

§ 2

You did not come to see your dead grandfather, nor did you know very much about the funeral. Nowadays we do not bring the sweet egotisms, the vivid beautiful personal intensities of childhood, into the cold, vast presence of death. I would as soon, my dear, have sent your busy little limbs toiling up the Matterhorn. I have put by a photograph of my father for you as he lay in that last stillness of his, that you will see at a properer time.

Your mother and I wore black only at his funeral and came back colored again into your colored world, and in a very little while your interest in this event that had taken us away for a time turned to other, more assimilable things. But there happened a little incident that laid hold upon me; you forgot it, perhaps, in a week or less, but I shall never forget it; and this incident it was that gathered up the fruits of those moments beside my father's body and set me to write this book. It had the effect of a little bright light held up against the vague dark immensities of thought and feeling that filled my mind because of my father's death.

Now that I come to set it down I see that it is altogether trivial, and I cannot explain how it is that it is to me so piercingly significant. I had to whip you. Your respect for the admirable and patient Mademoiselle Potin, the protectress and companion of your public expeditions, did in some slight crisis suddenly fail you. In the extreme

publicity of Kensington Gardens, in the presence of your two little sisters, before a startled world, you expressed an opinion of her, in two languages and a loud voice, that was not only very unjust, but extremely offensive and improper. It reflected upon her intelligence and goodness; it impeached her personal appearance; it was the kind of outcry no little gentleman should ever permit himself, however deeply he may be aggrieved. You then, so far as I was able to disentangle the evidence, assaulted her violently, hurled a stone at her, and fled her company. You came home alone by a route chosen by yourself, flushed and wrathful, braving the dangers of Kensington High Street. This, after my stern and deliberate edict that, upon pain of corporal punishment, respect and obedience must be paid to Mademoiselle Potin. The logic of the position was relentless.

But where your behavior was remarkable, where the affair begins to touch my imagination, was that you yourself presently put the whole business before me. Alone in the schoolroom, you seem to have come to some realization of the extraordinary dreadfulness of your behavior. Such moments happen in the lives of all small boys; they happened to me times enough, to my dead father, to that grandfather of the portrait which is now in my study, to his father and his, and so on through long series of Strattons, back to inarticulate, shock-haired little sinners slinking fearfully away from the awful wrath, the bellowings and limitless violence of the hairy Old Man of the herd. The bottom goes out of your heart then, you are full of a conviction of sin. So far you did but carry on the experience of the race. But to ask audience of me, to come

and look me in the eye, to say you wanted my advice on a pressing matter, that I think marks almost a new phase in the long developing history of father and son. And your account of the fracas struck me as quite reasonably frank and honest. "I didn't seem able," you observed, "not to go on being badder and badder."

We discussed the difficulties of our situation, and you passed sentence upon yourself. I saw to it that the outraged dignity of Mademoiselle Potin was mocked by no mere formality of infliction. You did your best to be stoical, I remember, but at last you yelped and wept. Then, justice being done, you rearranged your costume. The situation was a little difficult until you, still sobbing and buttoning--you are really a shocking bad hand at buttons--and looking a very small, tender, ruffled, rueful thing indeed, strolled towards my study window. "The pear tree is out next door," you remarked, without a trace of animosity, and sobbing as one might hiccough.

I suppose there are moments in the lives of all grown men when they come near to weeping aloud. In some secret place within myself I must have been a wild river of tears. I answered, however, with the same admirable detachment from the smarting past that you had achieved, that my study window was particularly adapted to the appreciation of our neighbor's pear tree, because of its height from the ground. We fell into a conversation about blossom and the setting of fruit, kneeling together upon my window-seat and looking up into the pear tree against the sky, and then down through its black branches into the gardens all

quickenings with spring. We were on so friendly a footing when presently Mademoiselle Potin returned and placed her dignity or her resignation in my hands, that I doubt if she believed a word of all my assurances until the unmistakable confirmation of your evening bath. Then, as I understood it, she was extremely remorseful to you and indignant against my violence....

But when I knelt with you, little urchin, upon my window-seat, it came to me as a thing almost intolerably desirable that some day you should become my real and understanding friend. I loved you profoundly. I wanted to stretch forward into time and speak to you, man myself to the man you are yet to be. It seemed to me that between us there must needs be peculiar subtleties of sympathy. And I remembered that by the time you were a man fully grown and emerging from the passionately tumultuous openings of manhood, capable of forgiving me all my blundering parentage, capable of perceiving all the justifying fine intention of my ill-conceived disciplines and misdirections, I might be either an old man, shriveling again to an inexplicable egotism, or dead. I saw myself as I had seen my father--first enfeebled and then inaccessibly tranquil. When presently you had gone from my study, I went to my writing-desk and drew a paper pad towards me, and sat thinking and making idle marks upon it with my pen. I wanted to exceed the limits of those frozen silences that must come at last between us, write a book that should lie in your world like a seed, and at last, as your own being ripened, flower into living understanding by your side.

This book, which before had been only an idea for a book, competing against many other ideas and the demands of that toilsome work for peace and understanding to which I have devoted the daily energies of my life, had become, I felt, an imperative necessity between us.