

V. The Fight For Timothy

Mary's poor pretentious babe screamed continually, with a note of exultation in his din, as if he thought he was devoting himself to a life of pleasure, and often the last sound I heard as I got me out of the street was his haw-haw-haw, delivered triumphantly as if it were some entirely new thing, though he must have learned it like a parrot. I had not one tear for the woman, but Poor father, thought I; to know that every time your son is happy you are betrayed. Phew, a nauseous draught.

I have the acquaintance of a deliciously pretty girl, who is always sulky, and the thoughtless beseech her to be bright, not witting wherein lies her heroism. She was born the merriest of maids, but, being a student of her face, learned anon that sulkiness best becomes it, and so she has struggled and prevailed. A woman's history. Brave Margaret, when night falls and thy hair is down, dost thou return, I wonder, to thy natural state, or, dreading the shadow of indulgence, sleepest thou even sulkily?

But will a male child do as much for his father? This remains to be seen, and so, after waiting several months, I decided to buy David a rocking-horse. My St. Bernard dog accompanied me, though I have always been diffident of taking him to toy-shops, which over-excite him. Hitherto the toys I had bought had always been for him, and as we durst not admit this to the saleswoman we were both horribly self-conscious when in the shop. A score of times I have told him that he had much better not come, I have announced fiercely that he is not to come. He then lets go of his legs, which is how a St. Bernard sits down, making the noise of a sack of coals suddenly deposited, and, laying his head between his front paws, stares at me through the red haws that make his eyes so mournful. He will do this for an hour without blinking, for he knows that in time it will unman me. My dog knows very little, but what little he does know he knows extraordinarily well. One can get out of my chambers by a back way, and I sometimes steal softly--but I can't help looking back, and there he is, and there are those haws asking sorrowfully, "Is this worthy of you?"

"Curse you," I say, "get your hat," or words to that effect.

He has even been to the club, where he waddles up the stairs so exactly like some respected member that he makes everybody most uncomfortable. I forget how I became possessor of him. I think I cut him out of an old

number of Punch. He costs me as much as an eight-roomed cottage in the country.

He was a full-grown dog when I first, most foolishly, introduced him to toys. I had bought a toy in the street for my own amusement. It represented a woman, a young mother, flinging her little son over her head with one hand and catching him in the other, and I was entertaining myself on the hearth-rug with this pretty domestic scene when I heard an unwonted sound from Porthos, and, looking up, I saw that noble and melancholic countenance on the broad grin. I shuddered and was for putting the toy away at once, but he sternly struck down my arm with his, and signed that I was to continue. The unmanly chuckle always came, I found, when the poor lady dropped her babe, but the whole thing entranced him; he tried to keep his excitement down by taking huge draughts of water; he forgot all his niceties of conduct; he sat in holy rapture with the toy between his paws, took it to bed with him, ate it in the night, and searched for it so longingly next day that I had to go out and buy him the man with the scythe. After that we had everything of note, the bootblack boy, the toper with bottle, the woolly rabbit that squeaks when you hold it in your mouth; they all vanished as inexplicably as the lady, but I dared not tell him my suspicions, for he suspected also and his gentle heart would have mourned had I confirmed his fears.

The dame in the temple of toys which we frequent thinks I want them for a little boy and calls him "the precious" and "the lamb," the while Porthos is standing gravely by my side. She is a motherly soul, but over-talkative.

"And how is the dear lamb to-day?" she begins, beaming.

"Well, ma'am, well," I say, keeping tight grip of his collar.

"This blighty weather is not affecting his darling appetite?"

"No, ma'am, not at all." (She would be considerably surprised if informed that he dined to-day on a sheepshead, a loaf, and three cabbages, and is suspected of a leg of mutton.)

"I hope he loves his toys?"

"He carries them about with him everywhere, ma'am." (Has the one we bought yesterday with him now, though you might not think it to look at him.)

"What do you say to a box of tools this time?"

"I think not, ma'am."

"Is the deary fond of digging?"

"Very partial to digging." (We shall find the leg of mutton some day.)

"Then perhaps a weeny spade and a pail?"

She got me to buy a model of Canterbury Cathedral once, she was so insistent, and Porthos gave me his mind about it when we got home. He detests the kindergarten system, and as she is absurdly prejudiced in its favour we have had to try other shops. We went to the Lowther Arcade for the rocking-horse. Dear Lowther Arcade! Ofttimes have we wandered agape among thy enchanted palaces, Porthos and I, David and I, David and Porthos and I. I have heard that thou art vulgar, but I cannot see how, unless it be that tattered children haunt thy portals, those awful yet smiling entrances to so much joy. To the Arcade there are two entrances, and with much to be sung in laudation of that which opens from the Strand I yet on the whole prefer the other as the more truly romantic, because it is there the tattered ones congregate, waiting to see the Davids emerge with the magic lamp. We have always a penny for them, and I have known them, before entering the Arcade with it, retire (but whither?) to wash; surely the prettiest of all the compliments that are paid to the home of toys.

And now, O Arcade, so much fairer than thy West End brother, we are told that thou art doomed, anon to be turned into an eating-house or a hive for usurers, something rankly useful. All thy delights are under notice to quit. The Noah's arks are packed one within another, with clockwork horses harnessed to them; the soldiers, knapsack on back, are kissing their hands to the dear foolish girls, who, however, will not be left behind them; all the four-footed things gather around the elephant, who is overful of drawing-room furniture; the birds flutter their wings; the man with the scythe mows his way through the crowd; the balloons tug at their strings; the ships rock under a swell of sail, everything is getting ready for the mighty exodus into the Strand. Tears will be shed.

So we bought the horse in the Lowther Arcade, Porthos, who thought it was for him, looking proud but uneasy, and it was sent to the bandbox house anonymously. About a week afterward I had the ill-luck to meet Mary's a husband in Kensington, so I asked him what he had called his little girl.

"It is a boy," he replied, with intolerable good-humour, "we call him David."

And then with a singular lack of taste he wanted the name of my boy.

I flicked my glove. "Timothy," said I.

I saw a suppressed smile on his face, and said hotly that Timothy was as good a name as David. "I like it," he assured me, and expressed a hope that they would become friends. I boiled to say that I really could not allow Timothy to mix with boys of the David class, but I refrained, and listened coldly while he told me what David did when you said his toes were pigs going to market or returning from it, I forget which. He also boasted of David's weight (a subject about which we are uncommonly touchy at the club), as if children were for throwing forth for a wager.

But no more about Timothy. Gradually this vexed me. I felt what a forlorn little chap Timothy was, with no one to say a word for him, and I became his champion and hinted something about teething, but withdrew it when it seemed too surprising, and tried to get on to safer ground, such as bibs and general intelligence, but the painter fellow was so willing to let me have my say, and knew so much more about babies than is fitting for men to know, that I paled before him and wondered why the deuce he was listening to me so attentively.

You may remember a story he had told me about some anonymous friend. "His latest," said he now, "is to send David a rocking-horse!"

I must say I could see no reason for his mirth. "Picture it," said he, "a rocking-horse for a child not three months old!"

I was about to say fiercely: "The stirrups are adjustable," but thought it best to laugh with him. But I was pained to hear that Mary had laughed, though heaven knows I have often laughed at her.

"But women are odd," he said unexpectedly, and explained. It appears that in the middle of her merriment Mary had become grave and said to him quite haughtily, "I see nothing to laugh at." Then she had kissed the horse solemnly on the nose and said, "I wish he was here to see me do it." There are moments when one cannot help feeling a drawing to Mary.

But moments only, for the next thing he said put her in a particularly odious light. He informed me that she had sworn to hunt Mr. Anon down.

"She won't succeed," I said, sneering but nervous.

"Then it will be her first failure," said he.

"But she knows nothing about the man."

"You would not say that if you heard her talking of him. She says he is a gentle, whimsical, lonely old bachelor."

"Old?" I cried.

"Well, what she says is that he will soon be old if he doesn't take care. He is a bachelor at all events, and is very fond of children, but has never had one to play with."

"Could not play with a child though there was one," I said brusquely; "has forgotten the way; could stand and stare only."

"Yes, if the parents were present. But he thinks that if he were alone with the child he could come out strong."

"How the deuce--" I began

"That is what she says," he explained, apologetically. "I think she will prove to be too clever for him."

"Pooh," I said, but undoubtedly I felt a dizziness, and the next time I met him he quite frightened me. "Do you happen to know any one," he said, "who has a St. Bernard dog?"

"No," said I, picking up my stick.

"He has a St. Bernard dog."

"How have you found that out?"

"She has found it out."

"But how?"

"I don't know."

I left him at once, for Porthos was but a little way behind me. The mystery of it scared me, but I armed promptly for battle. I engaged a boy to walk Porthos in Kensington Gardens, and gave him these instructions: "Should you find yourself followed by a young woman wheeling a second-hand perambulator, instantly hand her over to the police on the charge of attempting to steal the dog."

Now then, Mary.

"By the way," her husband said at our next meeting, "that rocking-horse I told you of cost three guineas."

"She has gone to the shop to ask?"

"No, not to ask that, but for a description of the purchaser's appearance."

Oh, Mary, Mary.

Here is the appearance of purchaser as supplied at the Arcade:--looked like a military gentleman; tall, dark, and rather dressy; fine Roman nose (quite so), carefully trimmed moustache going grey (not at all); hair thin and thoughtfully distributed over the head like fiddlestrings, as if to make the most of it (pah!); dusted chair with handkerchief before sitting down on it, and had other oldmaidish ways (I should like to know what they are); tediously polite, but no talker; bored face; age forty-five if a day (a lie); was accompanied by an enormous yellow dog with sore eyes. (They always think the haws are sore eyes.)

"Do you know anyone who is like that?" Mary's husband asked me innocently.

"My dear man," I said, "I know almost no one who is not like that," and it was true, so like each other do we grow at the club. I was pleased, on the whole, with this talk, for it at least showed me how she had come to know of the St. Bernard, but anxiety returned when one day from behind my curtains I saw Mary in my street with an inquiring eye on the windows. She stopped a nurse who was carrying a baby and went into pretended ecstasies over it. I was sure she also asked whether by any chance it was called Timothy. And if not, whether that nurse knew any other nurse who had charge of a Timothy.

Obviously Mary suspicioned me, but nevertheless, I clung to Timothy, though I wished fervently that I knew more about him; for I still met that other father occasionally, and he always stopped to compare notes about the boys. And the questions he asked were so intimate, how Timothy slept, how he woke up, how he fell off again, what we put in his bath. It is well that dogs and little boys have so much in common, for it was really of Porthos I told him; how he slept (peacefully), how he woke up (supposed to be subject to dreams), how he fell off again (with one little hand on his nose), but I glided past what we put in his bath (carbolic and a mop).

The man had not the least suspicion of me, and I thought it reasonable to hope that Mary would prove as generous. Yet was I straitened in my mind. For it might be that she was only biding her time to strike suddenly, and this attached me the more to Timothy, as if I feared she might soon snatch him from me. As was indeed to be the case.