A DEPARTURE

It is a very fine thing to be a real Prince. There are points about a Pirate Chief, and to succeed to the Captaincy of a Robber Band is a truly magnificent thing. But to be an Heir has also about it something extremely captivating. Not only a long-lost heir--an heir of the melodrama, strutting into your hitherto unsuspected kingdom at just the right moment, loaded up with the consciousness of unguessed merit and of rights so long feloniously withheld--but even to be a common humdrum domestic heir is a profession to which few would refuse to be apprenticed. To step from leading-strings and restrictions and one glass of port after dinner, into property and liberty and due appreciation, saved up, polished and varnished, dusted and laid in lavender, all expressly for you--why, even the Princedom and the Robber Captaincy, when their anxieties and responsibilities are considered, have hardly more to offer. And so it will continue to be a problem, to the youth in whom ambition struggles with a certain sensuous appreciation of life's side-dishes, whether the career he is called upon to select out of the glittering knick-knacks that strew the counter had better be that of an heir or an engine-driver.

In the case of eldest sons, this problem has a way of solving itself. In childhood, however, the actual heirship is apt to work on the principle of the "Borough-English" of our happier ancestors, and in most cases of inheritance it is the youngest that succeeds. Where the "res" is

"angusta," and the weekly books are simply a series of stiff hurdles at each of which in succession the paternal legs falter with growing suspicion of their powers to clear the flight, it is in the affair of clothes that the right of succession tells, and "the hard heir strides about the land" in trousers long ago framed for fraternal limbs--frondes novas et non sua poma. A bitter thing indeed! Of those pretty silken threads that knit humanity together, high and low, past and present, none is tougher, more pervading, or more iridescent, than the honest, simple pleasure of new clothes. It tugs at the man as it tugs at the woman; the smirk of the well-fitted prince is no different from the smirk of the Sunday-clad peasant; and the veins of the elders tingle with the same thrill that sets their fresh-frocked grandchildren skipping. Never trust people who pretend that they have no joy in their new clothes.

Let not our souls be wrung, however, at contemplation of the luckless urchin cut off by parental penury from the rapture of new clothes. Just as the heroes of his dreams are his immediate seniors, so his heroes' clothes share the glamour, and the reversion of them carries a high privilege--a special thing not sold by Swears and Wells. The sword of Galahad--and of many another hero--arrived on the scene already hoary with history, and the boy rather prefers his trousers to be legendary, famous, haloed by his hero's renown--even though the nap may have altogether vanished in the process.

But, putting clothes aside, there are other matters in which this

reversed heirship comes into play. Take the case of Toys. It is hardly right or fitting--and in this the child quite acquiesces--that as he approaches the reverend period of nine or say ten years, he should still be the unabashed and proclaimed possessor of a hoop and a Noah's Ark. The child will quite see the reasonableness of this, and, the goal of his ambition being now a catapult, a pistol, or even a sword-stick, will be satisfied that the titular ownership should lapse to his juniors, so far below him in their kilted or petticoated incompetence. After all, the things are still there, and if relapses of spirit occur, on wet afternoons, one can still (nominally) borrow them and be happy on the floor as of old, without the reproach of being a habitual baby toy-caresser. Also one can pretend it's being done to amuse the younger ones.

None of us, therefore, grumbled when in the natural course of things the nominal ownership of the toys slipped down to Harold, and from him in turn devolved upon Charlotte. The toys were still there; they always had been there and always would be there, and when the nursery door was fast shut there were no Kings or Queens or First Estates in that small Republic on the floor. Charlotte, to be sure, chin-tilted, at last an owner of real estate, might patronize a little at times; but it was tacitly understood that her "title" was only a drawing-room one.

Why does a coming bereavement project no thin faint voice, no shadow of its woe, to warn its happy, heedless victims? Why cannot Olympians ever think it worth while to give some hint of the thunderbolts they are

silently forging? And why, oh, why did it never enter any of our thick heads that the day would come when even Charlotte would be considered too matronly for toys? One's so called education is hammered into one with rulers and with canes. Each fresh grammar or musical instrument, each new historical period or quaint arithmetical rule, is impressed on one by some painful physical prelude. Why does Time, the biggest Schoolmaster, alone neglect premonitory raps, at each stage of his curriculum, on our knuckles or our heads?

Uncle Thomas was at the bottom of it. This was not the first mine he had exploded under our bows. In his favourite pursuit of fads he had passed in turn from Psychical Research to the White Rose and thence to a Children's Hospital, and we were being daily inundated with leaflets headed by a woodcut depicting Little Annie (of Poplar) sitting up in her little white cot, surrounded by the toys of the nice, kind, rich children. The idea caught on with the Olympians, always open to sentiment of a treacly, woodcut order; and accordingly Charlotte, on entering one day dishevelled and panting, having been pursued by yelling Redskins up to the very threshold of our peaceful home, was curtly informed that her French lessons would begin on Monday, that she was henceforth to cease all pretence of being a trapper or a Redskin on utterly inadequate grounds, and moreover that the whole of her toys were at that moment being finally packed up in a box, for despatch to London, to gladden the lives and bring light into the eyes of London waifs and Poplar Annies.

Naturally enough, perhaps, we others received no official intimation of this grave cession of territory. We were not supposed to be interested. Harold had long ago been promoted to a knife--a recognized, birthday knife. As for me, it was known that I was already given over, heart and soul, to lawless abandoned catapults--catapults which were confiscated weekly for reasons of international complications, but with which Edward kept me steadily supplied, his school having a fine old tradition for excellence in their manufacture. Therefore no one was supposed to be really affected but Charlotte, and even she had already reached Miss Yonge, and should therefore have been more interested in prolific curates and harrowing deathbeds.

Notwithstanding, we all felt indignant, betrayed, and sullen to the verge of mutiny. Though for long we had affected to despise them, these toys, yet they had grown up with us, shared our joys and our sorrows, seen us at our worst, and become part of the accepted scheme of existence. As we gazed at untenanted shelves and empty, hatefully tidy corners, perhaps for the first time for long we began to do them a tardy justice.

There was old Leotard, for instance. Somehow he had come to be sadly neglected of late years--and yet how exactly he always responded to certain moods! He was an acrobat, this Leotard, who lived in a glass-fronted box. His loose-jointed limbs were cardboard, cardboard his slender trunk; and his hands eternally grasped the bar of a trapeze. You turned the box round swiftly five or six times; the wonderful unsolved

machinery worked, and Leotard swung and leapt, backwards, forwards, now astride the bar, now flying free; iron-jointed, supple-sinewed, unceasingly novel in his invention of new, unguessable attitudes; while above, below, and around him, a richly-dressed audience, painted in skilful perspective of stalls, boxes, dress-circle, and gallery, watched the thrilling performance with a stolidity which seemed to mark them out as made in Germany. Hardly versatile enough, perhaps, this Leotard; unsympathetic, not a companion for all hours; nor would you have chosen him to take to bed with you. And yet, within his own limits, how fresh, how engrossing, how resourceful and inventive! Well, he was gone, it seemed--merely gone. Never specially cherished while he tarried with us, he had yet contrived to build himself a particular niche of his own. Sunrise and sunset, and the dinner-bell, and the sudden rainbow, and lessons, and Leotard, and the moon through the nursery windows--they were all part of the great order of things, and the displacement of any one item seemed to disorganize the whole machinery. The immediate point was, not that the world would continue to go round as of old, but that Leotard wouldn't.

Yonder corner, now swept and garnished, had been the stall wherein the spotty horse, at the close of each laborious day, was accustomed to doze peacefully the long night through. In days of old each of us in turn had been jerked thrillingly round the room on his precarious back, had dug our heels into his unyielding sides, and had scratched our hands on the tin tacks that secured his mane to his stiffly-curving neck. Later, with increasing stature, we came to overlook his merits as a beast of

burden; but how frankly, how good-naturedly, he had recognized the new conditions, and adapted himself to them without a murmur! When the military spirit was abroad, who so ready to be a squadron of cavalry, a horde of Cossacks, or artillery pounding into position? He had even served with honour as a gun-boat, during a period when naval strategy was the only theme; and no false equine pride ever hindered him from taking the part of a roaring locomotive, earth-shaking, clangorous, annihilating time and space. Really it was no longer clear how life, with its manifold emergencies, was to be carried on at all without a fellow like the spotty horse, ready to step in at critical moments and take up just the part required of him. In moments of mental depression, nothing is quite so consoling as the honest smell of a painted animal; and mechanically I turned towards the shelf that had been so long the Ararat of our weather-beaten Ark. The shelf was empty, the Ark had cast off moorings and sailed away to Poplar, and had taken with it its haunting smell, as well as that pleasant sense of disorder that the best conducted Ark is always able to impart. The sliding roof had rarely been known to close entirely. There was always a pair of giraffe-legs sticking out, or an elephant-trunk, taking from the stiffness of its outline, and reminding us that our motley crowd of friends inside were uncomfortably cramped for room and only too ready to leap in a cascade on the floor and browse and gallop, flutter and bellow and neigh, and be their natural selves again. I think that none of us ever really thought very much of Ham and Shem and Japhet. They were only there because they were in the story, but nobody really wanted them. The Ark was built for the animals, of course--animals with tails, and trunks, and horns, and

at least three legs apiece, though some unfortunates had been unable to retain even that number. And in the animals were of course included the birds--the dove, for instance, grey with black wings, and the red-crested woodpecker--or was it a hoopoe?--and the insects, for there was a dear beetle, about the same size as the dove, that held its own with any of the mammalia.

Of the doll-department Charlotte had naturally been sole chief for a long time; if the staff were not in their places to-day, it was not I who had any official right to take notice. And yet one may have been member of a Club for many a year without ever exactly understanding the use and object of the other members, until one enters, some Christmas day or other holiday, and, surveying the deserted armchairs, the untenanted sofas, the barren hat-pegs, realizes, with depression, that those other fellows had their allotted functions, after all. Where was old Jerry? Where were Eugenie, Rosa, Sophy, Esmeralda? We had long drifted apart, it was true, we spoke but rarely; perhaps, absorbed in new ambitions, new achievements, I had even come to look down on these conservative, unprogressive members who were so clearly content to remain simply what they were. And now that their corners were unfilled, their chairs unoccupied--well, my eyes were opened and I wanted 'em back!

However, it was no business of mine. If grievances were the question, I hadn't a leg to stand upon. Though my catapults were officially confiscated, I knew the drawer in which they were incarcerated, and

where the key of it was hidden, and I could make life a burden, if I chose, to every living thing within a square-mile radius, so long as the catapult was restored to its drawer in due and decent time. But I wondered how the others were taking it. The edict hit them more severely. They should have my moral countenance at any rate, if not more, in any protest or countermine they might be planning. And, indeed, something seemed possible, from the dogged, sullen air with which the two of them had trotted off in the direction of the raspberry-canes. Certain spots always had their insensible attraction for certain moods. In love, one sought the orchard. Weary of discipline, sick of convention, impassioned for the road, the mining-camp, the land across the border, one made for the big meadow. Mutinous, sulky, charged with plots and conspiracies, one always got behind the shelter of the raspberry-canes.

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"You can come too if you like," said Harold, in a subdued sort of way, as soon as he was aware that I was sitting up in bed watching him. "We didn't think you'd care, 'cos you've got to catapults. But we're goin' to do what we've settled to do, so it's no good sayin' we hadn't ought and that sort of thing, 'cos we're goin' to!"

The day had passed in an ominous peacefulness. Charlotte and Harold had kept out of my way, as well as out of everybody else's, in a purposeful manner that ought to have bred suspicion. In the evening we had read

books, or fitfully drawn ships and battles on fly-leaves, apart, in separate corners, void of conversation or criticism, oppressed by the lowering tidiness of the universe, till bedtime came, and disrobement, and prayers even more mechanical than usual, and lastly bed itself without so much as a giraffe under the pillow. Harold had grunted himself between the sheets with an ostentatious pretence of overpowering fatigue; but I noticed that he pulled his pillow forward and propped his head against the brass bars of his crib, and, as I was acquainted with most of his tricks and subterfuges, it was easy for me to gather that a painful wakefulness was his aim that night.

I had dozed off, however, and Harold was out and on his feet, poking under the bed for his shoes, when I sat up and grimly regarded him. Just as he said I could come if I liked, Charlotte slipped in, her face rigid and set. And then it was borne in upon me that I was not on in this scene. These youngsters had planned it all out, the piece was their own, and the mounting, and the cast. My sceptre had fallen, my rule had ceased. In this magic hour of the summer night laws went for nothing, codes were cancelled, and those who were most in touch with the moonlight and the warm June spirit and the topsy-turvydom that reigns when the clock strikes ten, were the true lords and lawmakers.

Humbly, almost timidly, I followed without a protest in the wake of these two remorseless, purposeful young persons, who were marching straight for the schoolroom. Here in the moonlight the grim big box stood visible--the box in which so large a portion of our past and our

personality lay entombed, cold, swathed in paper, awaiting the carrier of the morning who should speed them forth to the strange, cold, distant Children s Hospital, where their little failings would all be misunderstood and no one would make allowances. A dreamy spectator, I stood idly by while Harold propped up the lid and the two plunged in their arms and probed and felt and grappled.

"Here's Rosa," said Harold, suddenly. "I know the feel of her hair. Will you have Rosa out?"

"Oh, give me Rosa!" cried Charlotte with a sort of gasp. And when Rosa had been dragged forth, quite unmoved apparently, placid as ever in her moonfaced contemplation of this comedy-world with its ups and downs, Charlotte retired with her to the window-seat, and there in the moonlight the two exchanged their private confidences, leaving Harold to his exploration alone.

"Here's something with sharp corners," said Harold, presently. "Must be Leotard, I think. Better let him go."

"Oh, yes, we can't save Leotard," assented Charlotte, limply.

Poor old Leotard! I said nothing, of course; I was not on in this piece. But, surely, had Leotard heard and rightly understood all that was going on above him, he must have sent up one feeble, strangled cry, one faint appeal to be rescued from unfamiliar little Annies and retained for an

audience certain to appreciate and never unduly critical.

"Now I've got to the Noah's Ark," panted Harold, still groping blindly.

"Try and shove the lid back a bit," said Charlotte, "and pull out a dove or a zebra or a giraffe if there's one handy."

Harold toiled on with grunts and contortions, and presently produced in triumph a small grey elephant and a large beetle with a red stomach.

"They're jammed in too tight," he complained. "Can't get any more out. But as I came up I'm sure I felt Potiphar!" And down he dived again.

Potiphar was a finely modelled bull with a suede skin, rough and comfortable and warm in bed. He was my own special joy and pride, and I thrilled with honest emotion when Potiphar emerged to light once more, stout-necked and stalwart as ever.

"That'll have to do," said Charlotte, getting up. "We dursn't take any more, 'cos we'll be found out if we do. Make the box all right, and bring 'em along."

Harold rammed down the wads of paper and twists of straw he had disturbed, replaced the lid squarely and innocently, and picked up his small salvage; and we sneaked off for the window most generally in use for prison-breakings and nocturnal escapades. A few seconds later and we

were hurrying silently in single file along the dark edge of the lawn.

Oh, the riot, the clamour, the crowding chorus, of all silent things that spoke by scent and colour and budding thrust and foison, that moonlit night of June! Under the laurel-shade all was still ghostly enough, brigand-haunted, crackling, whispering of night and all its possibilities of terror. But the open garden, when once we were in it--how it turned a glad new face to welcome us, glad as of old when the sunlight raked and searched it, new with the unfamiliar night-aspect that yet welcomed us as guests to a hall where the horns blew up to a new, strange banquet! Was this the same grass, could these be the same familiar flower-beds, alleys, clumps of verdure, patches of sward? At least this full white light that was flooding them was new, and accounted for all. It was Moonlight Land, and Past-Ten-o'clock Land, and we were in it and of it, and all its other denizens fully understood, and, tongue-free and awakened at last, responded and comprehended and knew. The other two, doubtless, hurrying forward full of their mission, noted little of all this. I, who was only a super, had leisure to take it all in, and, though the language and the message of the land were not all clear to me then, long afterwards I remembered and understood.

Under the farthest hedge, at the loose end of things, where the outer world began with the paddock, there was darkness once again--not the blackness that crouched so solidly under the crowding laurels, but a duskiness hung from far-spread arms of high-standing elms. There, where the small grave made a darker spot on the grey, I overtook them, only

just in time to see Rosa laid stiffly out, her cherry cheeks pale in the moonlight, but her brave smile triumphant and undaunted as ever. It was a tiny grave and a shallow one, to hold so very much. Rosa once in, Potiphar, who had hitherto stood erect, stout-necked, through so many days and such various weather, must needs bow his head and lie down meekly on his side. The elephant and the beetle, equal now in a silent land where a vertebra and a red circulation counted for nothing, had to snuggle down where best they might, only a little less crowded than in their native Ark.

The earth was shovelled in and stamped down, and I was glad that no orisons were said and no speechifying took place. The whole thing was natural and right and self-explanatory, and needed no justifying or interpreting to our audience of stars and flowers. The connection was not entirely broken now--one link remained between us and them. The Noah's Ark, with its cargo of sad-faced emigrants, might be hull down on the horizon, but two of its passengers had missed the boat and would henceforth be always near us; and, as we played above them, an elephant would understand, and a beetle would hear, and crawl again in spirit along a familiar floor. Henceforth the spotty horse would scour along far-distant plains and know the homesickness of alien stables; but Potiphar, though never again would he paw the arena when bull-fights were on the bill, was spared maltreatment by town-bred strangers, quite capable of mistaking him for a cow. Jerry and Esmeralda might shed their limbs and their stuffing, by slow or swift degrees, in uttermost parts and unguessed corners of the globe; but Rosa's book was finally closed,

and no worse fate awaited her than natural dissolution almost within touch and hail of familiar faces and objects that had been friendly to her since first she opened her eyes on a world where she had never been treated as a stranger.

As we turned to go, the man in the moon, tangled in elm-boughs, caught my eye for a moment, and I thought that never had he looked so friendly. He was going to see after them, it was evident; for he was always there, more or less, and it was no trouble to him at all, and he would tell them how things were still going, up here, and throw in a story or two of his own whenever they seemed a trifle dull. It made the going away rather easier, to know one had left somebody behind on the spot; a good fellow, too, cheery, comforting, with a fund of anecdote; a man in whom one had every confidence.