

"LUSISTI SATIS"

Among the many fatuous ideas that possessed the Olympian noddle, this one was pre-eminent; that, being Olympians, they could talk quite freely in our presence on subjects of the closest import to us, so long as names, dates, and other landmarks were ignored. We were supposed to be denied the faculty for putting two and two together; and, like the monkeys, who very sensibly refrain from speech lest they should be set to earn their livings, we were careful to conceal our capabilities for a simple syllogism. Thus we were rarely taken by surprise, and so were considered by our disappointed elders to be apathetic and to lack the divine capacity for wonder.

Now the daily output of the letter-bag, with the mysterious discussions that ensued thereon, had speedily informed us that Uncle Thomas was intrusted with a mission,--a mission, too, affecting ourselves. Uncle Thomas's missions were many and various; a self-important man, one liking the business while protesting that he sank under the burden, he was the missionary, so to speak, of our remote habitation. The matching a ribbon, the running down to the stores, the interviewing a cook,--these and similar duties lent constant colour and variety to his vacant life in London and helped to keep down his figure. When the matter, however, had in our presence to be referred to with nods and pronouns, with significant hiatuses and interpolations in the French tongue, then the red flag was flown, the storm-cone hoisted, and by a studious pretence of inattention we were not long in plucking out the

heart of the mystery.

To clinch our conclusion, we descended suddenly and together on Martha; proceeding, however, not by simple inquiry as to facts,--that would never have done,--but by informing her that the air was full of school and that we knew all about it, and then challenging denial. Martha was a trusty soul, but a bad witness for the defence, and we soon had it all out of her. The word had gone forth, the school had been selected; the necessary sheets were hemming even now; and Edward was the designated and appointed victim.

It had always been before us as an inevitable bourne, this strange unknown thing called school; and yet--perhaps I should say consequently--we had never seriously set ourselves to consider what it really meant. But now that the grim spectre loomed imminent, stretching lean hands for one of our flock, it behoved us to face the situation, to take soundings in this uncharted sea and find out whither we were drifting. Unfortunately, the data in our possession were absolutely insufficient, and we knew not whither to turn for exact information. Uncle Thomas could have told us all about it, of course; he had been there himself, once, in the dim and misty past. But an unfortunate conviction, that Nature had intended him for a humourist, tainted all his evidence, besides making it wearisome to hear. Again, of such among our contemporaries as we had approached, the trumpets gave forth an uncertain sound. According to some, it meant larks, revels, emancipation, and a foretaste of the bliss of manhood. According to

others,--the majority, alas!--it was a private and peculiar Hades, that could give the original institution points and a beating. When Edward was observed to be swaggering round with a jaunty air and his chest stuck out, I knew that he was contemplating his future from the one point of view. When, on the contrary, he was subdued and unaggressive, and sought the society of his sisters, I recognised that the other aspect was in the ascendant. "You can always run away, you know," I used to remark consolingly on these latter occasions; and Edward would brighten up wonderfully at the suggestion, while Charlotte melted into tears before her vision of a brother with blistered feet and an empty belly, passing nights of frost 'neath the lee of windy haystacks.

It was to Edward, of course, that the situation was chiefly productive of anxiety; and yet the ensuing change in my own circumstances and position furnished me also with food for grave reflexion. Hitherto I had acted mostly to orders. Even when I had devised and counselled any particular devilry, it had been carried out on Edward's approbation, and--as eldest--at his special risk. Henceforward I began to be anxious of the bugbear Responsibility, and to realise what a soul-throttling thing it is. True, my new position would have its compensations.

Edward had been masterful exceedingly, imperious, perhaps a little narrow; impassioned for hard facts, and with scant sympathy for make-believe. I should now be free and untrammelled; in the conception and carrying out of a scheme, I could accept and reject to better artistic purpose.

It would, moreover, be needless to be a Radical any more. Radical I never was, really, by nature or by sympathy. The part had been thrust on me one day, when Edward proposed to foist the House of Lords on our small Republic. The principles of the thing he set forth learnedly and well, and it all sounded promising enough, till he went on to explain that, for the present at least, he proposed to be the House of Lords himself. We others were to be the Commons. There would be promotions, of course, he added, dependent on service and on fitness, and open to both sexes; and to me in especial he held out hopes of speedy advancement. But in its initial stages the thing wouldn't work properly unless he were first and only Lord. Then I put my foot down promptly, and said it was all rot, and I didn't see the good of any House of Lords at all. "Then you must be a low Radical!" said Edward, with fine contempt. The inference seemed hardly necessary, but what could I do? I accepted the situation, and said firmly, Yes, I was a low Radical. In this monstrous character I had been obliged to masquerade ever since; but now I could throw it off, and look the world in the face again.

And yet, did this and other gains really out-balance my losses? Henceforth I should, it was true, be leader and chief; but I should also be the buffer between the Olympians and my little clan. To Edward this had been nothing; he had withstood the impact of Olympus without flinching, like Teneriffe or Atlas unremoved. But was I equal to the task? And was there not rather a danger that for the sake of peace and quietness I might be tempted to compromise, compound, and make terms?

sinking thus, by successive lapses, into the Blameless Prig? I don't mean, of course, that I thought out my thoughts to the exact point here set down. In those fortunate days of old one was free from the hard necessity of transmuting the vague idea into the mechanical inadequate medium of words. But the feeling was there, that I might not possess the qualities of character for so delicate a position.

The unnatural halo round Edward got more pronounced, his own demeanour more responsible and dignified, with the arrival of his new clothes. When his trunk and play-box were sent in, the approaching cleavage between our brother, who now belonged to the future, and ourselves, still claimed by the past, was accentuated indeed. His name was painted on each of them, in large letters, and after their arrival their owner used to disappear mysteriously, and be found eventually wandering round his luggage, murmuring to himself, "Edward----," in a rapt, remote sort of way. It was a weakness, of course, and pointed to a soft spot in his character; but those who can remember the sensation of first seeing their names in print will not think hardly of him.

As the short days sped by and the grim event cast its shadow longer and longer across our threshold, an unnatural politeness, a civility scarce canny, began to pervade the air. In those latter hours Edward himself was frequently heard to say "Please," and also "Would you mind fetchin' that ball?" while Harold and I would sometimes actually find ourselves trying to anticipate his wishes. As for the girls, they simply

grovelled. The Olympians, too, in their uncouth way, by gift of carnal delicacies and such-like indulgence, seemed anxious to demonstrate that they had hitherto misjudged this one of us. Altogether the situation grew strained and false, and I think a general relief was felt when the end came.

We all trooped down to the station, of course; it is only in later years that the farce of "seeing people off" is seen in its true colours. Edward was the life and soul of the party; and if his gaiety struck one at times as being a trifle overdone, it was not a moment to be critical. As we tramped along, I promised him I would ask Farmer Larkin not to kill any more pigs till he came back for the holidays, and he said he would send me a proper catapult,--the real lethal article, not a kid's plaything. Then suddenly, when we were about half-way down, one of the girls fell a-snivelling.

The happy few who dare to laugh at the woes of sea-sickness will perhaps remember how, on occasion, the sudden collapse of a fellow-voyager before their very eyes has caused them hastily to revise their self-confidence and resolve to walk more humbly for the future. Even so it was with Edward, who turned his head aside, feigning an interest in the landscape. It was but for a moment; then he recollected the hat he was wearing,--a hard bowler, the first of that sort he had ever owned. He took it off, examined it, and felt it over. Something about it seemed to give him strength, and he was a man once more.

At the station, Edward's first care was to dispose his boxes on the platform so that every one might see the labels and the lettering thereon. One did not go to school for the first time every day! Then he read both sides of his ticket carefully; shifted it to every one of his pockets in turn; and finally fell to chinking of his money, to keep his courage up. We were all dry of conversation by this time, and could only stand round and stare in silence at the victim decked for the altar. And, as I looked at Edward, in new clothes of a manly cut, with a hard hat upon his head, a railway ticket in one pocket and money of his own in the other,--money to spend as he liked and no questions asked!--I began to feel dimly how great was the gulf already yawning betwixt us. Fortunately I was not old enough to realise, further, that here on this little platform the old order lay at its last gasp, and that Edward might come back to us, but it would not be the Edward of yore, nor could things ever be the same again.

When the train steamed up at last, we all boarded it impetuously with the view of selecting the one peerless carriage to which Edward might be intrusted with the greatest comfort and honour; and as each one found the ideal compartment at the same moment, and vociferously maintained its merits, he stood some chance for a time of being left behind. A porter settled the matter by heaving him through the nearest door; and as the train moved off, Edward's head was thrust out of the window, wearing on it an unmistakable first-quality grin that he had been saving up somewhere for the supreme moment. Very small and white his face looked, on the long side of the retreating train. But the grin was

visible, undeniable, stoutly maintained; till a curve swept him from our sight, and he was borne away in the dying rumble, out of our placid backwater, out into the busy world of rubs and knocks and competition, out into the New Life.

When a crab has lost a leg, his gait is still more awkward than his wont, till Time and healing Nature make him totus teres atque rotundus once more. We straggled back from the station disjointedly; Harold, who was very silent, sticking close to me, his last slender props while the girls in front, their heads together, were already reckoning up the weeks to the holidays. Home at last, Harold suggested one or two occupations of a spicy and contraband flavour, but though we did our manful best there was no knocking any interest out of them. Then I suggested others, with the same want of success. Finally we found ourselves sitting silent on an upturned wheelbarrow, our chins on our fists, staring haggardly into the raw new conditions of our changed life, the ruins of a past behind our backs.

And all the while Selina and Charlotte were busy stuffing Edward's rabbits with unwonted forage, bilious and green; polishing up the cage of his mice till the occupants raved and swore like householders in spring-time; and collecting materials for new bows and arrows, whips, boats, guns, and four-in-hand harness, against the return of Ulysses. Little did they dream that the hero, once back from Troy and all its onsets, would scornfully condemn their clumsy but laborious armoury as rot and humbug and only fit for kids! This, with many another like

awakening, was mercifully hidden from them. Could the veil have been lifted, and the girls permitted to see Edward as he would appear a short three months hence, ragged of attire and lawless of tongue, a scorner of tradition and an adept in strange new physical tortures, one who would in the same half-hour dismember a doll and shatter a hallowed belief,--in fine, a sort of swaggering Captain, fresh from the Spanish Main,--could they have had the least hint of this, well, then perhaps--. But which of us is of mental fibre to stand the test of a glimpse into futurity? Let us only hope that, even with certain disillusionment ahead, the girls would have acted precisely as they did.

And perhaps we have reason to be very grateful that, both as children and long afterwards, we are never allowed to guess how the absorbing pursuit of the moment will appear, not only to others, but to ourselves, a very short time hence. So we pass, with a gusto and a heartiness that to an onlooker would seem almost pathetic, from one droll devotion to another misshapen passion; and who shall care to play Rhadamanthus, to appraise the record, and to decide how much of it is solid achievement, and how much the merest child's play?