

ITS WALLS WERE AS OF JASPER

In the long winter evenings, when we had the picture-books out on the floor, and sprawled together over them with elbows deep in the hearth-rug, the first business to be gone through was the process of allotment. All the characters in the pictures had to be assigned and dealt out among us, according to seniority, as far as they would go. When once that had been satisfactorily completed, the story was allowed to proceed; and thereafter, in addition to the excitement of the plot, one always possessed a personal interest in some particular member of the cast, whose successes or rebuffs one took as so much private gain or loss.

For Edward this was satisfactory enough. Claiming his right of the eldest, he would annex the hero in the very frontispiece; and for the rest of the story his career, if chequered at intervals, was sure of heroic episodes and a glorious close. But his juniors, who had to put up with characters of a clay more mixed--nay, sometimes with undiluted villany--were hard put to it on occasion to defend their other selves (as it was strict etiquette to do) from ignominy perhaps only too justly merited.

Edward was indeed a hopeless grabber. In the "Buffalo-book," for instance (so named from the subject of its principal picture, though indeed it dealt with varied slaughter in every zone), Edward was the

stalwart, bearded figure, with yellow leggings and a powder-horn, who undauntedly discharged the fatal bullet into the shoulder of the great bull bison, charging home to within a yard of his muzzle. To me was allotted the subsidiary character of the friend who had succeeded in bringing down a cow; while Harold had to be content to hold Edward's spare rifle in the background, with evident signs of uneasiness. Farther on, again, where the magnificent chamois sprang rigid into mid-air. Edward, crouched dizzily against the precipice-face, was the sportsman from whose weapon a puff of white smoke was floating away. A bare-kneed guide was all that fell to my share, while poor Harold had to take the boy with the haversack, or abandon, for this occasion at least, all Alpine ambitions.

Of course the girls fared badly in this book, and it was not surprising that they preferred the "Pilgrim's Progress" (for instance), where women had a fair show, and there was generally enough of 'em to go round; or a good fairy story, wherein princesses met with a healthy appreciation. But indeed we were all best pleased with a picture wherein the characters just fitted us, in number, sex, and qualifications; and this, to us, stood for artistic merit.

All the Christmas numbers, in their gilt frames on the nursery-wall, had been gone through and allotted long ago; and in these, sooner or later, each one of us got a chance to figure in some satisfactory and brightly coloured situation. Few of the other pictures about the house afforded equal facilities. They were generally wanting in figures, and even when

these were present they lacked dramatic interest. In this picture that I have to speak about, although the characters had a stupid way of not doing anything, and apparently not wanting to do anything, there was at least a sufficiency of them; so in due course they were allotted, too.

In itself the picture, which--in its ebony and tortoise-shell frame--hung in a corner of the dining-room, had hitherto possessed no special interest for us, and would probably never have been dealt with at all but for a revolt of the girls against a succession of books on sport, in which the illustrator seemed to have forgotten that there were such things as women in the world. Selina accordingly made for it one rainy morning, and announced that she was the lady seated in the centre, whose gown of rich, flowered brocade fell in such straight, severe lines to her feet, whose cloak of dark blue was held by a jewelled clasp, and whose long, fair hair was crowned with a diadem of gold and pearl. Well, we had no objection to that; it seemed fair enough, especially to Edward, who promptly proceeded to "grab" the armour-man who stood leaning on his shield at the lady's right hand. A dainty and delicate armour-man this! And I confess, though I knew it was all right and fair and orderly, I felt a slight pang when he passed out of my reach into Edward's possession. His armour was just the sort I wanted myself--scalloped and fluted and shimmering and spotless; and, though he was but a boy by his beardless face and golden hair, the shattered spear-shaft in his grasp proclaimed him a genuine fighter and fresh from some such agreeable work. Yes, I grudged Edward the armour-man, and when

he said I could have the fellow on the other side, I hung back and said I'd think about it.

This fellow had no armour nor weapons, but wore a plain jerkin with a leather pouch--a mere civilian--and with one hand he pointed to a wound in his thigh. I didn't care about him, and when Harold eagerly put in his claim I gave way and let him have the man. The cause of Harold's anxiety only came out later. It was the wound he coveted, it seemed. He wanted to have a big, sore wound of his very own, and go about and show it to people, and excite their envy or win their respect. Charlotte was only too pleased to take the child-angel seated at the lady's feet, grappling with a musical instrument much too big for her. Charlotte wanted wings badly, and, next to those, a guitar or a banjo. The angel, besides, wore an amber necklace, which took her fancy immensely.

This left the picture allotted, with the exception of two or three more angels, who peeped or perched behind the main figures with a certain subdued drollery in their faces, as if the thing had gone on long enough, and it was now time to upset something or kick up a row of some sort. We knew these good folk to be saints and angels, because we had been told they were; otherwise we should never have guessed it. Angels, as we knew them in our Sunday books, were vapid, colourless, uninteresting characters, with straight up-and-down sort of figures, white nightgowns, white wings, and the same straight yellow hair parted in the middle. They were serious, even melancholy; and we had no desire to have any traffic with them. These bright bejewelled little persons,

however, piquant of face and radiant of feather, were evidently hatched from quite a different egg, and we felt we might have interests in common with them. Short-nosed, shock-headed, with mouths that went up at the corners and with an evident disregard for all their fine clothes, they would be the best of good company, we felt sure, if only we could manage to get at them. One doubt alone disturbed my mind. In games requiring agility, those wings of theirs would give them a tremendous pull. Could they be trusted to play fair? I asked Selina, who replied scornfully that angels always played fair. But I went back and had another look at the brown-faced one peeping over the back of the lady's chair, and still I had my doubts.

When Edward went off to school a great deal of adjustment and re-allotment took place, and all the heroes of illustrated literature were at my call, did I choose to possess them. In this particular case, however, I made no haste to seize upon the armour-man. Perhaps it was because I wanted a fresh saint of my own, not a stale saint that Edward had been for so long a time. Perhaps it was rather that, ever since I had elected to be saintless, I had got into the habit of strolling off into the background, and amusing myself with what I found there. A very fascinating background it was, and held a great deal, though so tiny. Blue and red, like gems. Then a white road ran, with wilful, uncalled-for loops, up a steep, conical hill, crowned with towers, bastioned walls, and belfries; and down the road the little knights came riding, two and two. The hill on one side descended to water, tranquil, farreaching, and blue; and a very curly ship lay at anchor, with one

mast having an odd sort of crow's-nest at the top of it.

There was plenty to do in this pleasant land. The annoying thing about it was, one could never penetrate beyond a certain point. I might wander up that road as often as I liked, I was bound to be brought up at the gateway, the funny galleried, top-heavy gateway, of the little walled town. Inside, doubtless, there were high jinks going on; but the password was denied to me. I could get on board a boat and row up as far as the curly ship, but around the headland I might not go. On the other side, of a surety, the shipping lay thick. The merchants walked on the quay, and the sailors sang as they swung out the corded bales. But as for me, I must stay down in the meadow, and imagine it all as best I could.

Once I broached the subject to Charlotte, and found, to my surprise, that she had had the same joys and encountered the same disappointments in this delectable country. She, too, had walked up that road and flattened her nose against that portcullis; and she pointed out something that I had overlooked--to wit, that if you rowed off in a boat to the curly ship, and got hold of a rope, and clambered aboard of her, and swarmed up the mast, and got into the crow's-nest, you could just see over the headland, and take in at your ease the life and bustle of the port. She proceeded to describe all the fun that was going on there, at such length and with so much particularity that I looked at her suspiciously. "Why, you talk as if you'd been in that crow's-nest yourself!" I said. Charlotte answered nothing, but pursed her mouth up

and nodded violently for some minutes; and I could get nothing more out of her. I felt rather hurt. Evidently she had managed, somehow or other, to get up into that crow's-nest. Charlotte had got ahead of me on this occasion.

It was necessary, no doubt, that grownup people should dress themselves up and go forth to pay calls. I don't mean that we saw any sense in the practice. It would have been so much more reasonable to stay at home in your old clothes and play. But we recognized that these folk had to do many unaccountable things, and after all it was their life, and not ours, and we were not in a position to criticize. Besides, they had many habits more objectionable than this one, which to us generally meant a free and untrammelled afternoon, wherein to play the devil in our own way. The case was different, however, when the press-gang was abroad, when prayers and excuses were alike disregarded, and we were forced into the service, like native levies impelled toward the foe less by the inherent righteousness of the cause than by the indisputable rifles of their white allies. This was unpardonable and altogether detestable. Still, the thing happened, now and again; and when it did, there was no arguing about it. The order was for the front, and we just had to shut up and march.

Selina, to be sure, had a sneaking fondness for dressing up and paying calls, though she pretended to dislike it, just to keep on the soft side of public opinion. So I thought it extremely mean in her to have the earache on that particular afternoon when Aunt Eliza ordered the

pony-carriage and went on the war-path. I was ordered also, in the same breath as the pony-carriage; and, as we eventually trundled off, it seemed to me that the utter waste of that afternoon, for which I had planned so much, could never be made up nor atoned for in all the tremendous stretch of years that still lay before me.

The house that we were bound for on this occasion was a "big house;" a generic title applied by us to the class of residence that had a long carriage-drive through rhododendrons; and a portico propped by fluted pillars; and a grave butler who bolted back swing-doors, and came down steps, and pretended to have entirely forgotten his familiar intercourse with you at less serious moments; and a big hall, where no boots or shoes or upper garments were allowed to lie about frankly and easily, as with us; and where, finally, people were apt to sit about dressed up as if they were going on to a party.

The lady who received us was effusive to Aunt Eliza and hollowly gracious to me. In ten seconds they had their heads together and were hard at it talking clothes. I was left high and dry on a straight-backed chair, longing to kick the legs of it, yet not daring. For a time I was content to stare; there was lots to stare at, high and low and around. Then the inevitable fidgets came on, and scratching one's legs mitigated slightly, but did not entirely disperse them. My two warders were still deep in clothes; I slipped off my chair and edged cautiously around the room, exploring, examining, recording.

Many strange, fine things lay along my route--pictures and gimcracks on the walls, trinkets and globular old watches and snuff-boxes on the tables; and I took good care to finger everything within reach thoroughly and conscientiously. Some articles, in addition, I smelt. At last in my orbit I happened on an open door, half concealed by the folds of a curtain. I glanced carefully around. They were still deep in clothes, both talking together, and I slipped through.

This was altogether a more sensible sort of room that I had got into; for the walls were honestly upholstered with books, though these for the most part glimmered provokingly through the glass doors of their tall cases. I read their titles longingly, breathing on every accessible pane of glass, for I dared not attempt to open the doors, with the enemy encamped so near. In the window, though, on a high sort of desk, there lay, all by itself, a most promising-looking book, gorgeously bound. I raised the leaves by one corner, and like scent from a pot-pourri jar there floated out a brief vision of blues and reds, telling of pictures, and pictures all highly coloured! Here was the right sort of thing at last, and my afternoon would not be entirely wasted. I inclined an ear to the door by which I had entered. Like the brimming tide of a full-fed river the grand, eternal, inexhaustible clothes-problem bubbled and eddied and surged along. It seemed safe enough. I slid the book off its desk with some difficulty, for it was very fine and large, and staggered with it to the hearthrug--the only fit and proper place for books of quality, such as this.

They were excellent hearthrugs in that house; soft and wide, with the thickest of pile, and one's knees sank into them most comfortably. When I got the book open there was a difficulty at first in making the great stiff pages lie down. Most fortunately the coal-scuttle was actually at my elbow, and it was easy to find a flat bit of coal to lay on the refractory page. Really, it was just as if everything had been arranged for me. This was not such a bad sort of house after all.

The beginnings of the thing were gay borders--scrolls and strap-work and diapered backgrounds, a maze of colour, with small misshapen figures clambering cheerily up and down everywhere. But first I eagerly scanned what text there was in the middle, in order to get a hint of what it was all about. Of course I was not going to waste any time in reading. A clue, a sign-board, a finger-post was all I required. To my dismay and disgust it was all in a stupid foreign language! Really, the perversity of some people made one at times almost despair of the whole race. However, the pictures remained; pictures never lied, never shuffled nor evaded; and as for the story, I could invent it myself.

Over the page I went, shifting the bit of coal to a new position; and, as the scheme of the picture disengaged itself from out the medley of colour that met my delighted eyes, first there was a warm sense of familiarity, then a dawning recognition, and then--O then! along with blissful certainty came the imperious need to clasp my stomach with both hands, in order to repress the shout of rapture that struggled to escape--it was my own little city!

I knew it well enough, I recognized it at once, though I had never been quite so near it before. Here was the familiar gateway, to the left that strange, slender tower with its grim, square head shot far above the walls; to the right, outside the town, the hill--as of old--broke steeply down to the sea. But to-day everything was bigger and fresher and clearer, the walls seemed newly hewn, gay carpets were hung out over them, fair ladies and long-haired children peeped and crowded on the battlements. Better still, the portcullis was up--I could even catch a glimpse of the sunlit square within--and a dainty company was trooping through the gate on horseback, two and two. Their horses, in trappings that swept the ground, were gay as themselves; and they were the gayest crew, for dress and bearing, I had ever yet beheld. It could mean nothing else but a wedding, I thought, this holiday attire, this festal and solemn entry; and, wedding or whatever it was, I meant to be there. This time I would not be balked by any grim portcullis; this time I would slip in with the rest of the crowd, find out just what my little town was like, within those exasperating walls that had so long confronted me, and, moreover, have my share of the fun that was evidently going on inside. Confident, yet breathless with expectation, I turned the page.

Joy! At last I was in it, at last I was on the right side of those provoking walls; and, needless to say, I looked about me with much curiosity. A public place, clearly, though not such as I was used to. The houses at the back stood on a sort of colonnade, beneath which the

people jostled and crowded. The upper stories were all painted with wonderful pictures. Above the straight line of the roofs the deep blue of a cloudless sky stretched from side to side. Lords and ladies thronged the foreground, while on a dais in the centre a gallant gentleman, just alighted off his horse, stooped to the fingers of a girl as bravely dressed out as Selina's lady between the saints; and round about stood venerable personages, robed in the most variegated clothing. There were boys, too, in plenty, with tiny red caps on their thick hair; and their shirts had bunched up and worked out at the waist, just as my own did so often, after chasing anybody; and each boy of them wore an odd pair of stockings, one blue and the other red. This system of attire went straight to my heart. I had tried the same thing so often, and had met with so much discouragement; and here, at last, was my justification, painted deliberately in a grown-up book! I looked about for my saint-friends--the armour-man and the other fellow--but they were not to be seen--Evidently they were unable to get off duty, even for a wedding, and still stood on guard in that green meadow down below. I was disappointed, too, that not an angel was visible. One or two of them, surely, could easily have been spared for an hour, to run up and see the show; and they would have been thoroughly at home here, in the midst of all the colour and the movement and the fun.

But it was time to get on, for clearly the interest was only just beginning. Over went the next page, and there we were, the whole crowd of us, assembled in a noble church. It was not easy to make out exactly what was going on; but in the throng I was delighted to recognize my

angels at last, happy and very much at home. They had managed to get leave off, evidently, and must have run up the hill and scampered breathlessly through the gate; and perhaps they cried a little when they found the square empty, and thought the fun must be all over. Two of them had got hold of a great wax candle apiece, as much as they could stagger under, and were tittering sideways at each other as the grease ran bountifully over their clothes. A third had strolled in among the company, and was chatting to a young gentleman, with whom she appeared to be on the best of terms. Decidedly, this was the right breed of angel for us. None of your sick-bed or night nursery business for them!

Well, no doubt they were now being married, He and She, just as always happened. And then, of course, they were going to live happily ever after; and that was the part I wanted to get to. Storybooks were so stupid, always stopping at the point where they became really nice; but this picture-story was only in its first chapters, and at last I was to have a chance of knowing how people lived happily ever after. We would all go home together, He and She, and the angels, and I; and the armour-man would be invited to come and stay. And then the story would really begin, at the point where those other ones always left off. I turned the page, and found myself free of the dim and splendid church and once more in the open country.

This was all right; this was just as it should be. The sky was a fleckless blue, the flags danced in the breeze, and our merry bridal party, with jest and laughter, jogged down to the water-side. I was

through the town by this time, and out on the other side of the hill, where I had always wanted to be; and, sure enough, there was the harbour, all thick with curly ships. Most of them were piled high with wedding-presents--bales of silk, and gold and silver plate, and comfortable-looking bags suggesting bullion; and the gayest ship of all lay close up to the carpeted landing-stage. Already the bride was stepping daintily down the gangway, her ladies following primly, one by one; a few minutes more and we should all be aboard, the hawsers would splash in the water, the sails would fill and strain. From the deck I should see the little walled town recede and sink and grow dim, while every plunge of our bows brought us nearer to the happy island--it was an island we were bound for, I knew well! Already I could see the island-people waving hands on the crowded quay, whence the little houses ran up the hill to the castle, crowning all with its towers and battlements. Once more we should ride together, a merry procession, clattering up the steep street and through the grim gateway; and then we should have arrived, then we should all dine together, then we should have reached home! And then--Ow! Ow! Ow!

Bitter it is to stumble out of an opalescent dream into the cold daylight; cruel to lose in a second a sea-voyage, an island, and a castle that was to be practically your own; but cruellest and bitterest of all to know, in addition to your loss, that the fingers of an angry aunt have you tight by the scruff of your neck. My beautiful book was gone too--ravished from my grasp by the dressy lady, who joined in the outburst of denunciation as heartily as if she had been a relative--and

naught was left me but to blubber dismally, awakened of a sudden to the harshness of real things and the unnumbered hostilities of the actual world. I cared little for their reproaches, their abuse; but I sorrowed heartily for my lost ship, my vanished island, my uneaten dinner, and for the knowledge that, if I wanted any angels to play with, I must henceforth put up with the anaemic, night-gowned nonentities that hovered over the bed of the Sunday-school child in the pages of the Sabbath Improver.

I was led ignominiously out of the house, in a pulpy, watery state, while the butler handled his swing doors with a stony, impassive countenance, intended for the deception of the very elect, though it did not deceive me. I knew well enough that next time he was off duty, and strolled around our way, we should meet in our kitchen as man to man, and I would punch him and ask him riddles, and he would teach me tricks with corks and bits of string. So his unsympathetic manner did not add to my depression.

I maintained a diplomatic blubber long after we had been packed into our pony-carriage and the lodge-gate had clicked behind us, because it served as a sort of armour-plating against heckling and argument and abuse, and I was thinking hard and wanted to be let alone. And the thoughts that I was thinking were two.

First I thought, "I've got ahead of Charlotte this time!"

And next I thought, "When I've grown up big, and have money of my own, and a full-sized walking-stick, I will set out early one morning, and never stop till I get to that little walled town." There ought to be no real difficulty in the task. It only meant asking here and asking there, and people were very obliging, and I could describe every stick and stone of it.

As for the island which I had never even seen, that was not so easy. Yet I felt confident that somehow, at some time, sooner or later, I was destined to arrive.