

## A FALLING OUT

Harold told me the main facts of this episode some time later,--in bits, and with reluctance. It was not a recollection he cared to talk about. The crude blank misery of a moment is apt to leave a dull bruise which is slow to depart, if it ever does so entirely; and Harold confesses to a twinge or two, still, at times, like the veteran who brings home a bullet inside him from martial plains over sea.

He knew he was a brute the moment he had done it; Selina had not meant to worry, only to comfort and assist. But his soul was one raw sore within him, when he found himself shut up in the schoolroom after hours, merely for insisting that 7 times 7 amounted to 47. The injustice of it seemed so flagrant. Why not 47 as much as 49? One number was no prettier than the other to look at, and it was evidently only a matter of arbitrary taste and preference, and, anyhow, it had always been 47 to him, and would be to the end of time. So when Selina came in out of the sun, leaving the Trappers or the Far West behind her, and putting off the glory of being an Apache squaw in order to hear him his tables and win his release, Harold turned on her venomously, rejected her kindly overtures, and ever drove his elbow into her sympathetic ribs, in his determination to be left alone in the glory of sulks. The fit passed directly, his eyes were opened, and his soul sat in the dust as he

sorrowfully began to cast about for some atonement heroic enough to salve the wrong.

Of course poor Selina looked for no sacrifice nor heroics whatever: she didn't even want him to say he was sorry. If he would only make it up, she would have done the apologising part herself. But that was not a boy's way. Something solid, Harold felt, was due from him; and until that was achieved, making-up must not be thought of, in order that the final effect might not be spoiled. Accordingly, when his release came, and poor Selina hung about, trying to catch his eye, Harold, possessed by the demon of a distorted motive, avoided her steadily--though he was bleeding inwardly at every minute of delay--and came to me instead. Needless to say, I approved his plan highly; it was so much more high-toned than just going and making-up tamely, which any one could do; and a girl who had been jobbed in the ribs by a hostile elbow could not be expected for a moment to overlook it, without the liniment of an offering to soothe her injured feelings.

"I know what she wants most," said Harold. "She wants that set of tea-things in the toy-shop window, with the red and blue flowers on 'em; she's wanted it for months, 'cos her dolls are getting big enough to have real afternoon tea; and she wants it so badly that she won't walk that side of the street when we go into the town. But it costs five shillings!"

Then we set to work seriously, and devoted the afternoon to a

realisation of assets and the composition of a Budget that might have been dated without shame from Whitehall. The result worked out as follows:--

s. d.

By one uncle, unspent through having been  
lost for nearly a week--turned up at last  
in the straw of the dog-kennel . . . . 2 6

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Carry forward, 2 6

s. d.

Brought forward, 2 6

By advance from me on security of next  
uncle, and failing that, to be called in at  
Christmas . . . . . 1 0

By shaken out of missionary-box with the  
help of a knife-blade. (They were our  
own pennies and a forced levy) . . . . . 0 4

By bet due from Edward, for walking across  
the field where Farmer Larkin's bull was,  
and Edward bet him twopence he wouldn't  
--called in with difficulty . . . . . 0 2

By advance from Martha, on no security at

all, only you mustn't tell your aunt . . . 1 0

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Total 5 0

and at last we breathed again.

The rest promised to be easy. Selina had a tea-party at five on the morrow, with the chipped old wooden tea-things that had served her successive dolls from babyhood. Harold would slip off directly after dinner, going alone, so as not to arouse suspicion, as we were not allowed to go into the town by ourselves. It was nearly two miles to our small metropolis, but there would be plenty of time for him to go and return, even laden with the olive-branch neatly packed in shavings; besides, he might meet the butcher, who was his friend and would give him a lift. Then, finally, at five, the rapture of the new tea-service, descended from the skies; and, retribution made, making-up at last, without loss of dignity. With the event before us, we thought it a small thing that twenty-four hours more of alienation and pretended sulks must be kept up on Harold's part; but Selina, who naturally knew nothing of the treat in store for her, moped for the rest of the evening, and took a very heavy heart to bed.

When next day the hour for action arrived, Harold evaded Olympian attention with an easy modesty born of long practice, and made off for

the front gate. Selina, who had been keeping her eye upon him, thought he was going down to the pond to catch frogs, a joy they had planned to share together, and made after him; but Harold, though he heard her footsteps, continued sternly on his high mission, without even looking back; and Selina was left to wander disconsolately among flower-beds that had lost--for her--all scent and colour. I saw it all, and although cold reason approved our line of action, instinct told me we were brutes.

Harold reached the town--so he recounted afterwards--in record time, having run most of the way for fear the tea-things, which had reposed six months in the window, should be snapped up by some other conscience-stricken lacerator of a sister's feelings; and it seemed hardly credible to find them still there, and their owner willing to part with them for the price marked on the ticket. He paid his money down at once, that there should be no drawing back from the bargain; and then, as the things had to be taken out of the window and packed, and the afternoon was yet young, he thought he might treat himself to a taste of urban joys and *la vie de Boheme*. Shops came first, of course, and he flattened his nose successively against the window with the india-rubber balls in it, and the clock-work locomotive; and against the barber's window, with wigs on blocks, reminding him of uncles, and shaving-cream that looked so good to eat; and the grocer's window, displaying more currants than the whole British population could possibly consume without a special effort; and the window of the bank, wherein gold was thought so little of that it was dealt about in

shovels. Next there was the market-place, with all its clamorous joys; and when a runaway calf came down the street like a cannon-ball, Harold felt that he had not lived in vain. The whole place was so brimful of excitement that he had quite forgotten the why and the wherefore of his being there, when a sight of the church clock recalled him to his better self, and sent him flying out of the town, as he realised he had only just time enough left to get back in. If he were after his appointed hour, he would not only miss his high triumph, but probably would be detected as a transgressor of bounds,--a crime before which a private opinion on multiplication sank to nothingness. So he jogged along on his homeward way, thinking of many things, and probably talking to himself a good deal, as his habit was, and had covered nearly half the distance, when suddenly--a deadly sinking in the pit of his stomach--a paralysis of every limb--around him a world extinct of light and music--a black sun and a reeling sky--he had forgotten the tea-things!

It was useless, it was hopeless, all was over, and nothing could now be done; nevertheless he turned and ran back wildly, blindly, choking with the big sobs that evoked neither pity nor comfort from a merciless mocking world around; a stitch in his side, dust in his eyes, and black despair clutching at his heart. So he stumbled on, with leaden legs and bursting sides, till--as if Fate had not yet dealt him her last worst buffet--on turning a corner in the road he almost ran under the wheels of a dog-cart, in which, as it pulled up, was apparent the portly form of Farmer Larkin, the arch-enemy, whose ducks he had been shying stones at that very morning!

Had Harold been in his right and unclouded senses, he would have vanished through the hedge some seconds earlier, rather than pain the farmer by any unpleasant reminiscences which his appearance might call up; but as things were, he could only stand and blubber hopelessly, caring, indeed, little now what further ill might befall him.

The farmer, for his part, surveyed the desolate figure with some astonishment, calling out in no unfriendly accents, "Why, Master Harold! whatever be the matter? Baint runnin' away, be ee?"

Then Harold, with the unnatural courage born of desperation, flung himself on the step, and climbing into the cart, fell in the straw at the bottom of it, sobbing out that he wanted to go back, go back! The situation had a vagueness; but the farmer, a man of action rather than words, swung his horse round smartly, and they were in the town again by the time Harold had recovered himself sufficiently to furnish some details. As they drove up to the shop, the woman was waiting at the door with the parcel; and hardly a minute seemed to have elapsed since the black crisis, ere they were bowling along swiftly home, the precious parcel hugged in a close embrace.

And now the farmer came out in quite a new and unexpected light. Never a word did he say of broken fences and hurdles, of trampled crops and harried flocks and herds. One would have thought the man had never possessed a head of live stock in his life. Instead, he was deeply interested in the whole dolorous quest of the tea-things, and

sympathised with Harold on the disputed point in mathematics as if he had been himself at the same stage of education. As they neared home, Harold found himself, to his surprise, sitting up and chatting to his new friend like man to man; and before he was dropped at a convenient gap in the garden hedge, he had promised that when Selina gave her first public tea-party, little Miss Larkin should be invited to come and bring ha whole sawdust family along with her; and the farmer appeared as pleased and proud as if he hat been asked to a garden-party at Marlborough House. Really, those Olympians have certain good points, far down in them. I shall have to leave off abusing them some day.

At the hour of five, Selina, having spent the afternoon searching for Harold in all his accustomed haunts, sat down disconsolately to tea with her dolls, who ungenerously refused to wait beyond the appointed hour. The wooden tea-things seemed more chipped than usual; and the dolls themselves had more of wax and sawdust, and less of human colour and intelligence about them, than she ever remembered before. It was then that Harold burst in, very dusty, his stockings at his heels, and the channels ploughed by tears still showing on his grimy cheeks; and Selina was at last permitted to know that he had been thinking of her ever since his ill-judged exhibition of temper, and that his sulks had not been the genuine article, nor had he gone frogging by himself. It was a very happy hostess who dispensed hospitality that evening to a glassy-eyed stiff-kneed circle; and many a dollish gaucherie, that would have been severely checked on ordinary occasions, was as much overlooked as if it had been a birthday.



But Harold and I, in our stupid masculine way, thought all her happiness sprang from possession of the long-coveted tea-service.