

MUTABILE SEMPER

She stood on the other side of the garden fence, and regarded me gravely as I came down the road. Then she said, "Hi--o!" and I responded, "Hullo!" and pulled up somewhat nervously.

To tell the truth, the encounter was not entirely unexpected on my part. The previous Sunday I had seen her in church, and after service it had transpired who she was, this new-comer, and what aunt she was staying with. That morning a volunteer had been called for, to take a note to the Parsonage, and rather to my own surprise I had found myself stepping forward with alacrity, while the others had become suddenly absorbed in various pursuits, or had sneaked unobtrusively out of view. Certainly I had not yet formed any deliberate plan of action; yet I suppose I recollected that the road to the Parsonage led past her aunt's garden.

She began the conversation, while I hopped backwards and forwards over the ditch, feigning a careless ease.

"Saw you in church on Sunday," she said; "only you looked different then. All dressed up, and your hair quite smooth, and brushed up at the sides, and oh, so shiny! What do they put on it to make it shine like that? Don't you hate having your hair brushed?" she ran on, without waiting for an answer. "How your boots squeaked when you came down the aisle! When mine squeak, I walk in all the puddles till they stop. Think

I'll get over the fence."

This she proceeded to do in a businesslike way, while, with my hands deep in my pockets, I regarded her movements with silent interest, as those of some strange new animal.

"I've been gardening," she explained, when she had joined me, "but I didn't like it. There's so many worms about to-day. I hate worms. Wish they'd keep out of the way when I'm digging."

"Oh, I like worms when I'm digging," I replied heartily, "seem to make things more lively, don't they?"

She reflected. "Shouldn't mind 'em so much if they were warm and dry," she said, "but--" here she shivered, and somehow I liked her for it, though if it had been my own flesh and blood hoots of derision would have instantly assailed her.

From worms we passed, naturally enough, to frogs, and thence to pigs, aunts, gardeners, rocking-horses, and other fellow-citizens of our common kingdom. In five minutes we had each other's confidences, and I seemed to have known her for a lifetime. Somehow, on the subject of one's self it was easier to be frank and communicative with her than with one's female kin. It must be, I supposed, because she was less familiar with one's faulty, tattered past.

"I was watching you as you came along the road," she said presently, "and you had your head down and your hands in your pockets, and you weren't throwing stones at anything, or whistling, or jumping over things; and I thought perhaps you'd bin scolded, or got a stomachache."

"No," I answered shyly, "it wasn't that. Fact is, I was--I often--but it's a secret."

There I made an error in tactics. That enkindling word set her dancing round me, half beseeching, half imperious. "Oh, do tell it me!" she cried. "You must! I'll never tell anyone else at all, I vow and declare I won't!"

Her small frame wriggled with emotion, and with imploring eyes she jigged impatiently just in front of me. Her hair was tumbled bewitchingly on her shoulders, and even the loss of a front tooth--a loss incidental to her age--seemed but to add a piquancy to her face.

"You won't care to hear about it," I said, wavering. "Besides, I can't explain exactly. I think I won't tell you." But all the time I knew I should have to.

"But I do care," she wailed plaintively. "I didn't think you'd be so unkind!"

This would never do. That little downward tug at either corner of the

mouth--I knew the symptom only too well!

"It 's like this," I began stammeringly. "This bit of road here--up as far as that corner--you know it 's a horrid dull bit of road. I'm always having to go up and down it, and I know it so well, and I'm so sick of it. So whenever I get to that corner, I just--well, I go right off to another place!"

"What sort of a place?" she asked, looking round her gravely.

"Of course it's just a place I imagine," I went on hurriedly and rather shamefacedly: "but it's an awfully nice place--the nicest place you ever saw. And I always go off there in church, or during joggraphy lessons."

"I'm sure it's not nicer than my home," she cried patriotically. "Oh, you ought to see my home--it 's lovely! We've got--"

"Yes it is, ever so much nicer," I interrupted. "I mean"--I went on apologetically--"of course I know your home's beautiful and all that. But this must be nicer, 'cos if you want anything at all, you've only got to want it, and you can have it!"

"That sounds jolly," she murmured. "Tell me more about it, please. Tell me how you get there, first."

"I--don't--quite--know--exactly," replied. "I just go. But generally

it begins by--well, you're going up a broad, clear river in a sort of a boat. You're not rowing or anything--you're just moving along. And there's beautiful grass meadows on both sides, and the river's very full, quite up to the level of the grass. And you glide along by the edge. And the people are haymaking there, and playing games, and walking about; and they shout to you, and you shout back to them, and they bring you things to eat out of their baskets, and let you drink out of their bottles; and some of 'em are the nice people you read about in books. And so at last you come to the Palace steps--great broad marble steps, reaching right down to the water. And there at the steps you find every sort of boat you can imagine--schooners, and punts, and row-boats, and little men-of-war. And you have any sort of boating you want to--rowing, or sailing, or shoving about in a punt!"

"I'd go sailing," she said decidedly: "and I 'd steer. No, you'd have to steer, and I'd sit about on the deck. No, I wouldn't though; I'd row--at least I'd make you row, and I'd steer. And then we'd--Oh, no! I'll tell you what we do! We'd just sit in a punt and dabble!"

"Of course we'll do just what you like," I said hospitably; but already I was beginning to feel my liberty of action somewhat curtailed by this exigent visitor I had so rashly admitted into my sanctum.

"I don't think we'd boat at all," she finally decided. "It's always so wobbly. Where do you come to next?"

"You go up the steps," I continued, "and in at the door, and the very first place you come to is the Chocolate-room!"

She brightened up at this, and I heard her murmur with gusto, "Chocolate-room!"

"It's got every sort of chocolate you can think of," I went on: "soft chocolate, with sticky stuff inside, white and pink, what girls like; and hard shiny chocolate, that cracks when you bite it, and takes such a nice long time to suck!"

"I like the soft stuff best," she said: "'cos you can eat such a lot more of it!" This was to me a new aspect of the chocolate question, and I regarded her with interest and some respect. With us, chocolate was none too common a thing, and, whenever we happened to come by any, we resorted to the quaintest devices in order to make it last out. Still, legends had reached us of children who actually had, from time to time, as much chocolate as they could possibly eat; and here, apparently, was one of them.

"You can have all the creams," I said magnanimously, "and I'll eat the hard sticks, 'cos I like 'em best."

"Oh, but you mustn't!" she cried impetuously. "You must eat the same as I do! It isn't nice to want to eat different. I'll tell you what--you must give me all the chocolate, and then I'll give you--I'll give you

what you ought to have!"

"Oh, all right," I said, in a subdued sort of way. It seemed a little hard to be put under a sentimental restriction like this in one's own Chocolate-room.

"In the next room you come to," I proceeded, "there's fizzy drinks! There's a marble-slab business all round the room, and little silver taps; and you just turn the right tap, and have any kind of fizzy drink you want."

"What fizzy drinks are there?" she inquired.

"Oh, all sorts," I answered hastily, hurrying on. (She might restrict my eatables, but I'd be hanged if I was going to have her meddle with my drinks.) "Then you go down the corridor, and at the back of the palace there's a great big park--the finest park you ever saw. And there's ponies to ride on, and carriages and carts; and a little railway, all complete, engine and guard's van and all; and you work it yourself, and you can go first-class, or in the van, or on the engine, just whichever you choose."

"I'd go on the engine," she murmured dreamily. "No, I wouldn't, I'd--"

"Then there's all the soldiers," I struck in. Really the line had to be drawn somewhere, and I could not have my railway system disorganized and

turned upside down by a mere girl. "There's any quantity of 'em, fine big soldiers, and they all belong to me. And a row of brass cannons all along the terrace! And every now and then I give the order, and they fire off all the guns!"

"No, they don't," she interrupted hastily. "I won't have 'em fire off any guns You must tell 'em not to. I hate guns, and as soon as they begin firing I shall run right away!"

"But--but that 's what they're there for," I protested, aghast

"I don't care," she insisted. "They mustn't do it. They can walk about behind me if they like, and talk to me, and carry things. But they mustn't fire off any guns."

I was sadly conscious by this time that in this brave palace of mine, wherein I was wont to swagger daily, irresponsible and unquestioned, I was rapidly becoming--so to speak--a mere lodger. The idea of my fine big soldiers being told off to "carry things"! I was not inclined to tell her any more, though there still remained plenty more to tell.

"Any other boys there?" she asked presently, in a casual sort of way.

"Oh yes," I unguardedly replied. "Nice chaps, too. We'll have great--"

Then I recollected myself. "We'll play with them, of course," I went on.

"But you are going to be my friend, aren't you? And you'll come in my boat, and we'll travel in the guard's van together, and I'll stop the

soldiers firing off their guns!" But she looked mischievously away, and--do what I would--I could not get her to promise.

Just then the striking of the village clock awoke within me another clamorous timepiece, reminding me of mid-day mutton a good half-mile away, and of penalties and curtailments attaching to a late appearance. We took a hurried farewell of each other, and before we parted I got from her an admission that she might be gardening again that afternoon, if only the worms would be less aggressive and give her a chance.

"Remember," I said as I turned to go, "you mustn't tell anybody about what I've been telling you!"

She appeared to hesitate, swinging one leg to and fro while she regarded me sideways with half-shut eyes.

"It's a dead secret," I said artfully. "A secret between us two, and nobody knows it except ourselves!"

Then she promised, nodding violently, big-eyed, her mouth pursed up small. The delight of revelation, and the bliss of possessing a secret, run each other very close. But the latter generally wins--for a time.

I had passed the mutton stage and was weltering in warm rice pudding, before I found leisure to pause and take in things generally; and then a glance in the direction of the window told me, to my dismay, that it was

raining hard. This was annoying in every way, for, even if it cleared up later, the worms--I knew well from experience--would be offensively numerous and frisky. Sulkily I said grace and accompanied the others upstairs to the schoolroom; where I got out my paint-box and resolved to devote myself seriously to Art, which of late I had much neglected. Harold got hold of a sheet of paper and a pencil, retired to a table in the corner, squared his elbows, and protruded his tongue. Literature had always been his form of artistic expression.

Selina had a fit of the fidgets, bred of the unpromising weather, and, instead of settling down to something on her own account, must needs walk round and annoy us artists, intent on embodying our conceptions of the ideal. She had been looking over my shoulder some minutes before I knew of it; or I would have had a word or two to say upon the subject.

"I suppose you call that thing a ship," she remarked contemptuously.

"Who ever heard of a pink ship? Hoo-hoo!"

I stifled my wrath, knowing that in order to score properly it was necessary to keep a cool head.

"There is a pink ship," I observed with forced calmness, "lying in the toyshop window now. You can go and look at it if you like. D' you suppose you know more about ships than the fellows who make 'em?"

Selina, baffled for the moment, returned to the charge presently.

"Those are funny things, too," she observed. "S'pose they 're meant to be trees. But they're blue."

"They are trees," I replied with severity; "and they are blue. They've got to be blue, 'cos you stole my gamboge last week, so I can't mix up any green."

"Didn't steal your gamboge," declared Selina, haughtily, edging away, however, in the direction of Harold. "And I wouldn't tell lies, either, if I was you, about a dirty little bit of gainboge."

I preserved a discreet silence. After all, I knew she knew she stole my gamboge.

The moment Harold became conscious of Selina's stealthy approach, he dropped his pencil and flung himself flat upon the table, protecting thus his literary efforts from chilling criticism by the interposed thickness of his person. From some-where in his interior proceeded a heart-rending compound of squeal and whistle, as of escaping steam,--long-drawn, ear-piercing, unvarying in note.

"I only just wanted to see," protested Selina, struggling to uproot his small body from the scrawl it guarded. But Harold clung limpet-like to the table edge, and his shrill protest continued to deafen humanity and to threaten even the serenities of Olympus. The time seemed come for a

demonstration in force. Personally I cared little what soul-outpourings of Harold were priated by Selina--she was pretty sure to get hold of them sooner or later--and indeed I rather welcomed the diversion as favourable to the undisturbed pursuit of Art. But the clannishness of sex has its unwritten laws. Boys, as such, are sufficiently put upon, maltreated, trodden under, as it is. Should they fail to hang together in perilous times, what disasters, what ignominies may not be looked for? Possibly even an extinction of the tribe. I dropped my paint brush and sailed shouting into the fray.

The result for a short space hung dubious. There is a period of life when the difference of a year or two in age far outweighs the minor advantage of sex. Then the gathers of Selina's frock came away with a sound like the rattle of distant musketry; and this calamity it was, rather than mere brute compulsion, that quelled her indomitable spirit.

The female tongue is mightier than the sword, as I soon had good reason to know, when Selina, her riven garment held out at length, avenged her discomfiture with the Greek-fire of personalities and abuse. Every black incident in my short, but not stainless, career--every error, every folly, every penalty ignobly suffered--were paraded before me as in a magic-lantern show. The information, however, was not particularly new to me, and the effect was staled by previous rehearsals. Besides, a victory remains a victory, whatever the moral character of the triumphant general.

Harold chuckled and crowed as he dropped from the table, revealing the document over which so many gathers had sighed their short lives out. "You can read it if you like," he said to me gratefully. "It's only a Death-letter."

It had never been possible to say what Harold's particular amusement of the hour might turn out to be. One thing only was certain, that it would be something improbable, unguessable, not to be foretold. Who, for instance, in search of relaxation, would ever dream of choosing the drawing-up of a testamentary disposition of property? Yet this was the form taken by Harold's latest craze; and in justice this much had to be said for him, that in the christening of his amusement he had gone right to the heart of the matter. The words "will" and "testament" have various meanings and uses; but about the signification of "death-letter" there can be no manner of doubt. I smoothed out the crumpled paper and read. In actual form it deviated considerably from that usually adopted by family solicitors of standing, the only resemblance, indeed, lying in the absence of punctuation.

"my dear edward (it ran) when I die I leave all my muny to you my walkin sticks wips my crop my sord and gun bricks forts and all things i have goodbye my dear charlotte when die I leave you my wach and cumpus and pencil case my salors and camperdown my picteres and evthing goodbye your loving brother armen my dear Martha I love you very much i leave you my garden my mice and rabets my plants in pots when I die please

take care of them my dear--" Catera desunt.

"Why, you 're not leaving me anything!" exclaimed Selina, indignantly.
"You're a regular mean little boy, and I'll take back the last birthday present I gave you!"

"I don't care," said Harold, repossessing himself of the document. "I was going to leave you something, but I sha'n't now, 'cos you tried to read my death-letter before I was dead!"

"Then I'll write a death-letter myself," retorted Selina, scenting an artistic vengeance: "and I sha'n't leave you a single thing!" And she went off in search of a pencil.

The tempest within-doors had kept my attention off the condition of things without. But now a glance through the window told me that the rain had entirely ceased, and that everything was bathed instead in a radiant glow of sunlight, more golden than any gamboge of mine could possibly depict. Leaving Selina and Harold to settle their feud by a mutual disinheritance, I slipped from the room and escaped into the open air, eager to pick up the loose end of my new friendship just where I had dropped it that morning. In the glorious reaction of the sunshine after the downpour, with its moist warm smells, bespanglement of greenery, and inspiriting touch of rain-washed air, the parks and palaces of the imagination glowed with a livelier iris, and their

blurred beauties shone out again with fresh blush and palpitation. As I sped along to the tryst, again I accompanied my new comrade along the corridors of my pet palace into which I had so hastily introduced her; and on reflection I began to see that it wouldn't work properly. I had made a mistake, and those were not the surroundings in which she was most fitted to shine. However, it really did not matter much; I had other palaces to place at her disposal--plenty of 'em; and on a further acquaintance with and knowledge of her tastes, no doubt I could find something to suit her.

There was a real Arabian one, for instance, which I visited but rarely--only just when I was in the fine Oriental mood for it; a wonder of silk hangings, fountains of rosewater, pavilions, and minarets. Hundreds of silent, well-trained slaves thronged the stairs and alleys of this establishment, ready to fetch and carry for her all day, if she wished it; and my brave soldiers would be spared the indignity. Also there were processions through the bazaar at odd moments--processions with camels, elephants, and palanquins. Yes, she was more suited for the East, this imperious young person; and I determined that thither she should be personally conducted as soon as ever might be.

I reached the fence and climbed up two bars of it, and leaning over I looked this way and that for my twin-souled partner of the morning. It was not long before I caught sight of her, only a short distance away. Her back was towards me and--well, one can never foresee exactly how one will find things--she was talking to a Boy.

Of course there are boys and boys, and Lord knows I was never narrow. But this was the parson's son from an adjoining village, a red-headed boy and as common a little beast as ever stepped. He cultivated ferrets--his only good point; and it was evidently through the medium of this art that he was basely supplanting me, for her head was bent absorbedly over something he carried in his hands. With some trepidation I called out, "Hi!" But answer there was none. Then again I called, "Hi!" but this time with a sickening sense of failure and of doom. She replied only by a complex gesture, decisive in import if not easily described. A petulant toss of the head, a jerk of the left shoulder, and a backward kick of the left foot, all delivered at once--that was all, and that was enough. The red-headed boy never even condescended to glance my way.

Why, indeed, should he? I dropped from the fence without another effort, and took my way homewards along the weary road.

Little inclination was left to me, at first, for any solitary visit to my accustomed palace, the pleasures of which I had so recently tasted in company; and yet after a minute or two I found myself, from habit, sneaking off there much as usual. Presently I became aware of a certain solace and consolation in my newly-recovered independence of action. Quit of all female whims and fanciful restrictions, I rowed, sailed, or punted, just as I pleased; in the Chocolate-room I cracked and nibbled the hard sticks, with a certain contempt for those who preferred the soft, veneered article; and I mixed and quaffed countless fizzy drinks

without dread of any prohibitionist. Finally, I swaggered into the park, paraded all my soldiers on the terrace, and, bidding them take the time from me, gave the order to fire off all the guns.