

XXI. William Paterson

We had been together, we three, in my rooms, David telling me about the fairy language and Porthos lolling on the sofa listening, as one may say. It is his favourite place of a dull day, and under him were some sheets of newspaper, which I spread there at such times to deceive my housekeeper, who thinks dogs should lie on the floor.

Fairy me tribber is what you say to the fairies when you want them to give you a cup of tea, but it is not so easy as it looks, for all the r's should be pronounced as w's, and I forget this so often that David believes I should find difficulty in making myself understood.

"What would you say," he asked me, "if you wanted them to turn you into a hollyhock?" He thinks the ease with which they can turn you into things is their most engaging quality.

The answer is Fairy me lukka, but though he had often told me this I again forgot the lukka.

"I should never dream," I said (to cover my discomfiture), "of asking them to turn me into anything. If I was a hollyhock I should soon wither, David."

He himself had provided me with this objection not long before, but now he seemed to think it merely silly. "Just before the time to wither begins," he said airily, "you say to them Fairy me bola."

Fairy me bola means "Turn me back again," and David's discovery made me uncomfortable, for I knew he had hitherto kept his distance of the fairies mainly because of a feeling that their conversions are permanent.

So I returned him to his home. I send him home from my rooms under the care of Porthos. I may walk on the other side unknown to them, but they have no need of me, for at such times nothing would induce Porthos to depart from the care of David. If anyone addresses them he growls softly and shows the teeth that crunch bones as if they were biscuits. Thus amicably the two pass on to Mary's house, where Porthos barks his knock-and-ring bark till the door is opened. Sometimes he goes in with David, but on this occasion he said good-bye on the step. Nothing remarkable in this, but he did not return to me, not that day nor next day nor in weeks and months. I was a man distraught; and David wore his knuckles in his eyes. Conceive it, we had lost our dear Porthos--at least--well--something disquieting happened. I don't quite know what to think of it even now. I know what David thinks. However, you shall think as you choose.

My first hope was that Porthos had strolled to the Gardens and got locked in for the night, and almost as soon as Lock-out was over I was there to make inquiries. But there was no news of Porthos, though I learned that someone was believed to have spent the night in the Gardens, a young gentleman who walked out hastily the moment the gates were opened. He had said nothing, however, of having seen a dog. I feared an accident now, for I knew no thief could steal him, yet even an accident seemed incredible, he was always so cautious at crossings; also there could not possibly have been an accident to Porthos without there being an accident to something else.

David in the middle of his games would suddenly remember the great blank and step aside to cry. It was one of his qualities that when he knew he was about to cry he turned aside to do it and I always respected his privacy and waited for him. Of course being but a little boy he was soon playing again, but his sudden floods of feeling, of which we never spoke, were dear to me in those desolate days.

We had a favourite haunt, called the Story-seat, and we went back to that, meaning not to look at the grass near it where Porthos used to squat, but we could not help looking at it sideways, and to our distress a man was sitting on the acquainted spot. He rose at our approach and took two steps toward us, so quick that they were almost jumps, then as he saw that we were passing indignantly I thought I heard him give a little cry.

I put him down for one of your garrulous fellows who try to lure strangers into talk, but next day, when we found him sitting on the Story-seat itself, I had a longer scrutiny of him. He was dandiacally dressed, seemed to tell something under twenty years and had a handsome wistful face atop of a heavy, lumbering, almost corpulent figure, which however did not betoken inactivity; for David's purple hat (a conceit of his mother's of which we were both heartily ashamed) blowing off as we neared him he leapt the railings without touching them and was back with it in three seconds; only instead of delivering it straightway he seemed to expect David to chase him for it.

You have introduced yourself to David when you jump the railings without touching them, and William Paterson (as proved to be his name) was at once our friend. We often found him waiting for us at the Story-seat, and the great stout fellow laughed and wept over our tales like a three-year-old. Often he said with extraordinary pride, "You are telling the story to me quite as much as to David, ar'n't you?" He was of an innocence such as you shall seldom encounter, and believed stories at which even David blinked. Often he looked at me in quick alarm if David said that of course these things did

not really happen, and unable to resist that appeal I would reply that they really did. I never saw him irate except when David was still sceptical, but then he would say quite warningly "He says it is true, so it must be true." This brings me to that one of his qualities, which at once gratified and pained me, his admiration for myself. His eyes, which at times had a rim of red, were ever fixed upon me fondly except perhaps when I told him of Porthos and said that death alone could have kept him so long from my side. Then Paterson's sympathy was such that he had to look away. He was shy of speaking of himself so I asked him no personal questions, but concluded that his upbringing must have been lonely, to account for his ignorance of affairs, and loveless, else how could he have felt such a drawing to me?

I remember very well the day when the strange, and surely monstrous, suspicion first made my head tingle. We had been blown, the three of us, to my rooms by a gust of rain; it was also, I think, the first time Paterson had entered them. "Take the sofa, Mr. Paterson," I said, as I drew a chair nearer to the fire, and for the moment my eyes were off him. Then I saw that, before sitting down on the sofa, he was spreading the day's paper over it.

"Whatever makes you do that?" I asked, and he started like one bewildered by the question, then went white and pushed the paper aside.

David had noticed nothing, but I was strangely uncomfortable, and, despite my efforts at talk, often lapsed into silence, to be roused from it by a feeling that Paterson was looking at me covertly. Pooh! what vapours of the imagination were these. I blew them from me, and to prove to myself, so to speak, that they were dissipated, I asked him to see David home. As soon as I was alone, I flung me down on the floor laughing, then as quickly jumped up and was after them, and very sober too, for it was come to me abruptly as an odd thing that Paterson had set off without asking where David lived.

Seeing them in front of me, I crossed the street and followed. They were walking side by side rather solemnly, and perhaps nothing remarkable happened until they reached David's door. I say perhaps, for something did occur. A lady, who has several pretty reasons for frequenting the Gardens, recognised David in the street, and was stooping to address him, when Paterson did something that alarmed her. I was too far off to see what it was, but had he growled "Hands off!" she could not have scurried away more precipitately. He then ponderously marched his charge to the door, where, assuredly, he did a strange thing. Instead of knocking or ringing, he stood on the step and called out sharply, "Hie, hie, hie!" until the door was opened.

The whimsy, for it could be nothing more, curtailed me of my sleep that night, and you may picture me trying both sides of the pillow.

I recalled other queer things of Paterson, and they came back to me charged with new meanings. There was his way of shaking hands. He now did it in the ordinary way, but when first we knew him his arm had described a circle, and the hand had sometimes missed mine and come heavily upon my chest instead. His walk, again, might more correctly have been called a waddle.

There were his perfervid thanks. He seldom departed without thanking me with an intensity that was out of proportion to the little I had done for him. In the Gardens, too, he seemed ever to take the sward rather than the seats, perhaps a wise preference, but he had an unusual way of sitting down. I can describe it only by saying that he let go of himself and went down with a thud.

I reverted to the occasion when he lunched with me at the Club. We had cutlets, and I noticed that he ate his in a somewhat finicking manner; yet having left the table for a moment to consult the sweets-card, I saw, when I returned, that there was now no bone on his plate. The waiters were looking at him rather curiously.

David was very partial to him, but showed it in a somewhat singular manner, used to pat his head, for instance. I remembered, also, that while David shouted to me or Irene to attract our attention, he usually whistled to Paterson, he could not explain why.

These ghosts made me to sweat in bed, not merely that night, but often when some new shock brought them back in force, yet, unsupported, they would have disturbed me little by day. Day, however, had its reflections, and they came to me while I was shaving, that ten minutes when, brought face to face with the harsher realities of life, we see things most clearly as they are. Then the beautiful nature of Paterson loomed offensively, and his honest eyes insulted over me. No one come to nigh twenty years had a right to such faith in his fellow-creatures. He could not backbite, nor envy, nor prevaricate, nor jump at mean motives for generous acts. He had not a single base story about women. It all seemed inhuman.

What creatures we be! I was more than half ashamed of Paterson's faith in me, but when I saw it begin to shrink I fought for it. An easy task, you may say, but it was a hard one, for gradually a change had come over the youth. I am now arrived at a time when the light-heartedness had gone out of him;

he had lost his zest for fun, and dubiety sat in the eyes that were once so certain. He was not doubtful of me, not then, but of human nature in general; that whilom noble edifice was tottering. He mixed with boys in the Gardens; ah, mothers, it is hard to say, but how could he retain his innocence when he had mixed with boys? He heard your talk of yourselves, and so, ladies, that part of the edifice went down. I have not the heart to follow him in all his discoveries. Sometimes he went in flame at them, but for the most part he stood looking on, bewildered and numbed, like one moaning inwardly.

He saw all, as one fresh to the world, before he had time to breathe upon the glass. So would your child be, madam, if born with a man's powers, and when disillusioned of all else, he would cling for a moment longer to you, the woman of whom, before he saw you, he had heard so much. How you would strive to cheat him, even as I strove to hide my real self from Paterson, and still you would strive as I strove after you knew the game was up.

The sorrowful eyes of Paterson stripped me bare. There were days when I could not endure looking at him, though surely I have long ceased to be a vain man. He still met us in the Gardens, but for hours he and I would be together without speaking. It was so upon the last day, one of those innumerable dreary days when David, having sneezed the night before, was kept at home in flannel, and I sat alone with Paterson on the Story-seat. At last I turned to address him. Never had we spoken of what chained our tongues, and I meant only to say now that we must go, for soon the gates would close, but when I looked at him I saw that he was more mournful than ever before; he shut his eyes so tightly that a drop of blood fell from them.

"It was all over, Paterson, long ago," I broke out harshly, "why do we linger?"

He beat his hands together miserably, and yet cast me appealing looks that had much affection in them.

"You expected too much of me," I told him, and he bowed his head. "I don't know where you brought your grand ideas of men and women from. I don't want to know," I added hastily.

"But it must have been from a prettier world than this," I said: "are you quite sure that you were wise in leaving it?"

He rose and sat down again. "I wanted to know you," he replied slowly, "I wanted to be like you."

"And now you know me," I said, "do you want to be like me still? I am a curious person to attach oneself to, Paterson; don't you see that even David often smiles at me when he thinks he is unobserved. I work very hard to retain that little boy's love; but I shall lose him soon; even now I am not what I was to him; in a year or two at longest, Paterson, David will grow out of me."

The poor fellow shot out his hand to me, but "No," said I, "you have found me out. Everybody finds me out except my dog, and that is why the loss of him makes such a difference to me. Shall we go, Paterson?"

He would not come with me, and I left him on the seat; when I was far away I looked back, and he was still sitting there forlornly.

For long I could not close my ears that night: I lay listening, I knew not what for. A scare was on me that made me dislike the dark, and I switched on the light and slept at last. I was roused by a great to-do in the early morning, servants knocking excitedly, and my door opened, and the dear Porthos I had mourned so long tore in. They had heard his bark, but whence he came no one knew.

He was in excellent condition, and after he had leaped upon me from all points I flung him on the floor by a trick I know, and lay down beside him, while he put his protecting arm round me and looked at me with the old adoring eyes.

But we never saw Paterson again. You may think as you choose.