

## Chapter 17

The Rev. John Starr

'What time is it now, Mum?' asked Frankie as soon as he had finished dinner on the following Sunday.

'Two o'clock.'

'Hooray! Only one more hour and Charley will be here! Oh, I wish it was three o'clock now, don't you, Mother?'

'No, dear, I don't. You're not dressed yet, you know.'

Frankie made a grimace.

'You're surely not going to make me wear my velvets, are you, Mum? Can't I go just as I am, in my old clothes?'

The 'velvets' was a brown suit of that material that Nora had made out of the least worn parts of an old costume of her own.

'Of course not: if you went as you are now, you'd have everyone staring at you.'

'Well, I suppose I'll have to put up with it,' said Frankie, resignedly.

'And I think you'd better begin to dress me now, don't you?'

'Oh, there's plenty of time yet; you'd only make yourself untidy and then I should have the trouble all over again. Play with your toys a little while, and when I've done the washing up I'll get you ready.'

Frankie obeyed, and for about ten minutes his mother heard him in the next room rummaging in the box where he stored his collection of 'things'. At the end of that time, however, he returned to the kitchen. 'Is it time to dress me yet, Mum?'

'No, dear, not yet. You needn't be afraid; you'll be ready in plenty of time.'

'But I can't help being afraid; you might forget.'

'Oh, I shan't forget. There's lots of time.'

'Well, you know, I should be much easier in my mind if you would dress me now, because perhaps our clock's wrong, or p'r'aps when you begin dressing me you'll find some buttons off or something, and then there'll be a lot of time wasted sewing them on; or p'r'aps you won't be able to find my clean stockings or something and then while you're looking for it Charley might come, and if he sees I'm not ready he mightn't wait for me.'

'Oh, dear!' said Nora, pretending to be alarmed at this appalling list of possibilities. 'I suppose it will be safer to dress you at once. It's very evident you won't let me have much peace until it is done, but mind when you're dressed you'll have to sit down quietly and wait till he comes, because I don't want the trouble of dressing you twice.'

'Oh, I don't mind sitting still,' returned Frankie, loftily. 'That's very easy.'

'I don't mind having to take care of my clothes,' said Frankie as his mother--having washed and dressed him, was putting the finishing touches to his hair, brushing and combing and curling the long yellow locks into ringlets round her fingers, 'the only thing I don't like is having my hair done. You know all these curls are quite unnecessary. I'm sure it would save you a lot of trouble if you wouldn't mind cutting them off.'

Nora did not answer: somehow or other she was unwilling to comply with this often-repeated entreaty. It seemed to her that when this hair was cut off the child would have become a different individual--more separate and independent.

'If you don't want to cut it off for your own sake, you might do it for my sake, because I think it's the reason some of the big boys don't want to play with me, and some of them shout after me and say I'm a girl, and sometimes they sneak up behind me and pull it. Only yesterday I had to have a fight with a boy for doing it: and even

Charley Linden laughs at me, and he's my best friend--except you and Dad of course.

'Why don't you cut it off, Mum?'

'I am going to cut it as I promised you, after your next birthday.'

'Then I shall be jolly glad when it comes. Won't you? Why, what's the matter, Mum? What are you crying for?' Frankie was so concerned that he began to cry also, wondering if he had done or said something wrong. He kissed her repeatedly, stroking her face with his hand. What's the matter, Mother?'

'I was thinking that when you're over seven and you've had your hair cut short you won't be a baby any more.'

'Why, I'm not a baby now, am I? Here, look at this!'

He strode over to the wall and, dragging out two chairs, he placed them in the middle of the room, back to back, about fifteen inches apart, and before his mother realized what he was doing he had climbed up and stood with one leg on the back of each chair.

'I should like to see a baby who could do this,' he cried, with his face wet with tears. 'You needn't lift me down. I can get down by myself. Babies can't do tricks like these or even wipe up the spoons and forks or sweep the passage. But you needn't cut it off if you

don't want to. I'll bear it as long as you like. Only don't cry any more, because it makes me miserable. If I cry when I fall down or when you pull my hair when you're combing it you always tell me to bear it like a man and not be a baby, and now you're crying yourself just because I'm not a baby. You ought to be jolly glad that I'm nearly grown up into a man, because you know I've promised to build you a house with the money I earn, and then you needn't do no more work. We'll have a servant the same as the people downstairs, and Dad can stop at home and sit by the fire and read the paper or play with me and Maud and have pillow fights and tell stories and--'

'It's all right, dearie,' said Nora, kissing him. 'I'm not crying now, and you mustn't either, or your eyes will be all red and you won't be able to go with Charley at all.'

When she had finished dressing him, Frankie sat for some time in silence, apparently lost in thought. At last he said:

'Why don't you get a baby, Mother? You could nurse it, and I could have it to play with instead of going out in the street.'

'We can't afford to keep a baby, dear. You know, even as it is, sometimes we have to go without things we want because we haven't the money to buy them. Babies need many things that cost lots of money.'

'When I build our house when I'm a man, I'll take jolly good care not to have a gas-stove in it. That's what runs away with all the money;

we're always putting pennies in the slot. And that reminds me: Charley said I'll have to take a ha'penny to put in the mishnery box. Oh, dear, I'm tired of sitting still. I wish he'd come. What time is it now, Mother?'

Before she could answer both Frankie's anxiety and the painful ordeal of sitting still were terminated by the loud peal at the bell announcing Charley's arrival, and Frankie, without troubling to observe the usual formality of looking out of the window to see if it was a runaway ring, had clattered half-way downstairs before he heard his mother calling him to come back for the halfpenny; then he clattered up again and then down again at such a rate and with so much noise as to rouse the indignation of all the respectable people in the house.

When he arrived at the bottom of the stairs he remembered that he had omitted to say goodbye, and as it was too far to go up again he rang the bell and then went into the middle of the road and looked up at the window that Nora opened.

'Goodbye, Mother,' he shouted. 'Tell Dad I forgot to say it before I came down.'

The School was not conducted in the chapel itself, but in a large lecture hall under it. At one end was a small platform raised about six inches from the floor; on this was a chair and a small table. A number of groups of chairs and benches were arranged at intervals round the sides and in the centre of the room, each group of seats

accommodating a separate class. On the walls--which were painted a pale green--were a number of coloured pictures: Moses striking the Rock, the Israelites dancing round the Golden Calf, and so on. As the reader is aware, Frankie had never been to a Sunday School of any kind before, and he stood for a moment looking in at the door and half afraid to enter. The lessons had already commenced, but the scholars had not yet settled down to work.

The scene was one of some disorder: some of the children talking, laughing or playing, and the teachers alternately threatening and coaxing them. The girls' and the very young children's classes were presided over by ladies: the boys' teachers were men.

The reader already has some slight knowledge of a few of these people. There was Mr Didlum, Mr Sweater, Mr Rushton and Mr Hunter and Mrs Starvem (Ruth Easton's former mistress). On this occasion, in addition to the teachers and other officials of the Sunday School, there were also present a considerable number of prettily dressed ladies and a few gentlemen, who had come in the hope of meeting the Rev. John Starr, the young clergyman who was going to be their minister for the next few weeks during the absence of their regular shepherd, Mr Belcher, who was going away for a holiday for the benefit of his health. Mr Belcher was not suffering from any particular malady, but was merely 'run down', and rumour had it that this condition had been brought about by the rigorous asceticism of his life and his intense devotion to the arduous labours of his holy calling.

Mr Starr had conducted the service in the Shining Light Chapel that morning, and a great sensation had been produced by the young minister's earnest and eloquent address, which was of a very different style from that of their regular minister. Although perhaps they had not quite grasped the real significance of all that he had said, most of them had been favourably impressed by the young clergyman's appearance and manner in the morning: but that might have arisen from prepossession and force of habit, for they were accustomed, as a matter of course, to think well of any minister. There were, however, one or two members of the congregation who were not without some misgivings and doubts as to the soundness of his doctrines. Mr Starr had promised that he would look in some time during the afternoon to say a few words to the Sunday School children, and consequently on this particular afternoon all the grown-ups were looking forward so eagerly to hearing him again that not much was done in the way of lessons. Every time a late arrival entered all eyes were directed towards the door in the hope and expectation that it was he.

When Frankie, standing at the door, saw all the people looking at him he drew back timidly.

'Come on, man,' said Charley. 'You needn't be afraid; it's not like a weekday school; they can't do nothing to us, not even if we don't behave ourselves. There's our class over in that corner and that's our teacher, Mr Hunter. You can sit next to me. Come on!'

Thus encouraged, Frankie followed Charley over to the class, and both



sat down. The teacher was so kind and spoke so gently to the children that in a few minutes Frankie felt quite at home.

When Hunter noticed how well cared for and well dressed he was he thought the child must belong to well-to-do, respectable parents. Frankie did not pay much attention to the lesson, for he was too much interested in the pictures on the walls and in looking at the other children. He also noticed a very fat man who was not teaching at all, but drifted aimlessly about the room from one class to another. After a time he came and stood by the class where Frankie was, and, after nodding to Hunter, remained near, listening and smiling patronizingly at the children. He was arrayed in a long garment of costly black cloth, a sort of frock coat, and by the rotundity of his figure he seemed to be one of those accustomed to sit in the chief places at feasts. This was the Rev. Mr Belcher, minister of the Shining Light Chapel. His short, thick neck was surrounded by a studless collar, and apparently buttonless, being fastened in some mysterious way known only to himself, and he showed no shirt front.

The long garment beforementioned was unbuttoned and through the opening there protruded a vast expanse of waistcoat and trousers, distended almost to bursting by the huge globe of flesh they contained. A gold watch-chain with a locket extended partly across the visible portion of the envelope of the globe. He had very large feet which were carefully encased in soft calfskin boots. If he had removed the long garment, this individual would have resembled a balloon: the feet representing the car and the small head that surmounted the globe, the safety valve;

as it was it did actually serve the purpose of a safety valve, the owner being, in consequence of gross overfeeding and lack of natural exercise, afflicted with chronic flatulence, which manifested itself in frequent belchings forth through the mouth of the foul gases generated in the stomach by the decomposition of the foods with which it was generally loaded. But as the Rev. Mr Belcher had never been seen with his coat off, no one ever noticed the resemblance. It was not necessary for him to take his coat off: his part in life was not to help to produce, but to help to devour the produce of the labour of others.

After exchanging a few words and grins with Hunter, he moved on to another class, and presently Frankie with a feeling of awe noticed that the confused murmuring sound that had hitherto pervaded the place was hushed. The time allotted for lessons had expired, and the teachers were quietly distributing hymn-books to the children. Meanwhile the balloon had drifted up to the end of the hall and had ascended the platform, where it remained stationary by the side of the table, occasionally emitting puffs of gas through the safety valve. On the table were several books, and also a pile of folded cards. These latter were about six inches by three inches; there was some printing on the outside: one of them was lying open on the table, showing the inside, which was ruled and had money columns.

Presently Mr Belcher reached out a flabby white hand and, taking up one of the folded cards, he looked around upon the under-fed, ill-clad children with a large, sweet, benevolent, fatherly smile, and then in a

drawling voice occasionally broken by explosions of flatulence, he said:

'My dear children. This afternoon as I was standing near Brother Hunter's class I heard him telling them of the wanderings of the Children of Israel in the wilderness, and of all the wonderful things that were done for them; and I thought how sad it was that they were so ungrateful.

'Now those ungrateful Israelites had received many things, but we have even more cause to be grateful than they had, for we have received even more abundantly than they did.' (Here the good man's voice was stilled by a succession of explosions.) 'And I am sure,' he resumed, 'that none of you would like to be even as those Israelites, ungrateful for all the good things you have received. Oh, how thankful you should be for having been made happy English children. Now, I am sure that you are grateful and that you will all be very glad of an opportunity of showing your gratitude by doing something in return.

'Doubtless some of you have noticed the unseemly condition of the interior of our Chapel. The flooring is broken in countless places. the walls are sadly in need of cleansing and distempering, and they also need cementing externally to keep out the draught. The seats and benches and the chairs are also in a most unseemly condition and need varnishing.

'Now, therefore, after much earnest meditation and prayer, it has been decided to open a Subscription List, and although times are very hard

just now, we believe we shall succeed in getting enough to have the work done; so I want each one of you to take one of these cards and go round to all your friends to see how much you can collect. It doesn't matter how trifling the amounts are, because the smallest donations will be thankfully received.

'Now, I hope you will all do your very best. Ask everyone you know; do not refrain from asking people because you think that they are too poor to give a donation, but remind them that if they cannot give their thousands they can give the widow's mite. Ask Everyone! First of all ask those whom you feel certain will give: then ask all those whom you think may possibly give: and, finally, ask all those whom you feel certain will not give: and you will be surprised to find that many of these last will donate abundantly.

'If your friends are very poor and unable to give a large donation at one time, a good plan would be to arrange to call upon them every Saturday afternoon with your card to collect their donations. And while you are asking others, do not forget to give what you can yourselves. Just a little self-denial, and those pennies and half-pennies which you so often spend on sweets and other unnecessary things might be given--as a donation--to the good cause.'

Here the holy man paused again, and there was a rumbling, gurgling noise in the interior of the balloon, followed by several escapes of gas through the safety valve. The paroxysm over, the apostle of self-denial continued:

'All those who wish to collect donations will stay behind for a few minutes after school, when Brother Hunter--who has kindly consented to act as secretary to the fund--will issue the cards.

'I would like here to say a few words of thanks to Brother Hunter for the great interest he has displayed in this matter, and for all the trouble he is taking to help us to gather in the donations.'

This tribute was well deserved; Hunter in fact had originated the whole scheme in the hope of securing the job for Rushton & Co., and two-and-a-half per cent of the profits for himself.

Mr Belcher now replaced the collecting card on the table and, taking up one of the hymn-books, gave out the words and afterwards conducted the singing, nourishing one fat, flabby white hand in the air and holding the book in the other.

As the last strains of the music died away, he closed his eyes and a sweet smile widened his mouth as he stretched forth his right hand, open, palm down, with the fingers close together, and said:

'Let us pray.'

With much shuffling of feet everyone knelt down. Hunter's lanky form was distributed over a very large area; his body lay along one of the benches, his legs and feet sprawled over the floor, and his huge hands

clasped the sides of the seat. His eyes were tightly closed and an expression of the most intense misery pervaded his long face.

Mrs Starvem, being so fat that she knew if she once knelt down she would never be able to get up again, compromised by sitting on the extreme edge of her chair, resting her elbows on the back of the seat in front of her, and burying her face in her hands. It was a very large face, but her hands were capacious enough to receive it.

In a seat at the back of the hall knelt a pale-faced, weary-looking little woman about thirty-six years of age, very shabbily dressed, who had come in during the singing. This was Mrs White, the caretaker, Bert White's mother. When her husband died, the committee of the Chapel, out of charity, gave her this work, for which they paid her six shillings a week. Of course, they could not offer her full employment; the idea was that she could get other work as well, charing and things of that kind, and do the Chapel work in between. There wasn't much to do: just the heating furnace to light when necessary; the Chapel, committee rooms, classrooms and Sunday School to sweep and scrub out occasionally; the hymn-books to collect, etc. Whenever they had a tea meeting--which was on an average about twice a week--there were the trestle tables to fix up, the chairs to arrange, the table to set out, and then, supervised by Miss Didlum or some other lady, the tea to make. There was rather a lot to do on the days following these functions: the washing up, the tables and chairs to put away, the floor to sweep, and so on; but the extra work was supposed to be compensated by the cakes and broken victuals generally left over from the feast,

which were much appreciated as a welcome change from the bread and dripping or margarine that constituted Mrs White's and Bert's usual fare.

There were several advantages attached to the position: the caretaker became acquainted with the leading members and their wives, some of who, out of charity, occasionally gave her a day's work as charwoman, the wages being on about the same generous scale as those she earned at the Chapel, sometimes supplemented by a parcel of broken victuals or some castoff clothing.

An evil-minded, worldly or unconverted person might possibly sum up the matter thus: these people required this work done: they employed this woman to do it, taking advantage of her poverty to impose upon her conditions of price and labour that they would not have liked to endure themselves. Although she worked very hard, early and late, the money they paid her as wages was insufficient to enable her to provide herself with the bare necessaries of life. Then her employers, being good, kind, generous, Christian people, came to the rescue and bestowed charity, in the form of cast-off clothing and broken victuals.

Should any such evil-minded, worldly or unconverted persons happen to read these lines, it is a sufficient answer to their impious and malicious criticisms to say that no such thoughts ever entered the simple mind of Mrs White herself: on the contrary, this very afternoon as she knelt in the Chapel, wearing an old mantle that some years previously had adorned the obese person of the saintly Mrs Starvem, her

heart was filled with gratitude towards her generous benefactors.

During the prayer the door was softly opened: a gentleman in clerical dress entered on tiptoe and knelt down next to Mr Didlum. He came in very softly, but all the same most of those present heard him and lifted their heads or peeped through their fingers to see who it was, and when they recognized him a sound like a sigh swept through the hall.

At the end of the prayer, amid groans and cries of 'Amen', the balloon slowly descended from the platform, and collapsed into one of the seats, and everyone rose up from the floor. When all were seated and the shuffling, coughing and blowing of noses had ceased Mr Didlum stood up and said:

'Before we sing the closin' ymn, the gentleman hon my left, the Rev. Mr John Starr, will say a few words.'

An expectant murmur rippled through the hall. The ladies lifted their eyebrows and nodded, smiled and whispered to each other; the gentlemen assumed various attitudes and expressions; the children were very quiet. Everyone was in a state of suppressed excitement as John Starr rose from his seat and, stepping up on to the platform, stood by the side of the table, facing them.

He was about twenty-six years of age, tall and slenderly built. His clean-cut, intellectual face, with its lofty forehead, and his air of refinement and culture were in striking contrast to the coarse



appearance of the other adults in the room: the vulgar, ignorant, uncultivated crowd of profit-mongers and hucksters in front of him. But it was not merely his air of good breeding and the general comeliness of his exterior that attracted and held one. There was an indefinable something about him--an atmosphere of gentleness and love that seemed to radiate from his whole being, almost compelling confidence and affection from all those with whom he came in contact. As he stood there facing the others with an inexpressibly winning smile upon his comely face, it seemed impossible that there could be any fellowship between him and them.

There was nothing in his appearance to give anyone even an inkling of the truth, which was: that he was there for the purpose of bolstering up the characters of the despicable crew of sweaters and slave-drivers who paid his wages.

He did not give a very long address this afternoon--only just a few words but they were very precious, original and illuminating. He told them of certain thoughts that had occurred to his mind on his way there that afternoon; and as they listened, Sweater, Rushton, Didlum, Hunter, and the other disciples exchanged significant looks and gestures. Was it not magnificent! Such power! Such reasoning! In fact, as they afterwards modestly admitted to each other, it was so profound that even they experienced great difficulty in fathoming the speaker's meaning.

As for the ladies, they were motionless and dumb with admiration. They

sat with flushed faces, shining eyes and palpitating hearts, looking hungrily at the dear man as he proceeded:

'Unfortunately, our time this afternoon does not permit us to dwell at length upon these Thoughts. Perhaps at some future date we may have the blessed privilege of so doing; but this afternoon I have been asked to say a Few Words on another subject. The failing health of your dear minister has for some time past engaged the anxious attention of the congregation.'

Sympathetic glances were directed towards the interesting invalid; the ladies murmured, 'Poor dear!' and other expressions of anxious concern.

'Although naturally robust,' continued Starr, 'long, continued Overwork, the loving solicitude for Others that often prevented him taking even necessary repose, and a too rigorous devotion to the practice of Self-denial have at last brought about the inevitable Breakdown, and rendered a period of Rest absolutely imperative.'

The orator paused to take breath, and the silence that ensued was disturbed only by faint rumblings in the interior of the ascetic victim of overwork.

'With this laudable object,' proceeded Starr, 'a Subscription List was quietly opened about a month ago, and those dear children who had cards and assisted in the good work of collecting donations will be pleased to hear that altogether a goodly sum was gathered, but as it was not

quite enough, the committee voted a further amount out of the General Fund, and at a special meeting held last Friday evening, your dear Shepherd was presented with an illuminated address, and a purse of gold sufficient to defray the expenses of a month's holiday in the South of France.

'Although, of course, he regrets being separated from you even for such a brief period he feels that in going he is choosing the lesser of two evils. It is better to go to the South of France for a month than to continue Working in spite of the warnings of exhausted nature and perhaps be taken away from you altogether--by Heaven.'

'God forbid!' fervently ejaculated several disciples, and a ghastly pallor overspread the features of the object of their prayers.

'Even as it is there is a certain amount of danger. Let us hope and pray for the best, but if the worst should happen and he is called upon to Ascend, there will be some satisfaction in knowing that you have done what you could to avert the dreadful calamity.'

Here, probably as a precaution against the possibility of an involuntary ascent, a large quantity of gas was permitted to escape through the safety valve of the balloon.

'He sets out on his pilgrimage tomorrow,' concluded Starr, 'and I am sure he will be followed by the good wishes and prayers of all the members of his flock.'

The reverend gentleman resumed his seat, and almost immediately it became evident from the oscillations of the balloon that Mr Belcher was desirous of rising to say a Few Words in acknowledgement, but he was restrained by the entreaties of those near him, who besought him not to exhaust himself. He afterwards said that he would not have been able to say much even if they had permitted him to speak, because he felt too full.

'During the absence of our beloved pastor,' said Brother Didlum, who now rose to give out the closing hymn, 'his flock will not be left hentirely without a shepherd, for we 'ave arranged with Mr Starr to come and say a Few Words to us hevery Sunday.'

From the manner in which they constantly referred to themselves, it might have been thought that they were a flock of sheep instead of being what they really were--a pack of wolves.

When they heard Brother Didlum's announcement a murmur of intense rapture rose from the ladies, and Mr Starr rolled his eyes and smiled sweetly. Brother Didlum did not mention the details of the 'arrangement', to have done so at that time would have been most unseemly, but the following extract from the accounts of the chapel will not be out of place here: 'Paid to Rev. John Starr for Sunday, Nov. 14--£4.4.0 per the treasurer.' It was not a large sum considering the great services rendered by Mr Starr, but, small as it was, it is to be feared that many worldly, unconverted persons will think it was far

too much to pay for a Few Words, even such wise words as Mr John Starr's admittedly always were. But the Labourer is worthy of his hire.

After the 'service' was over, most of the children, including Charley and Frankie, remained to get collecting cards. Mr Starr was surrounded by a crowd of admirers, and a little later, when he rode away with Mr Belcher and Mr Sweater in the latter's motor car, the ladies looked hungrily after that conveyance, listening to the melancholy 'pip, pip' of its hooter and trying to console themselves with the reflection that they would see him again in a few hours' time at the evening service.