

§ 3

And then there happened one of those crises of dread and apprehension and pain that are like a ploughing of the heart. It was brought home to me that you might die even before the first pages of this book of yours were written. You became feverish, complained of that queer pain you had felt twice before, and for the third time you were ill with appendicitis. Your mother and I came and regarded your tousled head and flushed little face on the pillow as you slept uneasily, and decided that we must take no more risks with you. So soon as your temperature had fallen again we set about the business of an operation.

We told each other that nowadays these operations were as safe as going to sleep in your bed, but we knew better. Our own doctor had lost his son. "That," we said, "was different." But we knew well enough in our hearts that you were going very near to the edge of death, nearer than you had ever been since first you came clucking into the world.

The operation was done at home. A capable, fair-complexioned nurse took possession of us; and my study, because it has the best light, was transfigured into an admirable operating-room. All its furnishings were sent away, every cloth and curtain, and the walls and floor were covered with white sterilized sheets. The high little mechanical table they erected before the window seemed to me like an altar on which I had to offer up my son. There were basins of disinfectants and towels conveniently about, the operator came, took out his array of scalpels

and forceps and little sponges from the black bag he carried, put them ready for his hand, and then covered them from your sight with a white cloth, and I brought you down in my arms, wrapped in a blanket, from your bedroom to the anæsthetist. You were beautifully trustful and submissive and unafraid. I stood by you until the chloroform had done its work, and then left you there, lest my presence should in the slightest degree embarrass the surgeon. The anæsthetic had taken all the color out of your face, and you looked pinched and shrunken and greenish and very small and pitiful. I went into the drawing-room and stood there with your mother and made conversation. I cannot recall what we said, I think it was about the moorland to which we were going for your convalescence. Indeed, we were but the ghosts of ourselves; all our substance seemed listening, listening to the little sounds that came to us from the study.

Then after long ages there was a going to and fro of feet, a bump, the opening of a door, and our own doctor came into the room rubbing his hands together and doing nothing to conceal his profound relief.

"Admirable," he said, "altogether successful." I went up to you and saw a tumbled little person in the bed, still heavily insensible and moaning slightly. By the table were bloody towels, and in a shallow glass tray was a small object like a damaged piece of earthworm. "Not a bit too soon," said the surgeon, holding this up in his forceps for my inspection. "It's on the very verge of perforation." I affected a detached and scientific interest, but the prevailing impression in my mind was that this was a fragment from very nearly the centre of your

being.

He took it away with him, I know not whither. Perhaps it is now in spirits in a specimen jar, an example to all medical students of what to avoid in an appendix; perhaps it was stained and frozen, and microtomed into transparent sections as they do such things, and mounted on glass slips and distributed about the world for curious histologists to wreak their eyes upon. For a time you lay uneasily still and then woke up to pain. Even then you got a fresh purchase on my heart. It has always been our custom to discourage weeping and outcries, and you did not forget your training. "I shan't mind so much, dadda," you remarked to me, "if I may yelp." So for a day, by special concession, you yelped, and then the sting of those fresh wounds departed.

Within a fortnight, so quickly does an aseptic wound heal up again, you were running about in the sun, and I had come back, as one comes back to a thing forgotten, to the first beginnings of this chapter on my desk. But for a time I could not go on working at it because of the fear I had felt, and it is only now in June, in this house in France to which we have come for the summer, with you more flagrantly healthy than I have ever known you before, that my heart creeps out of its hole again, and I can go on with my story.

CHAPTER THE SECOND

BOYHOOD

§ 1

I was a Harbury boy as my father and grandfather were before me and as you are presently to be. I went to Harbury at the age of fourteen. Until then I was educated at home, first by a governess and then by my father's curate, Mr. Siddons, who went from us to St. Philip's in Hampstead, and, succeeding marvellously there, is now Bishop of Exminster. My father became rector of Burnmore when I was nine; my mother had been dead four years, and my second cousin, Jane Stratton, was already his housekeeper. My father held the living until his resignation when I was nearly thirty. So that all the most impressionable years of my life centre upon the Burnmore rectory and the easy spaciousness of Burnmore Park. My boyhood and adolescence alternated between the ivied red-brick and ancient traditions of Harbury (and afterwards Christ-church) and that still untroubled countryside.

I was never a town dweller until I married and we took our present house in Holland Park. I went into London at last as one goes into an arena. It cramps me and wearies me and at times nearly overwhelms me, but there it is that the life of men centres and my work lies. But every

summer we do as we have done this year and go to some house in the country, near to forests or moorland or suchlike open and uncultivated country, where one may have the refreshment of freedom among natural and unhurried things. This year we are in a walled garden upon the Seine, about four miles above Château Galliard, and with the forest reaching up to the paddock beyond the orchard close....

You will understand better when I have told you my story why I saw Burnmore for the last time when I was one-and-twenty and why my memories of it shine so crystalline clear. I have a thousand vivid miniatures of it in my mind and all of them are beautiful to me, so that I could quite easily write a whole book of landscapes from the Park alone. I can still recall quite vividly the warm beauty-soaked sensation of going out into the morning sunshine of the Park, with my lunch in a little green Swiss tin under my arm and the vast interminable day all before me, the gigantic, divinely unconditional day that only boyhood knows, and the Park so great and various that it was more than two hours' going for me to reach its eastern fences. I was only a little older then than you are now. Sometimes I went right up through the woods to the house to companion with Philip and Guy Christian and their sister--I loved her then, and one day I was to love her with all my heart--but in those boyish times I liked most to go alone.

My memories of the Park are all under blue sky and sunshine, with just a thunderstorm or so; on wet days and cold days I was kept to closer limits; and it seems to me now rather an intellectual conviction than a

positive memory that save for a few pine-clad patches in the extreme south-east, its soil was all thick clay. That meant for me only beautiful green marshes, a number of vividly interesting meres upon the course of its stream, and a wealth of gigantic oaks. The meres lay at various levels, and the hand of Lady Ladislaw had assisted nature in their enrichment with lilies and water plants. There were places of sedge and scented rush, amidst which were sapphire mists of forget-me-not for long stretches, skirmishing commandoes of yellow iris and wide wastes of floating water-lilies. The gardens passed insensibly into the Park, and beyond the house were broad stretches of grass, sun-lit, barred with the deep-green shadows of great trees, and animated with groups and lines of fallow deer. Near the house was an Italianate garden, with balustradings and statuary, and a great wealth of roses and flowering shrubs.

Then there were bracken wildernesses in which the does lurked with the young fawns, and a hollow, shallow and wide, with the turf greatly attacked by rabbits, and exceptionally threadbare, where a stricken oak, lightning-stripped, spread out its ghastly arms above contorted rotting branches and the mysterious skeletons of I should think five several deer. In the evening-time the woods behind this place of bones--they were woods of straight-growing, rather crowded trees and standing as it were a little aloof--became even under the warmest sunset grey and cold--and as if they waited....

And in the distant corner where the sand was, rose suddenly a steep

little hill, surmounted by a wild and splendid group of pines, through which one looked across a vale of cornfields at an ancient town that became strange and magical as the sun went down, so that I was held gazing at it, and afterwards had to flee the twilight across the windy spaces and under the dim and darkling trees. It is only now in the distant retrospect that I identify that far-off city of wonder, and luminous mist with the commonplace little town, through whose narrow streets we drove to the railway station. But, of course, that is what it must have been.

There are persons to be found mixed up in those childish memories,--Lady Ladislaw, tall and gracious, in dresses of floating blue or grey, or thin, subtly folding, flowering stuffs, Philip and his sister, Guy, the old butler, a multitude of fainter figures long become nameless and featureless; they are far less vivid in my memory than the fine solitudes of the Park itself--and the dreams I had there.

I wonder if you dream as I dreamt. I wonder whether indeed I dreamt as now I think I did. Have I, in these latter years, given form and substance and a name to things as vague in themselves as the urgencies of instinct? Did I really go into those woods and waving green places as one keeps a tryst, expectant of a fellowship more free and delicate and delightful than any I knew. Did I know in those days of nymphs and dryads and fauns and all those happy soulless beings with which the desire of man's heart has animated the wilderness. Once certainly I crawled slowly through the tall bracken and at last lay still for an

interminable while, convinced that so I should see those shadows
populous with fairies, with green little people. How patiently I lay!
But the stems creaked and stirred, and my heart would keep on beating
like a drum in my throat.

It is incredible that once a furry whispering half-human creature with
bright brown eyes came and for a time played with me near where the tall
ferns foam in a broad torrent from between the big chestnuts down to the
upper mere. That must have been real dreaming, and yet now, with all my
sanities and scepticisms, I could half believe it real.

§ 2

You become reserved. Perhaps not exceptionally so, but as all children become reserved. Already you understand that your heart is very precious to you. You keep it from me and everyone, so much so, so justifiably so, that when by virtue of our kindred and all that we have in common I get sudden glimpses right into your depths, there mixes with the swift spasm of love I feel, a dread--lest you should catch me, as it were, spying into you and that one of us, I know not which, should feel ashamed.

Every child passes into this secret stage; it closes in from its first frankness; it carries off the growing jewel of its consciousness to hide from all mankind.... I think I can see why this should be so, but I cannot tell why in so many cases no jewel is given back again at last, alight, ripened, wonderful, glowing with the deep fires of experience. I think that is what ought to happen; it is what does happen now with true poets and true artists. Someday I think it will be the life of all normal human souls. But usually it does not seem to happen at all. Children pass out of a stage--open, beautiful, exquisitely simple--into silences and discretions beneath an imposed and artificial life. And they are lost. Out of the finished, careful, watchful, restrained and limited man or woman, no child emerges again....

I remember very distinctly how I myself came by imperceptible increments of reservation to withdraw those early delicacies of judgments, those

original and personal standards and appreciations, from sight and expression. I can recall specific moments when I perceive now that my little childish figure stood, as it were, obstinately and with a sense of novelty in a doorway denying the self within.

It was partly, I think, a simple instinct that drew that curtain of silences and concealments, it was much more a realization that I had no power of lucidity to save the words and deeds I sought to make expressive from complete misunderstanding. But most of all it was the perception that I was under training and compulsion for ends that were all askew and irrelevant to the trend of my imaginations, the quality of my dreams. There was around me something unfriendly to this inner world--something very ready to pass from unfriendliness to acute hostility; and if, indeed, I succeeded in giving anything of my inner self to others, it was only, as people put it, to give myself away.

My nurses, my governess, my tutor, my father, the servants about me, seemed all bent upon imposing an artificial personality upon me. Only in a very limited sense did they want me. What they wanted was something that could be made out of me by extensive suppressions and additions. They ignored the fact that I had been born with a shape of my own; they were resolved I should be pressed into a mould and cast.

It was not that they wanted outer conformity to certain needs and standards--that, I think, would be a reasonable thing enough to demand--but they wanted me to subdue my most private thoughts to their

ideals. My nurses and my governesses would rate me for my very feelings, would clamor for gratitude and reproach me bitterly for betraying that I did not at some particular moment--love.

(Only yesterday I heard Mademoiselle Potin doing that very same thing to you. "It is that you do not care, Master Steve. It is that you do not care. You do not want to care.")

They went too far in that invasion of my personal life, but I perceive quite clearly the present need for most of the process of moulding and subjugation that children must undergo. Human society is a new thing upon the earth, an invention of the last ten thousand years. Man is a creature as yet not freely and instinctively gregarious; in his more primordial state he must have been an animal of very small groups and limited associations, an animal rather self-centred and fierce, and he is still but imperfectly adapted either morally or physically to the wider social life his crowding interactions force upon him. He still learns speech and computation and civility and all the devices of this artificially extended and continually broadening tribal life with an extreme reluctance. He has to be shaped in the interests of the species, I admit, to the newer conditions; the growing social order must be protected from the keen edge of his still savage individuality, and he must be trained in his own interests to save himself from the destruction of impossible revolts. But how clumsily is the thing done! How we are caught and jammed and pressed and crippled into citizenship! How excessive and crushing is the suppression, and how inadequate!

Every child feels that, even if every child does not clearly know it.
Every child presently begins to hide itself from the confused tyrannies
of the social process, from the searching inspections and injunctions
and interferences of parent and priest and teacher.

"I have got to be so," we all say deep down in ourselves and more or
less distinctly according to the lucidities of our minds; "but in my
heart I am this."

And in the outcome we all try to seem at least to be so, while an
ineffectual rebel struggles passionately, like a beast caught in a trap,
for ends altogether more deep and dangerous, for the rose and the star
and the wildfire,--for beauty and beautiful things. These, we all know
in our darkly vital recesses, are the real needs of life, the obediences
imposed upon us by our crude necessities and jostling proximities, mere
incidentals on our way to those profounder purposes....

And when I write thus of our selves I mean our bodies quite as much as
our imaginations; the two sides of us are covered up alike and put alike
into disguises and unnatural shapes, we are taught and forced to hide
them for the same reasons, from a fear of ourselves and a fear of the
people about us. The sense of beauty, the sense of one's body, the
freedom of thought and of desire and the wonder of life, are all
interwoven strands. I remember that in the Park of Burnmore one great
craving I had was to take off my clothes there altogether, and bathe in

a clear place among loosestrife and meadowsweet, and afterwards lie wet and naked upon the soft green turf with the sun shining upon me. But I thought also that that was a very wicked and shameful craving to have, and I never dared give way to it.

§ 3

As I think of myself and all these glowing secrecies and hidden fancies within, walking along beside old Siddons, and half listening to his instructive discourse, I see myself as though I was an image of all humanity under tuition for the social life.

I write "old Siddons," for so he seemed to me then. In truth he was scarcely a dozen years older than I, and the other day when I exchanged salutations with his gaitered presence in the Haymarket, on his way I suppose to the Athenæum, it struck me that he it is who is now the younger man. But at Burnmore he was eighteen inches or more above my head and all the way of school and university beyond me; full of the world they had fitted him for and eager to impart its doctrines. He went along in his tweeds that were studiously untidy, a Norfolk jacket of one clerically-greyish stuff and trousers of another somewhat lighter pattern, in thick boots, the collar of his calling, and a broad-minded hat, bearing his face heavenward as he talked, and not so much aware of me as appreciating the things he was saying. And sometimes he was manifestly talking to himself and airing his outlook. He carried a walking-stick, a manly, homely, knobby, donnish walking-stick.

He forced the pace a little, for his legs were long and he had acquired the habit of strenuous pedestrianism at Oxford with all the other things; he obliged me to go at a kind of skipping trot, and he preferred the high roads towards Wickenham for our walks, because they were

flatter and there was little traffic upon them in those days before the motor car, and we could keep abreast and go on talking uninterrupted. That is to say, he could.

What talk it was!

Of all the virtues that the young should have. He spoke of courage and how splendid it was to accustom oneself not even to feel fear; of truth, and difficult cases when one might conceivably injure others by telling the truth and so perhaps, perhaps qualify the rigor of one's integrity, but how one should never hesitate to injure one's own self in that matter. Then in another phase he talked of belief--and the disagreeableness of dissenters. But here, I remember, there was a discussion. I have forgotten how I put the thing, but in some boyish phrasing or other I must have thrown out the idea that thought is free and beliefs uncontrollable. What of conformity, if the truth was that you doubted? "Not if you make an effort," I remember him saying, "not if you make an effort. I have had my struggles. But if you say firmly to yourself, the Church teaches this. If you dismiss mere carping and say that."

"But suppose you can't," I must have urged.

"You can if you will," he said with a note near enthusiasm. "I have been through all that. I did it. I dismissed doubts. I wouldn't listen. I felt, This won't do. All this leads nowhere."

And he it was told me the classic story of that presumptuous schoolboy who went to his Head Master and declared himself an atheist. There were no dialectics but a prompt horse-whipping. "In after life," said Mr. Siddons, with unctuous gratification, "he came to recognize that thrashing as the very best thing that had ever happened to him. The kindest thing."

"Yes," urged the obstinate rebel within me, "but--the Truth, that fearless insistence on the Truth!"

I could, however, find nothing effective to say aloud, and Siddons prevailed over me. That story made my blood boil, it filled me with an anticipatory hatred of and hostility to Head Masters, and at the same time there was something in it, brutally truer to the conditions of human association than any argument.

I do not remember the various steps by which I came to be discussing doubts so early in my life. I could not have been much more than thirteen when that conversation occurred. I am I think perhaps exceptionally unconscious about myself. I find I can recall the sayings and even the gestures of other people far more distinctly than the things I said and did myself. Even my dreams and imaginings are more active than my positive thoughts and proceedings. But I was no doubt very much stimulated by the literature lying about my home and the gleams and echoes of controversies that played like summer lightning

round and about the horizons of my world. Over my head and after I had gone to bed, my father and Siddons were talking, my cousin was listening with strained apprehensions, there was a new spirit in my father's sermons; it was the storm of Huxley-Darwin controversies that had at last reached Burnmore. I was an intelligent little listener, an eager reader of anything that came to hand, Mr. Siddons had a disposition to fight his battles over again in his monologues to me; and after all at thirteen one isn't a baby. The small boy of the lower classes used in those days to start life for himself long before then.

How dramatic a phase it was in the history of the human mind when science suddenly came into the vicarages, into all the studies and quiet places that had been the fastnesses of conviction and our ideals, and denied, with all the power of evidence it had been accumulating for so long, and so obscurely and inaggressively, with fossils and strata, with embryology and comparative anatomy, the doctrine of the historical Fall and all the current scheme of orthodoxy that was based on that! What a quickening shock it must have been in countless thousands of educated lives! And my father after a toughly honest resistance was won over to Darwinism, the idea of Evolution got hold of him, the idea that life itself was intolerant of vain repetitions; and he had had to "consider his position" in the church. To him as to innumerable other honest, middle-aged and comfortable men, Darwinism came as a dreadful invitation to go out into the wilderness. Over my head and just out of range of my ears he was debating that issue with Siddons as a foil and my cousin as a horrified antagonist. Slowly he was developing his conception of

compromise. And meanwhile he wasn't going out into the wilderness at all, but punctually to and fro, along the edge of the lawn by the bed of hollyhocks and through the little green door in the garden wall, and across the corner of the churchyard to the vestry and the perennial services and sacraments of the church.

But he never talked to me privately of religion. He left that for my cousin and Mr. Siddons to do or not to do as they felt disposed, and in those silences of his I may have found another confirmation of my growing feeling that religion was from one point of view a thing somehow remote and unreal, claiming unjustifiable interventions in the detailed conduct of my life, and from another a peculiar concern of my father's and Mr. Siddons', to which they went--through the vestry, changing into strange garments on the way.