed that whatever is, is right.

In such a situation, even Moss's candidature could not be regarded as a walk-over, the more so as he suffered from a besetting weakness in Arithmetic (Intelligence), a weakness which was a source of gnawing anxiety to Mester Caxton. That good man could only conclude that the very gifts of imagination and invention which guaranteed his pupil a comfortable passage through the English Composition paper seemed to become a positive drawback when he was faced with the Arithmetic (Intelligence) paper, persuading him that this particular branch of knowledge was for him a quickset hedge, impossible to penetrate.

Most of these problems, Moss discovered, seemed to concern themselves with taps emptying and filling tanks, often and confusingly at the same time (though for what conceivable purpose was never revealed), or with workmen digging trenches (though for what purpose was never stated), or with agricultural workers ploughing fields (a human activity which could hardly have been more remote from the restricted bounds of Moss's experience).

For the majority of children presented for the first examination, such problems were simply not understood and just as simply not attempted. Moss's case was quite different, in that he laboured under two difficulties which had apparently never before been experienced by any of the Grimesmoor Council School teachers.

The first was a tendency to invest these tapsters, workmen, and labourers in the field with the riches of his own imagination so that they became not abstract questions to do with arithmetic, but beings of flesh and blood with human problems. This first tendency led inevitably to the second in that these problems inevitably took on all the aspects of intractability, illogicality and waywardness which characterize most human problems, and which have plagued mankind since the dawn of time. These questions in Arithmetic (Intelligence), in short, seemed to Moss infinitely more difficult than in fact they were.

He met with no such difficulty in Arithmetic (Practical), and in Composition he was gifted beyond his years. But his blind spot over Arithmetic (Intelligence) so vexed the spirit of Mester Caxton that in the end, with a sense of despair which overcame all his natural reluctance, he took the burden to the Headmistress and laid it on her shoulders.

Miss Hardy was not at all displeased to be provided with the chance to show one of the younger generation of teachers what was what, and Moss found himself going to the Headmistress every morning for special coaching. The result was that Miss Hardy found his grasp of arithmetical problems less secure than she would have liked, and little firmer after two or three weeks.

To do the Headmistress and Mester Caxton justice, it was not the sort of dilemma they faced every day. It was one thing to deal, as they were often called upon to deal, with those for whom the problem was that the subject was beyond their grasp, and quite another to deal with Moss, who seemed intent on finding difficulties where none existed.

Logic and reason seemed to insist that a child so gifted in all the processes of Arithmetic ought surely to take such problems in his stride. His knowledge of tables was all that it should be; his handling of the processes of calculation was invariably sure; and if he stumbled at all it was only through carelessness or over-confidence – neither of which was likely to happen in the conditions of a formal examination.

In the end, headmistress and teacher decided that only familiarity would breed contempt, and they abandoned all the mechanical processes, and provided Moss with a steady diet of problems, set by Mester Caxton new every morning, and eventually taxing Moss's powers of imagination and invention to the limit.

It ought to have worked, but it did not.

All the Headmistress's long experience and the admittedly shorter span of Mester Caxton's had advised them that this way lay salvation. But, as the number of problems increased, Moss – out of sheer boredom – retreated ever deeper into the realms of imagination. And as his flights of fancy soared higher, so did the number of errors in Arithmetic (Intelligence).

In the end, Miss Hardy did something quite unprecedented. Remembering her meeting with his mother, she decided to call on these reserves. She sent for Lizzie, explained the difficulty, and recruited her help. Lizzie, somewhat out of her depth, did her best to grasp the nub of the problem, but was reluctant at first to commit herself to something she so

little understood. But when she realized that all she had to do was to supervise Moss's nightly forays into the lists against arithmetical problems, she agreed readily enough.

All unwittingly, Miss Hardy had solved the problem, though by no means in the way she had intended. Secure in the knowledge that Moss was concentrating nightly on Arithmetic (Problems) she left Mester Caxton to turn the spotlight on to Arithmetic (Practical) and English Composition.

For two or three nights Lizzie honoured her side of the bargain and kept her son up to the collar, but then the care of her own concerns, which were Legion in such a large family, occupied her mind to the exclusion of Moss's homework. Left to himself, Moss began to fill the time with matters of greater interest to him than problems in arithmetic, with the result that his errors became fewer in number, and Miss Hardy could congratulate herself upon her acumen and rub into Mester Caxton the humiliation of knowing that he had failed to find an answer.

If the truth be told, she was not at all concerned with Moss's chances in the Preliminary Examination, since brethren much weaker than he had surmounted that hurdle without too much difficulty. It was the Final 'Merit' Examination, to which so few were called and even fewer chosen, which haunted her.

And as expected, Moss passed the Preliminary Examination without faltering in his stride. There now remained only the spectre of the Merit Examination.

And then, when they could all have looked to relax a little in their efforts before girding their loins for the last and best effort, another and altogether unexpected spectre arose to haunt them. The chronic ear disease from which he now suffered flared up again and began to take further toll of his health.

Matters came to a head with the visit of the school doctor – the only medico most Grimesmoor children were ever likely to meet. Moss was well accustomed to these visits, and to the doctor's evident satisfaction with his patient's rude health, at a time when ignorance and poverty were sapping the strength of many of his fellows.

But this year was different.

The doctor looked at the narrow chest, the too-prominent rib cage and the deep-set eyes. Then he carefully inspected Moss's ears, consulted his notes, looked dubious and muttered darkly. He asked Lizzie the traditional questions about his diet, a necessary inquisition when so many children subsisted on little more than white bread, margarine and condensed milk.

By now, Lizzie was thoroughly alarmed. The doctor had wielded his stethoscope on Moss's chest so long and so thoroughly that one dread word was beginning to take shape in her mind despite all her frenzied efforts to brush it aside. Nor could her lips frame the question which she knew she ought to ask.

The doctor looked up, caught her eye, and saw the signs of distress with which he was all too familiar. He knew only too well what the unspoken question was, and the dread word it concealed.

‘Mrs – er – Garrett, isn’t it? Well now, Mrs Garrett –!’ He broke off and made sign to the nurse to take Moss away and to supervise the putting on of his outer garments. Then he turned again to Lizzie.

‘the boy’s in need of building up,’ he said. ‘Let me see – he was born during the War, wasn’t he?’

Lizzie could only nod, and wonder where all this was leading.

‘Yes,’ he said, ‘children of that period often did get a bad start. Rationing and all that – ‘

He paused, and Lizzie’s heart seemed too big for her breast. She dreaded what was to come, but could not find the courage to frame the question.

‘I’m going to recommend him for a spell at Netherside,’ he said.

Then he saw the naked fear leap into Lizzie’s eyes, and hastened to reassure her.

‘It’s all right, Mrs Garrett! Really it is! There’s no question of TB, I’m quite sure! Consumption, you know. Nothing of the kind! But the lad is run down, and in that condition he’s always at risk. So what we’ll do is build him up with rest and a good diet, and give him some treatment for that ear. He’ll probably be away for a month or two, but I think we can promise you he’ll be a new boy when we’ve done with him! I’ll see to it that arrangements are made, and we’ll let you know as soon as we can find him a bed!’

Now dressed, and ignorant of all this, Moss waited with ill-concealed impatience for his mother. So, when at last she appeared, he quite failed to notice the bright spot in her cheek. Nor was he aware, trotting beside her as they made their way back to Fern Street, that she was quiet and withdrawn.

Wisely, Lizzie decided that she would leave the breaking of the news to her son in the capable hands of Jim. He, as she had expected, took the news calmly enough, called Moss in from play, and broke the tidings to him.

Moss searched the faces of his father and mother to see how he ought to receive the news. Once assured that there was no prospect of ‘operations’, his first alarm was quickly dispelled. Indeed, he began to see positive advantages in the turn of events, the bragging over the operation having worn thin. He knew that this was an experience which none of his schoolmates had enjoyed, and he would now be able to brag freely in the absence of any threat of personal danger.

But in their preoccupation with this new turn of events, both Lizzie and Jim had overlooked one important matter. The Merit Examination was only weeks away, and if Moss should be called into the convalescent hospital before that date, his chance of a scholarship might be lost, and with that his place at a Secondary School. Not knowing what they or anyone could do in this situation, they experienced all the torments of those who must suffer events rather than mould them to their own desires.

In the event, their fears were groundless. On the very morning of the Merit Examination, there came a card from Netherside Hospital to say that they would expect Moss in ten days’ time.

The news bade fair to drive from Moss’s mind all thought of lesser considerations such as a Merit Examination. He scarcely noticed the strange surroundings of the school where

the examination was to be held, the white apprehensive faces around him, the unnaturally subdued air of the playground before they were called in to take their places, the solemn hush of the examination room, and the virgin sheets of paper and the printed examination sheet. His imagination was busily toying with thoughts of 't'Ospital', the opportunities for boasting when eventually he came home, and the curdling then of his schoolfellows' blood with gory and quite imaginary detail.

So the fears of Miss Hardy and her staff were set at naught. He read the questions, and found them almost beneath his notice, they were so easy. He had a moment's panic when the Arithmetic (Intelligence) papers were given out, but his other preoccupations helped him to the realization that the questions were by no means insoluble.

By the time he arrived home, he had all but dismissed such trifling matters from his mind, and astonished his parents by his casual responses to their questioning about the examination. Moss was much too busily occupied in the glorious contemplation of other and more exciting events to come.

However, on his arrival at Netherfield Hospital, one new and unpleasant experience threatened to mar the vision splendid.

It happened when Moss had been at the hospital for some ten days – days in which the pangs of homesickness had tormented his days and troubled his nights. Only now was he at last beginning to enjoy himself.

And then this new threat to his peace of mind raised its head.

Out of bed for the first time, he joined his fellow-patients in the day-room for the daily dispensation of cod-liver oil in a spoon which might have been designed to stretch small mouths to the fullest. Then, with no warning, there was made known to him a form of terror every bit as bad as that he had experienced at the Chinese laundry. And with its coming the pangs of homesickness returned with added poignancy.

Between the ward in which he slept and the day-room which was used whenever the weather prevented the boys from taking their pre- and post-prandial rest out of doors there was a corridor painted in the universal cream and green. In itself, this corridor was harmless enough, but halfway along it there was a door with a glass panel curtained on the inside, in the manner of the Chinaman's door, and housing, he was now told, of all unspeakable things 'a real skellington'.

Worse than that, so the tale ran, boys who misbehaved themselves might find themselves thrust into this room and the door locked behind them, there to reflect upon their misdeeds, and repent.

Even if the stories had been true, and Moss had no way of knowing that they were not, the chances of his being so incarcerated were slight, for he was a biddable child, given to high spirits from time to time but entirely free from low cunning or deliberate misdemeanour. But nothing could lessen his terror of that appalling room, and his determination to pass that door with all possible speed was renewed every time he was required to traverse that corridor.

On his second morning out of bed he was doing this when he was stopped by a peremptory command.

‘Garrett! Don’t you know the rule about this corridor to the day-room? If I find you running again, you’ll be punished, do you hear?’

His mind, already preoccupied with the terror of that room, registered that word ‘punish’. His blood seemed to freeze in his veins, and he stopped dead in his tracks and turned to face the sister.

Something in his rigid stance and his eyes caught Sister Appleyard’s attention. She drew near, and saw that he was trembling uncontrollably.

‘What is it, Garrett?’ she asked. ‘What is the matter?’

But Moss could not persuade his quivering lips to frame a sound. After a moment or two, she took him by the arm, led him to her office and quickly wormed out of him his horror of that room.

Her first thought was to take him there and show him how groundless were his fears. But she had not practised as a children’s nurse all these years without learning something about the ways of boys. She had a shrewd suspicion that, once his fears were exorcised, he might well join the ranks of those who took delight in curdling the blood of newcomers.

So that afternoon, in the presence of them all, she introduced them to ‘Charlie’, the anatomical model once used in lectures in the days before Netherside became a convalescent hospital. Familiarity, as she had suspected, soon brought not contempt but interest. Her decision, taken on the spur of the moment, had been an inspiration. In one blow, ‘Charlie Wag’, as he came to be known, was stripped of his terrors, as was the room where he had lain unused for years.

But out of that incident there was still better to come for Moss. Sister Appleyard began to pay more attention to this dark-eyed ten-year-old in the navy blue jersey and the sensible boots. The next time the weather was fine and warm and the boys sat outside in their deck-chairs, protected with a blanket, she deputed to another task one of the two nurses whose duty it was to supervise them, took her place facing the ranks of boys, and called to Moss to bring his chair and blanket and to sit beside her.

He noticed that she had on her knee a newspaper – always a magnet to Moss, but at home almost always monopolized by his father. It had been folded so as to allow Sister Appleyard to pass the time with the crossword puzzle, something of a novelty at that time. She noticed his interest, and soon discovered that this new craze was not yet familiar to him. He had to be introduced to the puzzle, and, to her astonishment, grasped the idea almost before she had done explaining it. He astounded her even further by the speed with which he solved the first of the clues.

And so in this strange fashion another encounter happened in Moss’s life-long love-affair with words and their ways. Neither he nor Sister Appleyard could have foreseen the consequences which were to flow from her sudden impulse to learn more about him. Years later, Moss would recall the incident of his first crossword with wry amusement, and Sister Appleyard with affectionate gratitude.

Slowly, as the days of that Summer slipped by, Moss filled out and his cheeks took on the glow of health. The day came at last when he was pronounced fit to leave, and to give place to another casualty of the lean years.

His delight at being home again knew no bounds, but there was more delight to come. Before she removed her coat or took the fearsome hat-pin from her sombre Sunday hat, Lizzie said to her son,

‘A’ve got summat fer you, our Moss! A surprise!’

He was all agog on the instant, and looked around him for the evidence of the surprise. He had not expected delights beyond this homecoming.

He turned back to look at his mother and saw that she was holding out a letter. His face spoke his bewilderment, for never before in his life had he received a letter. So he was not at all astonished to see that the envelope was addressed not to him, but to his mother and father.

‘Goo on, then!’ she said, beaming. ‘Oppen it!’

He opened it as he was bidden.

And then he learned to his utter delight that indeed, indeed, Grimesmoor Council School could boast at least one Scholarship that year.



CHAPTER 25

In Mine Innocence
King Henry VI Part II, IV. iv.

The Hallamside Central Secondary School was all and more than Moss had expected.

A less partial observer might have judged it a fairly ordinary example of Late-Victorian Municipal Neo-Gothic. To Moss it was the stuff of his dreams. Had it not been for the sinking feeling in the pit of his stomach which had lodged itself there some days earlier and troubled his nights ever since, he would have said that he was in the seventh heaven of delight.

He had to admit that one alarming aspect of this new experience was the absence of a single familiar face in all the hundreds milling around him. There was no denying that, from being cock of the walk at Grimesmoor Council School the only one to win a Scholarship that year, here he was a small fish indeed in a very large pool.

Even the bright new badge which, only yesterday, his mother had sewn on to the pocket of his new blazer – a badge which was a most impressive creation of bright golden wire on a green felt ground – seemed no longer to have quite the lustre it had so far enjoyed, now that it was but one among so many of its kind, and most of them no longer so conspicuous by virtue of their newness.

He came to himself at the sound of a voice raised above the general din.

‘Eigh up, thee!’

He looked round to see whom the stranger intended by this. The call was repeated, and this time there could be no mistake. Hesitantly, he moved towards the speaker, a pimply youth who stood head and shoulders higher than himself.

‘What’s thi name, then?’ asked the stranger.

‘Moss Garrett!’ he replied, too quietly amid the other sounds.

‘What’s tha say?’ the stranger said, his drawn brows heavy with menace. ‘Oppen thi gob, will tha?’

Moss repeated his name, this time more distinctly.

The stranger nodded, and turned to his mates.

‘What did A tell yer?’ he said. ‘their kid’s Jimmy Garrett!’ And turning towards Moss again with an ugly leer, he added, ‘that’s reight, innit?’

It was Moss’s turn to nod. The speaker turned again to his friends.

‘A were reight, weren’t A? Their kid’s Jimmy Garrett. ‘Im as were in t’football team! Tha knows, ’im as were foorced to get married!’

The others sniggered, and one made a gesture which Moss failed to understand but which he took to be lewd. Knowing nothing of what the words implied, nor why they should occasion laughter, he yet felt that in some way his family’s honour had been impugned. His protest was a reflex action.

‘No, ’e warn’t! What’s tha know about it, any rooad|?’

Almost casually, but in the most explicit language, the ring-leader told him all he knew, in words so obscene that the blood rushed to Moss’s cheeks. His embarrassment was clearly noticed at once, and gave rise to even more hilarity. Fight was clearly out of the question against such odds, and Moss resorted to flight. As he fled, a fresh stream of obscenities followed him.

Coming from the home which had sheltered him from such a world since his birth, Moss was all unprepared for such an encounter. It left him white and shaking, and with a brain whirling in confusion. The leaden weight in his stomach had now given place to a burning sense of outrage in his breast, a feeling which threatened to choke him, and to possess him to his very finger-tips. And, mingled with this sense of utter outrage, there was another sense of ignorance and bewilderment that blinded him to all that went on around him that day. It was as well that he was one of some hundred and thirty new boys, or he must surely have drawn the eyes of authority to his complete lack of attention to matters in hand.

All through the long hours of that day he raged inwardly at the thought that this day, the day he had longed for so ardently, should have been so befouled. But, as the time dragged on, he began to see that this new experience had been like no other and similar distasteful event in more ways than one, in that even the thought of home, which at all other times had represented warmth and a safe haven, now offered him no relief. His sense of outrage there would be no less than here. Only this time there would be no one to turn to for comfort, no one to confide in.

As he made his way home with dragging steps, he came slowly to a decision which grew in strength as home drew nearer, and which offered him if not comfort, at least the hope of enlightenment. Hardly stopping to answer his mother’s enquiry as to how his first day had gone, he dropped his new satchel inside the kitchen door and set off for the new public library at Frith Park. His mother, supposing that he had gone off to find friends and astonish them with his exploits at his new school, shook her head in amusement.

But Moss had other designs. Books had been the key to most of the knowledge he had so far acquired. Now they must unlock the door to this mystery.

A later age would find it inconceivable that a boy could grow to Moss’s years in total ignorance of what later came to be known as ‘the facts of life’. But in this Moss was far from unique. Such topics, he was still to learn, were the stuff of an adult conspiracy which had deprived many such innocents abroad of any knowledge of one of life’s central mysteries.

Perhaps, as he later came to accept, he had been fortunate in being thus shocked into his own exploration of that mystery. In the end, his knowledge was fuller and freer than that of the foul-mouthed adolescent who, all unwittingly, had set his feet upon this path.

For now his mind was fully intent. Now he would know the truth of it. All of it . . .

Once inside the library he sought out the catalogue index, which eventually pointed him to the Anatomy and Physiology shelf. But here his search was thwarted, for the adult conspiracy extended even to this fount of knowledge. Every book which promised to be informative had been removed from the shelves and replaced with a book-sized block of wood, bearing on its edge, as on the spine of a book, its title and author, its classification number, and a typewritten footnote to the effect that the book itself could be obtained on application at the counter.

Moss had a suspicion not far short of near-certainty that any enquiry he might make at the counter would be abortive. He set himself to search through every book which did not hide under a bushel this secret of life.

His search was quite unavailing, until at last, in a bulky medical dictionary, his efforts were, at least in part, rewarded. Hefting the huge tome in his arms he carried it to one of the study-tables, and settled to his task.

He began with the subject of Marriage, but nowhere was it described as 'forced'. However, there was a cross-reference to Childbirth at the end of the passage. To this he turned eagerly, and began to read.

How much time passed as he read on and on he had no idea, but at length he came to himself to find his scalp icy cold and the knuckles of his hands white with tension.

Never as long as he lived would he forget his initiation into this central mystery. Never, never could he have believed that Mam had gone through this appalling ordeal to give him life.

But it must be so. He had too much faith in books to believe that in so important a matter they would give him the lie. This, he told himself incredulously, this is the truth. This is birth.

And even now he knew only the final act. He was still no wiser about the rest of the mystery. But he had now taken in all and more than he could endure at one time. He replaced the book on the shelf and saw that it was long past tea-time.

He remembered nothing of the journey home, except to wonder as he turned into Fern Street how he would contrive to face Mam, knowing what he now knew.

But when he lifted the sneck, it was to find his mother not at home. The only members of the family there to greet him were his brother Jimmy and his new bride, the unwitting causes of Moss's agony. Jimmy, not normally the most perceptive of humankind, could not fail to notice his brother's over-bright eye and flushed cheek, and asked the cause. To his utter astonishment, his question was answered with a flood of tears.

'Come in 'ere, our Moss,' he said, leading the way to the front room, where Elsie was knitting baby garments. She raised her eyebrows in enquiry but, before she could give it words, Jimmy indicated with a discreet signal that he would prefer to speak to Moss alone. With commendably quick understanding, she picked up her work and slipped from the room.

'What's up then, our Moss?' Jimmy asked, with unaccustomed tenderness.

Only a mind tormented beyond his endurance could have persuaded Moss to confide in his brother, for such subjects were simply not mentioned in the Garrett household, and most assuredly not before children.

‘It were a lad at school!’ Moss blurted out. ‘E were on about you, our Jimmy!’

Jimmy’s face was a study in bewilderment.

‘About me?’

‘E said as our Jimmy were foorced to get married!’

There was a long silence. So long indeed that Moss lifted his head to look at his brother. There was something in Jimmy’s expression that was new to Moss, something that combined sadness with a sort of wry amusement.

‘Dun’t tha know owt about them things then, our Moss?’ Jimmy asked at length, and saw at once that there was but one answer.

Jimmy, himself only a little less new to this awful mystery than his brother, and still moved at times to a sense of wonder by it all, could not resist Moss’s unspoken plea for help and enlightenment. Quietly, awkwardly at first, but then with an oddly dignified simplicity he told him the little he needed to know to put this morning’s stark obscenities into a proper perspective.

Moss sat with bowed head throughout the recital, for he found it impossible to look into his brother’s face. But once he had heard him out, he knew that his instinctive protest had been right. The stranger’s lewd comments had been as far from the heart of the truth as his own earlier and appalling ignorance. And, knowing that, he was a little comforted.

When he had told his brother as much as he deemed needful, Jimmy reached out a hand which was none too steady and scuffed Moss’s hair. Without a word Moss ran to the door, scrambled up the stairs to his own room, and sat on the edge of the bed, striving to come to terms with the thing that has troubled the mind of man since time began.

But at least, and much to his astonishment, he slept long and deeply that night, though he had gone to bed fasting. When he awoke, it was to an instant recollection of the previous day’s events, and to the knowledge that today and all the days to come would be different from all the days of his ignorance.

Suddenly, and without warning, a wave of feeling swept over him, leaving him shaken to his depths. He recalled all that he had learned yesterday about man’s birth in woman’s travail, and was abashed by the prospect of meeting his mother again in the light of that overwhelming knowledge.

But when, at her insistent call, he made his way downstairs, it was all right. Mam was still Mam. Only he was different.

This time he responded more readily to her enquiries about his new school, until she remembered with a start that it was time for him to be off. Much to her astonishment, when he was finally ready he kissed her ‘Goodbye’, without the need of a reminder.

He’s growing up, she thought, as the door closed behind him, and wondered briefly how much longer he might remain innocent and unspoilt.