

A HOLIDAY.

The masterful wind was up and out, shouting and chasing, the lord of the morning. Poplars swayed and tossed with a roaring swish; dead leaves sprang aloft, and whirled into space; and all the clear-swept heaven seemed to thrill with sound like a great harp.

It was one of the first awakenings of the year. The earth stretched herself, smiling in her sleep; and everything leapt and pulsed to the stir of the giant's movement. With us it was a whole holiday; the occasion a birthday--it matters not whose. Some one of us had had presents, and pretty conventional speeches, and had glowed with that sense of heroism which is no less sweet that nothing has been done to deserve it. But the holiday was for all, the rapture of awakening Nature for all, the various outdoor joys of puddles and sun and hedge-breaking for all. Colt-like I ran through the meadows, frisking happy heels in the face of Nature laughing responsive. Above, the sky was bluest of the blue; wide pools left by the winter's floods flashed the colour back, true and brilliant; and the soft air thrilled with the germinating touch that seemed to kindle something in my own small person as well as in the rash primrose already lurking in sheltered haunts. Out into the brimming sun-bathed world I sped, free of lessons, free of discipline and correction, for one day at least. My legs ran of themselves, and though I heard my name called faint and shrill behind, there was no stopping for me. It was only Harold, I concluded, and his legs, though shorter than mine, were good for a longer spurt than this. Then I heard it

called again, but this time more faintly, with a pathetic break in the middle; and I pulled up short, recognising Charlotte's plaintive note.

She panted up anon, and dropped on the turf beside me. Neither had any desire for talk; the glow and the glory of existing on this perfect morning were satisfaction full and sufficient.

"Where's Harold;" I asked presently.

"Oh, he's just playin' muffin-man, as usual," said Charlotte with petulance. "Fancy wanting to be a muffin-man on a whole holiday!"

It was a strange craze, certainly; but Harold, who invented his own games and played them without assistance, always stuck staunchly to a new fad, till he had worn it quite out. Just at present he was a muffin-man, and day and night he went through passages and up and down staircases, ringing a noiseless bell and offering phantom muffins to invisible wayfarers. It sounds a poor sort of sport; and yet--to pass along busy streets of your own building, for ever ringing an imaginary bell and offering airy muffins of your own make to a bustling thronging crowd of your own creation--there were points about the game, it cannot be denied, though it seemed scarce in harmony with this radiant wind-swept morning!

"And Edward, where is he?" I questioned again.

"He's coming along by the road," said Charlotte. "He'll be crouching in the ditch when we get there, and he's going to be a grizzly bear and spring out on us, only you mustn't say I told you, 'cos it's to be a surprise."

"All right," I said magnanimously. "Come on and let's be surprised." But I could not help feeling that on this day of days even a grizzly felt misplaced and common.

Sure enough an undeniable bear sprang out on us as we dropped into the road; then ensued shrieks, growlings, revolver-shots, and unrecorded heroisms, till Edward condescended at last to roll over and die, bulking large and grim, an unmitigated grizzly. It was an understood thing, that whoever took upon himself to be a bear must eventually die, sooner or later, even if he were the eldest born; else, life would have been all strife and carnage, and the Age of Acorns have displaced our hard-won civilisation. This little affair concluded with satisfaction to all parties concerned, we rambled along the road, picking up the defaulting Harold by the way, muffinless now and in his right and social mind.

"What would you do?" asked Charlotte presently,--the book of the moment always dominating her thoughts until it was sucked dry and cast aside,--"what would you do if you saw two lions in the road, one on each side, and you didn't know if they was loose or if they was chained up?"

"Do?" shouted Edward, valiantly, "I should--I should--I should--"

His boastful accents died away into a mumble: "Dunno what I should do."

"Shouldn't do anything," I observed after consideration; and really it would be difficult to arrive at a wiser conclusion.

"If it came to DOING," remarked Harold, reflectively, "the lions would do all the doing there was to do, wouldn't they?"

"But if they was GOOD lions," rejoined Charlotte, "they would do as they would be done by."

"Ah, but how are you to know a good lion from a bad one?" said Edward.

"The books don't tell you at all, and the lions ain't marked any different."

"Why, there aren't any good lions," said Harold, hastily.

"Oh yes, there are, heaps and heaps," contradicted Edward. "Nearly all the lions in the story-books are good lions. There was Androcles' lion, and St. Jerome's lion, and--and--the Lion and the Unicorn--"

"He beat the Unicorn," observed Harold, dubiously, "all round the town."

"That PROVES he was a good lion," cried Edwards triumphantly. "But the question is, how are you to tell 'em when you see 'em?"

"I should ask Martha," said Harold of the simple creed.

Edward snorted contemptuously, then turned to Charlotte. "Look here," he said; "let's play at lions, anyhow, and I'll run on to that corner and be a lion,--I'll be two lions, one on each side of the road,--and you'll come along, and you won't know whether I'm chained up or not, and that'll be the fun!"

"No, thank you," said Charlotte, firmly; "you'll be chained up till I'm quite close to you, and then you'll be loose, and you'll tear me in pieces, and make my frock all dirty, and p'raps you'll hurt me as well. I know your lions!"

"No, I won't; I swear I won't," protested Edward. "I'll be quite a new lion this time,--something you can't even imagine." And he raced off to his post. Charlotte hesitated; then she went timidly on, at each step growing less Charlotte, the mummer of a minute, and more the anxious Pilgrim of all time. The lion's wrath waxed terrible at her approach; his roaring filled the startled air. I waited until they were both thoroughly absorbed, and then I slipped through the hedge out of the trodden highway, into the vacant meadow spaces. It was not that I was unsociable, nor that I knew Edward's lions to the point of satiety; but the passion and the call of the divine morning were high in my blood.

Earth to earth! That was the frank note, the joyous summons of the day;

and they could not but jar and seem artificial, these human discussions and pretences, when boon Nature, reticent no more, was singing that full-throated song of hers that thrills and claims control of every fibre. The air was wine; the moist earth-smell, wine; the lark's song, the wafts from the cow-shed at top of the field, the pant and smoke of a distant train,--all were wine,--or song, was it? or odour, this unity they all blended into? I had no words then to describe it, that earth-effluence of which I was so conscious; nor, indeed, have I found words since. I ran sideways, shouting; I dug glad heels into the squelching soil; I splashed diamond showers from puddles with a stick; I hurled clods skywards at random, and presently I somehow found myself singing. The words were mere nonsense,--irresponsible babble; the tune was an improvisation, a weary, unrhythmic thing of rise and fall: and yet it seemed to me a genuine utterance, and just at that moment the one thing fitting and right and perfect. Humanity would have rejected it with scorn, Nature, everywhere singing in the same key, recognised and accepted it without a flicker of dissent.

All the time the hearty wind was calling to me companionably from where he swung and bellowed in the tree-tops. "Take me for guide to-day," he seemed to plead. "Other holidays you have tramped it in the track of the stolid, unswerving sun; a belated truant, you have dragged a weary foot homeward with only a pale, expressionless moon for company. To-day why not I, the trickster, the hypocrite? I, who whip round corners and bluster, relapse and evade, then rally and pursue! I can lead you the best and rarest dance of any; for I am the strong capricious one, the

lord of misrule, and I alone am irresponsible and unprincipled, and obey no law." And for me, I was ready enough to fall in with the fellow's humour; was not this a whole holiday? So we sheered off together, arm-in-arm, so to speak; and with fullest confidence I took the jiggling, thwartwise course my chainless pilot laid for me.

A whimsical comrade I found him, ere he had done with me. Was it in jest, or with some serious purpose of his own, that he brought me plump upon a pair of lovers, silent, face to face o'er a discreet unwinking stile? As a rule this sort of thing struck me as the most pitiful tomfoolery. Two calves rubbing noses through a gate were natural and right and within the order of things; but that human beings, with salient interests and active pursuits beckoning them on from every side, could thus--! Well, it was a thing to hurry past, shamed of face, and think on no more. But this morning everything I met seemed to be accounted for and set in tune by that same magical touch in the air; and it was with a certain surprise that I found myself regarding these fatuous ones with kindness instead of contempt, as I rambled by, unheeded of them. There was indeed some reconciling influence abroad, which could bring the like antics into harmony with bud and growth and the frolic air.

A puff on the right cheek from my wilful companion sent me off at a fresh angle, and presently I came in sight of the village church, sitting solitary within its circle of elms. From forth the vestry window projected two small legs, gyrating, hungry for foothold, with

larceny--not to say sacrilege--in their every wriggle: a godless sight for a supporter of the Establishment. Though the rest was hidden, I knew the legs well enough; they were usually attached to the body of Bill Saunders, the peerless bad boy of the village. Bill's coveted booty, too, I could easily guess at that; it came from the Vicar's store of biscuits, kept (as I knew) in a cupboard along with his official trappings.

For a moment I hesitated; then I passed on my way. I protest I was not on Bill's side; but then, neither was I on the Vicar's, and there was something in this immoral morning which seemed to say that perhaps, after all, Bill had as much right to the biscuits as the Vicar, and would certainly enjoy them better; and anyhow it was a disputable point, and no business of mine. Nature, who had accepted me for ally, cared little who had the world's biscuits, and assuredly was not going to let any friend of hers waste his time in playing policeman for Society.

He was tugging at me anew, my insistent guide; and I felt sure, as I rambled off in his wake, that he had more holiday matter to show me. And so, indeed, he had; and all of it was to the same lawless tune. Like a black pirate flag on the blue ocean of air, a hawk hung ominous; then, plummet-wise, dropped to the hedgerow, whence there rose, thin and shrill, a piteous voice of squealing.

By the time I got there a whisk of feathers on the turf--like scattered playbills--was all that remained to tell of the tragedy just enacted.

Yet Nature smiled and sang on, pitiless, gay, impartial. To her, who took no sides, there was every bit as much to be said for the hawk as for the chaffinch. Both were her children, and she would show no preferences.

Further on, a hedgehog lay dead athwart the path--nay, more than dead; decadent, distinctly; a sorry sight for one that had known the fellow in more bustling circumstances. Nature might at least have paused to shed one tear over this rough jacketed little son of hers, for his wasted aims, his cancelled ambitions, his whole career of usefulness cut suddenly short. But not a bit of it! Jubilant as ever, her song went bubbling on, and "Death-in-Life," and again, "Life-in-Death," were its alternate burdens. And looking round, and seeing the sheep-nibbled heels of turnips that dotted the ground, their hearts eaten out of them in frost-bound days now over and done, I seemed to discern, faintly, a something of the stern meaning in her valorous chant.

My invisible companion was singing also, and seemed at times to be chuckling softly to himself, doubtless at thought of the strange new lessons he was teaching me; perhaps, too, at a special bit of waggishness he had still in store. For when at last he grew weary of such insignificant earthbound company, he deserted me at a certain spot I knew; then dropped, subsided, and slunk away into nothingness. I raised my eyes, and before me, grim and lichened, stood the ancient whipping-post of the village; its sides fretted with the initials of a generation that scorned its mute lesson, but still clipped by the stout

rusty shackles that had tethered the wrists of such of that generation's ancestors as had dared to mock at order and law. Had I been an infant Sterne, here was a grand chance for sentimental output! As things were, I could only hurry homewards, my moral tail well between my legs, with an uneasy feeling, as I glanced back over my shoulder, that there was more in this chance than met the eye.

And outside our gate I found Charlotte, alone and crying. Edward, it seemed, had persuaded her to hide, in the full expectation of being duly found and ecstatically pounced upon; then he had caught sight of the butcher's cart, and, forgetting his obligations, had rushed off for a ride. Harold, it further appeared, greatly coveting tadpoles, and top-heavy with the eagerness of possession, had fallen into the pond. This, in itself, was nothing; but on attempting to sneak in by the back-door, he had rendered up his duckweed-bedabbled person into the hands of an aunt, and had been promptly sent off to bed; and this, on a holiday, was very much. The moral of the whipping-post was working itself out; and I was not in the least surprised when, on reaching home, I was seized upon and accused of doing something I had never even thought of. And my frame of mind was such, that I could only wish most heartily that I had done it.