

§ 4

I do not want to leave the impression which my last section may have conveyed that at the age of thirteen or thereabouts I walked about with Mr. Siddons discussing doubt in a candid and intelligent manner and maintaining theological positions. That particular conversation, you must imagine with Mr. Siddons somewhat monologuing, addressing himself not only to my present self, but with an unaccustomed valiance to my absent father. What I may have said or not said, whether I did indeed dispute or merely and by a kind of accident implied objections, I have altogether forgotten long ago.

A boy far more than a man is mentally a discontinuous being. The drifting chaos of his mind makes its experimental beginnings at a hundred different points and in a hundred different spirits and directions; here he flashes into a concrete realization, here into a conviction unconsciously incompatible; here is something originally conceived, here something uncritically accepted. I know that I criticized Mr. Siddons quite acutely, and disbelieved in him. I know also that I accepted all sorts of suggestions from him quite unhesitatingly and that I did my utmost to satisfy his standards and realize his ideals of me.

Like an outer casing to that primordial creature of senses and dreams which came to the surface in the solitudes of the Park was my Siddonsesque self, a high-minded and clean and brave English boy,

conscientiously loyal to queen and country, athletic and a good sportsman and acutely alive to good and bad "form." Mr. Siddons made me aware of my clothed self as a visible object, I surveyed my garmented being in mirrors and was trained to feel the "awfulness" of various other small boys who appeared transitorily in the smaller Park when Lady Ladislaw extended her wide hospitality to certain benevolent London associations. Their ill-fitting clothing, their undisciplined outcries, their slouching, their bad throwing and defective aspirates were made matters for detestation in my plastic mind. Those things, I was assured, placed them outside the pale of any common humanity.

"Very unfortunate and all that," said Mr. Siddons, "and uncommonly good of Lady Ladislaw to have them down. But dirty little cads, Stephen, dirty little cads; so don't go near 'em if you can help it."

They played an indecent sort of cricket with coats instead of a wicket!

Mr. Siddons was very grave about games and the strict ritual and proper apparatus for games. He believed that Waterloo was won by the indirect influence of public school cricket--disregarding many other contributory factors. We did not play very much, but we "practised" sedulously at a net in the paddock with the gardener and the doctor's almost grown-up sons. I thought missing a possible catch was an impropriety. I studiously maintained the correct attitude, alert and elastic, while I was fielding. Moreover I had a shameful secret, that I did not really know where a ball ought to pitch. I wasn't clear about it and I did not

dare to ask. Also until I was nearly thirteen I couldn't bowl overarm. Such is the enduring force of early suggestion, my dear son, that I feel a faint twinge of shame as I set this down for your humiliated eyes. But so it was. May you be more precocious!

Then I was induced to believe that I really liked hunting and killing things. In the depths of my being I was a gentle and primitive savage towards animals; I believed they were as subtle and wise as myself and full of a magic of their own, but Mr. Siddons nevertheless got me out into the south Warren, where I had often watched the rabbits setting their silly cock-eared sentinels and lolloping out to feed about sundown, and beguiled me into shooting a furry little fellow-creature--I can still see its eyelid quiver as it died--and carrying it home in triumph. On another occasion I remember I was worked up into a ferocious excitement about the rats in the old barn. We went ratting, just as though I was Tom Brown or Harry East or any other of the beastly little models of cant and cruelty we English boys were trained to imitate. It was great sport. It was a tremendous spree. The distracted movements, the scampering and pawing of the little pink forefeet of one squawking little fugitive, that I hit with a stick and then beat to a shapeless bag of fur, haunted my dreams for years, and then I saw the bowels of another still living victim that had been torn open by one of the terriers, and abruptly I fled out into the yard and was violently sick; the best of the fun was over so far as I was concerned.

My cousin saved me from the uttermost shame of my failure by saying

that I had been excited too soon after my dinner....

And also I collected stamps and birds' eggs.

Mr. Siddons hypnotized me into believing that I really wanted these things; he gave me an egg-cabinet for a birthday present and told me exemplary stories of the wonderful collections other boys had made. My own natural disposition to watch nests and establish heaven knows what friendly intimacy with the birds--perhaps I dreamt their mother might let me help to feed the young ones--gave place to a feverish artful hunting, a clutch, and then, detestable process, the blowing of the egg. Of course we were very humane; we never took the nest, but just frightened off the sitting bird and grabbed a warm egg or so. And the poor perforated, rather damaged little egg-shells accumulated in the drawers, against the wished-for but never actually realized day of glory when we should meet another collector who wouldn't have--something that we had. So far as it was for anything and not mere imbecile imitateness, it was for that.

And writing thus of eggs reminds me that I got into a row with Mr. Siddons for cruelty.

I discovered there was the nest of a little tit in a hole between two stones in the rock bank that bordered the lawn. I found it out when I was sitting on the garden seat near by, learning Latin irregular verbs. I saw the minute preposterous round birds going and coming, and I found

something so absurdly amiable and confiding about them--they sat balancing and oscillating on a standard rose and cheeped at me to go and then dived nestward and gave away their secret out of sheer impatience--that I could not bring myself to explore further, and kept the matter altogether secret from the enthusiasm of Mr. Siddons. And in a few days there were no more eggs and I could hear the hungry little nestlings making the minutest of fairy hullabalooos, the very finest spun silk of sound; a tremendous traffic in victual began and I was the trusted friend of the family.

Then one morning I was filled with amazement and anguish. There was a rock torn down and lying in the path; a paw had gone up to that little warm place. Across the gravel, shreds of the nest and a wisp or so of down were scattered. I could imagine the brief horrors of that night attack. I started off, picking up stones as I went, to murder that sandy devil, the stable cat. I got her once--alas! that I am still glad to think of it--and just missed her as she flashed, a ginger streak, through the gate into the paddock.

"Now Steve! Now!" came Mr. Siddons' voice behind me....

How can one explain things of that sort to a man like Siddons? I took my lecture on the Utter Caddishness of Wanton Cruelty in a black rebellious silence. The affair and my own emotions were not only far beyond my powers of explanation, but far beyond my power of understanding. Just then my soul was in shapeless and aimless revolt against something

greater and higher and deeper and darker than Siddons, and his reproaches were no more than the chattering of a squirrel while a storm uproots great trees. I wanted to kill the cat. I wanted to kill whatever had made that cat.