

The Young Visitors or, Mr. Salteena's Plan

By

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PREFACE

The "owner of the copyright" guarantees that "The Young Visitors" is the unaided effort in fiction of an authoress of nine years. "Effort," however, is an absurd word to use, as you may see by studying the triumphant countenance of the child herself, which is here reproduced as frontispiece to her sublime work. This is no portrait of a writer who had to burn the oil at midnight (indeed there is documentary evidence that she was hauled off to bed every evening at six): it has an air of careless power; there is a complacency about it that by the severe might perhaps be called smugness. It needed no effort for that face to knock off a masterpiece. It probably represents precisely how she looked when she finished a chapter. When she was actually at work I think the expression was more solemn, with the tongue firmly clenched between the teeth; an unholy rapture showing as she drew near her love chapter. Fellow-craftsmen will see that she is looking forward to this chapter all the time.

The manuscript is in pencil in a stout little note book (twopence), and there it has lain for years, for though the authoress was nine when she wrote it she is now a grown woman. It has lain, in lavender as it were, in the dumpy note book, waiting for a publisher to ride that way and rescue it; and here he is at last, not a bit afraid that to this age it may appear "Victorian." Indeed if its pictures of High Life are accurate (as we cannot doubt, the authoress seems always so

sure of her facts) they had a way of going on in those times which is really surprising. Even the grand historical figures were free and easy, such as King Edward, of whom we have perhaps the most human picture ever penned, as he appears at a levée "rather sumshiously," in a "small but costly crown," and afterwards slips away to tuck into ices. It would seem in particular that we are oddly wrong in our idea of the young Victorian lady as a person more shy and shrinking than the girl of to-day. The Ethel of this story is a fascinating creature who would have a good time wherever there were a few males, but no longer could she voyage through life quite so jollily without attracting the attention of the censorious. Chaperon seems to be one of the very few good words of which our authoress had never heard.

The lady she had grown into, the "owner of the copyright" already referred to, gives me a few particulars of this child she used to be, and is evidently a little scared by her. We should probably all be a little scared (though proud) if that portrait was dumped down in front of us as ours, and we were asked to explain why we once thought so much of ourselves as that.

Except for the smirk on her face, all I can learn of her now is that she was one of a small family who lived in the country, invented their own games, dodged the governess and let the rest of the world go hang. She read everything that came her way, including, as the context amply proves, the grown-up novels of the period. "I adored writing and used to pray for bad weather, so that I need not go out but could stay

in and write." Her mother used to have early tea in bed; sometimes visitors came to the house, when there was talk of events in high society: there was mention of places called Hampton Court, the Gaiety Theatre and the "Crystale" Palace. This is almost all that is now remembered, but it was enough for the blazing child. She sucked her thumb for a moment (this is guesswork), and sat down to her amazing tale.

"Her mother used to have early tea in bed." Many authors must have had a similar experience, but they all missed the possibilities of it until this young woman came along. It thrilled her; and tea in bed at last takes its proper place in fiction. "Mr Salteena woke up rrather early next day and was delighted to find Horace the footman entering with a cup of tea. Oh thank you my man said Mr Salteena rolling over in the costly bed. Mr Clark is nearly out of the bath sir announced Horace I will have great pleasure in turning it on for you if such is your desire. Well yes you might said Mr Salteena seeing it was the idear." Mr Salteena cleverly conceals his emotion, but as soon as he is alone he rushes to Ethel's door, "I say said Mr Salteena excitedly I have had some tea in bed."

"Sometimes visitors came to the house." Nothing much in that to us, but how consummately this child must have studied them; if you consider what she knew of them before the "viacle" arrived to take them back to the station you will never dare to spend another week-end in a house where there may be a novelist of nine years. I am sure that

when you left your bedroom this child stole in, examined everything and summed you up. She was particularly curious about the articles on your dressing-table, including the little box containing a reddish powder, and she never desisted from watching you till she caught you dabbing it on your cheeks. This powder, which she spells "ruge," went a little to her head, and it accompanies Ethel on her travels with superb effect. For instance, she is careful to put it on to be proposed to; and again its first appearance is excused in words that should henceforth be serviceable in every boudoir. "I shall put some red ruge on my face said Ethel because I am very pale owing to the drains in this house."

Those who read will see how the rooms in Hampton Court became the "compartments" in the "Crystale" Palace, and how the "Gaierty" Hotel grew out of the Gaiety Theatre, with many other agreeable changes. The novelist will find the tale a model for his future work. How incomparably, for instance, the authoress dives into her story at once. How cunningly throughout she keeps us on the hooks of suspense, jumping to Mr Salteena when we are in a quiver about Ethel, and turning to Ethel when we are quite uneasy about Mr Salteena. This authoress of nine is flirting with her readers all the time. Her mind is such a rich pocket that as she digs in it (her head to the side and her tongue well out) she sends up showers of nuggets. There seldom probably was a novelist with such an uncanny knowledge of his characters as she has of Mr Salteena. The first line of the tale etches him for all time: "Mr Salteena was an elderly man of 42 and

fond of asking people to stay with him." On the next page Salteena draws a touching picture of himself in a letter accepting an invitation: "I do hope I shall enjoy myself with you. I am fond of digging in the garden and I am parshal to ladies if they are nice I suppose it is my nature. I am not quite a gentleman but you would hardly notice it but can't be helped anyhow." "When the great morning arrived Mr Salteena did not have an egg for his breakfast in case he should be sick on the journey." For my part I love Mr Salteena, who has a touch of Hamlet, and I wished up to the end that Ethel would make him happy, though I never had much hope after I read the description of Bernard Clark's legs.

It is not to be wondered at that Mr Salteena soon grew "rurther jellous" of Bernard, who showed off from the first. "My own room is next the bathroom said Bernard it is decerated dark red as I have somber tastes. The bathroom has got a tip up basin." Thus was Mr Salteena put in his place, and there the cruel authoress (with her tongue farther out than ever) doggedly keeps him. "After dinner Ethel played some merry tunes on the piano and Bernard responded with a rurther loud song in a base voice and Ethel clapped him a good deal. Then Mr Salteena asked a few riddles as he was not musicle." No wonder Mr Salteena went gloomily to bed, not to sleep, but to think out the greater riddle of how to become a gentleman, with which triumphant adventure the book is largely concerned.

To many the most instructive part of the story will be the chapter

entitled "Bernard's Idear." Bernard's "idear" (warmly acclaimed by Ethel) is that she and he should go up to London "for a few weeks gaierty." Something of the kind has often been done in fiction and in guide-books, but never probably in such a hearty way as here. Arrived at the "Gaierty" Hotel Bernard pokes his head into the "window of the pay desk. Have you a couple of bedrooms for self and young lady he enquired in a lordly way." He is told that they have two beauties. "Thank you said Bernard we will go up if you have no objection. None whatever sir said the genial lady the beds are well aired and the view quite pleasant. Come along Ethel cried Bernard this sounds alright eh. Oh quite said Ethel with a beaming smile." He decides gallantly that the larger room shall be hers. "I shall be quite lost in that large bed," Ethel says. "Yes I expect you will said Bernard and now what about a little table d'ote followed by a theatre?"

Bernard's proposal should be carried in the pocket of all future swains. He decides "whilst imbibing his morning tea beneath the pink silken quilt," that to propose in London would not be the "correct idear." He springs out of bed and knocks at Ethel's door. "Are you up my dear? he called. Well not quite said Ethel hastily jumping from her downy nest." He explains his "idear." "Oh hurrah shouted Ethel I shall soon be ready as I had my bath last night so won't wash very much now."

They go up the river in a boat, and after they had eaten and "drunk deeply of the charming viands ending up with merangs and chocklates,"

Bernard says "in a passionate voice Let us now bask under the spreading trees. Oh yes lets said Ethel." "Ethel he murmured in a trembly voice. Oh what is it said Ethel." What it was (as well she knew) was love eternal. Ethel accepts him, faints and is brought back to life by a clever "idear" of Bernard's, who pours water on her. "She soon came to and looked up with a sickly smile. Take me back to the 'Gaierty' Hotel she whispered faintly. With pleasure my darling said Bernard I will just pack up our viands ere I unloose the boat. Ethel felt better after a few drops of champagne and began to tidy her hair while Bernard packed the remains of the food. Then arm in arm they tottered to the boat, I trust you have not got an illness my darling murmured Bernard as he helped her in, Oh no I am very strong said Ethel I fainted from joy she added to explain matters. Oh I see said Bernard handing her a cushion well some people do he added kindly."

"So I will end my chapter," the authoress says; and we can picture her doing it complacently, and slowly pulling in her tongue.

Ethel was married in the Abbey. Her wedding dress was "a rich satin with a humped pattern of gold on the pure white and it had a long train edged with Airum lillies." "You will indeed be a charming spectacle my darling gasped Bernard as they left the shop," and I have no doubt she was. She got many delightful presents, the nicest of all being from her father, who "provided a cheque for £2 and promised to send her a darling little baby calf when ready." This is perhaps the prettiest touch in the story and should make us all take off our hats

to the innocent wondering mind that thought of it.

Poor Mr Salteena. He was at the wedding, dressed in black and crying into his handkerchief. However he recovered to an extent and married Another and had ten children, "five of each," none of them of course equal to Ethel's children, of whom in a remarkably short time there were seven, which the authoress evidently considers to be the right "idear."

It seems to me to be a remarkable work for a child, remarkable even in its length and completeness, for when children turn author they usually stop in the middle, like the kitten when it jumps. The pencilled MS. has been accurately reproduced, not a word added or cut out. Each chapter being in one long paragraph, however, this has been subdivided for the reader's comfort.

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