

XI

THE RUNAWAY PERAMBULATOR

I SOMETIMES met David in public places such as the Kensington Gardens, where he lorded it surrounded by his suite and wearing the blank face and glass eyes of all carriage people. On these occasions I always stalked by, meditating on higher things, though Mary seemed to think me very hard-hearted, and Irene, who had become his nurse (I forget how, but fear I had something to do with it), ran after me with messages, as, would I not call and see him in his home at twelve o'clock, at which moment, it seemed, he was at his best.

No, I would not.

'He says tick-tack to the clock,' Irene said, trying to snare me.

'Pooh!' said I.

'Other little 'uns jest says "tick-tick,"' she told me, with a flush of pride.

'I prefer "tick-tick,"' I said, whereat she departed in dudgeon.

Had they had the sense to wheel him behind a tree and leave him, I would have looked ; but as they lacked it, I decided to wait until he could walk, when it would be more easy to waylay him. However, he was a cautious little gorbal who, after many threats to rise, always seemed to come to the conclusion that he might do worse than remain where he was, and when he had completed his first year I lost patience with him.

‘When I was his age,’ I said to Irene, ‘I was running about.’ I consulted them casually about this matter at the club, and they had all been running about at a year old.

I made this nurse the following offer : If she would bring the dilatory boy to my rooms, and leave him there for half an hour, I would look at him. At first Mary, to whom the offer was passed on, rejected it with hauteur ; but presently she wavered, and the upshot was that Irene, looking scornful and anxious, arrived one day with the perambulator. Without casting eyes on its occupant, I pointed Irene to the door : ‘In half an hour,’ I said.

She begged permission to remain, and promised to turn her back, and so on ; but I was obdurate, and she then delivered herself of a passionately

affectionate farewell to her charge, which was really all directed against me, and ended with these powerful words : 'And if he takes off your socks, my pretty, may he be blasted for evermore.'

'I shall probably take off her socks,' I said carelessly to this.

Her socks. - Do you see what made Irene scream?

'It is a girl, is it not?' I asked, thus neatly depriving her of coherent speech as I pushed her to the door. I then turned round to—to begin, and, after reflecting, I began by sitting down behind the hood of his carriage. My plan was to accustom him to his new surroundings before bursting on the scene myself.

I had various thoughts. Was he awake? If not, better let him wake naturally. Half an hour was a long time. Why had I not said quarter of an hour? Anon, I saw that if I was to sit there much longer I should have said an hour, so I whistled softly ; but he took no notice. I remember trying to persuade myself that if I never budged till Irene's return, it would be an amusing triumph over Mary. I coughed, but still there was no response. Abruptly the fear smote me. Perhaps he is not there.

I rose hastily, and was striding forward, when I distinctly noticed a covert movement somewhere near the middle of the carriage, and heard a low gurgle, which was instantly suppressed. I stopped dead at this sharp reminder that I was probably not the only curious person in the room, and for a long moment we both lay low, after which, I am glad to remember, I made the first advance. Earlier in the day I had arranged some likely articles on a side-table : my watch and chain, my bunch of keys, and two war-medals for plodding merit, and with a glance at these (as something to fall back upon), I stepped forward doggedly, looking (I fear now) a little like a professor of legerdemain. David was sitting up, and he immediately fixed his eyes on me.

It would ill become me to attempt to describe this dear boy to you, for of course I know really nothing about children, so I shall say only this, that I thought him very like what Timothy would have been had he ever had a chance.

I, to whom David had been brought for judgment, now found myself being judged by him, and this rearrangement of the pieces seemed so natural that I felt no surprise ; I felt only a humble craving to hear him signify that I would do. I have stood

up before other keen judges and deceived them all, but I made no effort to deceive David ; I wanted to, but dared not. Those unblinking eyes were too new to the world to be hooded by any of its tricks. In them I saw my true self. They opened for me that peddler's pack of which I have made so much ado, and I found that it was weighted less with pretty little sad love-tokens than with ignoble thoughts and deeds and an unguided life. I looked dejectedly at David, not so much, I think, because I had such a sorry display for him, as because I feared he would not have me in his service. I seemed to know that he was making up his mind once and for all.

And in the end he smiled ; perhaps only because I looked so frightened, but the reason scarcely mattered to me. I felt myself a fine fellow at once. It was a long smile, too, opening slowly to its fullest extent (as if to let me in), and then as slowly shutting.

Then, to divert me from sad thoughts, or to rivet our friendship, or because the time had come for each of us to show the other what he could do, he immediately held one foot high in the air. This made him slide down the perambulator, and I saw at once that it was very necessary to replace

him. But never before had I come into such close contact with a child; the most I had ever done was, when they were held up to me, to shut my eyes and kiss a vacuum. David, of course, though no doubt he was eternally being replaced, could tell as little as myself how it was contrived, and yet we managed it between us quite easily. His body instinctively assumed a certain position as I touched him, which compelled my arms to fall into place, and the thing was done. I felt absurdly pleased, but he was already considering what he should do next.

He again held up his foot, which had a gouty appearance owing to its being contained in a dumpy little worsted sock, and I thought he proposed to repeat his first performance; but in this I did him an injustice, for, unlike Porthos, he was one who scorned to do the same feat twice; perhaps, like the conjurers, he knew that the audience were more on the alert the second time.

I discovered that he wanted me to take off his sock!

Remembering Irene's dread warnings on this subject, I must say that I felt uneasy. Had he heard her, and was he daring me? And what dire thing could happen if the sock was removed? I

sought to reason with him, but he signed to me to look sharp, and I removed the sock. The part of him thus revealed gave David considerable pleasure, but I noticed, as a curious thing, that he seemed to have no interest in the other foot.

However, it was not there merely to be looked at, for after giving me a glance which said 'Now observe!' he raised his bare foot and ran his mouth along the toes, like one playing on a barbaric instrument. He then tossed his foot aside, smiled his long triumphant smile, and intimated that it was now my turn to do something. I thought the best thing I could do would be to put his sock on him again, but as soon as I tried to do so I discovered why Irene had warned me so portentously against taking it off. I should say that she had trouble in socking him every morning.

Nevertheless I managed to slip it on while he was debating what to do with my watch. I bitterly regretted that I could do nothing with it myself—put it under a wine-glass, for instance, and make it turn into a rabbit, which so many people can do. In the meantime David, occupied with similar thoughts, very nearly made it disappear altogether, and I was thankful to be able to pull it back by the chain.

‘Haw-haw-*haw*!’

Thus he commented on his new feat, but it was also a reminder to me, a trifle cruel, that he was not my boy. After all, you see, Mary had not given him the whole of his laugh. The watch said that five-and-twenty minutes had passed, and looking out I saw Irene at one end of the street staring up at my window, and at the other end Mary’s husband staring up at my window, and beneath me Mary staring up at my window. They had all broken their promise.

I returned to David, and asked him in a low voice whether he would give me a kiss. He shook his head about six times, and I was in despair. Then the smile came, and I knew that he was teasing me only. He now nodded his head about six times.

This was the prettiest of all his exploits. It was so pretty, that, contrary to his rule, he repeated it. I had held out my arms to him, and first he shook his head, and then after a long pause (to frighten me), he nodded it.

But no sooner was he in my arms than I seemed to see Mary and her husband and Irene bearing down upon my chambers to take him from me, and acting under an impulse I whipped him into the perambulator and was off with it without a license

down the back staircase. To the Kensington Gardens we went; it may have been Manitoba we started for, but we arrived at the Kensington Gardens, and it had all been so unpremeditated and smartly carried out that I remember clapping my hand to my head in the street, to make sure that I was wearing a hat.

I watched David to see what he thought of it, and he had not yet made up his mind. Strange to say, I no longer felt shy. I was grown suddenly indifferent to public comment, and my elation increased when I discovered that I was being pursued. They drew a cordon round me near Margot Meredith's tree, but I broke through it by a strategic movement to the south, and was next heard of in the Baby's Walk. They held both ends of this passage, and then thought to close on me, but I slipped through their fingers by doubling up Bunting's Thumb into Picnic Street. Covering at St. Govor's Well, we saw them rush distractedly up the Hump, and when they had crossed to the Round Pond we paraded gaily in the Broad Walk, not feeling the tiniest bit sorry for anybody.

Here, however, it gradually came into David's eyes that, after all, I was a strange man, and they opened wider and wider, until they were the size of

my medals, and then, with the deliberation that distinguishes his smile, he slowly prepared to howl. I saw all his forces gathering in his face, and I had nothing to oppose to them ; it was an unarmed man against a regiment.

Even then I did not chide him. He could not know that it was I who had dropped the letter.

I think I must have stepped over a grateful fairy at that moment, for who else could have reminded me so opportunely of my famous manipulation of the eyebrows, forgotten since I was in the fifth form? I alone of boys had been able to elevate and lower my eyebrows separately ; when the one was climbing my forehead the other descended it, like the two buckets in the well.

Most diffidently did I call this accomplishment to my aid now, and immediately David checked his forces and considered my unexpected movement without prejudice. His face remained as it was, his mouth open to emit the howl if I did not surpass expectation. I saw that, like the fair-minded boy he has always been, he was giving me my chance, and I worked feverishly, my chief fear being that, owing to his youth, he might not know how marvellous was this thing I was doing. It is an appeal to the intellect, as well as to the

senses, and no one on earth can do it except myself.

When I paused for a moment exhausted he signed gravely, with unchanged face, that though it was undeniably funny, he had not yet decided whether it was funny enough, and taking this for encouragement, at it I went once more, till I saw his forces wavering, when I sent my left eyebrow up almost farther than I could bring it back: and with that I had him—the smile broke through the clouds.

In the midst of my hard-won triumph I heard cheering.

I had been vaguely conscious that we were not quite alone, but had not dared to look away from David. I looked now, and found to my annoyance that I was the centre of a deeply interesting gathering of children. There was in particular one vulgar little street-boy—

However, if that damped me in the moment of victory, I was soon to triumph gloriously in what began like defeat. I had sat me down on one of the garden seats in the Figs, with one hand resting carelessly on the perambulator, in imitation of the nurses—it was so pleasant to assume the air of one who walked with David daily,—when

to my chagrin I saw Mary approaching with quick, stealthy steps, and already so near me that flight would have been ignominy. Porthos, of whom she had hold, bounded toward me, waving his traitorous tail, but she slowed on seeing that I had observed her. She had run me down with my own dog.

I have not mentioned that Porthos had for some time now been a visitor at her house, though never can I forget the shock I got the first time I saw him strolling out of it like an afternoon caller. Of late he has avoided it, crossing to the other side when I go that way, and rejoining me farther on, so I conclude that Mary's husband is painting him.

I waited her coming stiffly, in great depression of spirits, and noted that her first attentions were for David, who, somewhat shabbily, gave her the end of a smile which had been begun for me. It seemed to relieve her, for what one may call the wild maternal look left her face, and trying to check little gasps of breath, the result of unseemly running, she signed to her confederates to remain in the background, and turned curious eyes on me. Had she spoken as she approached, I am sure her words would have been as flushed as

her face, but now her mouth puckered as David's does before he sets forth upon his smile, and I saw that she thought she had me in a parley at last.

'I could not help being a little anxious,' she said craftily, but I must own, with some sweetness.

I merely raised my hat, and at that she turned quickly to David—I cannot understand why the movement was so hasty—and lowered her face to his. O little trump of a boy! Instead of kissing her, he seized her face with one hand and tried to work her eyebrows up and down with the other. He failed, and his obvious disappointment in his mother was as nectar to me.

'I don't understand what you want, darling,' said she in distress, and looked at me inquiringly, and I understood what he wanted, and let her see that I understood. Had I been prepared to converse with her, I should have said elatedly that, had she known what he wanted, still she could not have done it, though she had practised for twenty years.

I tried to express all this by another movement of my hat.

It caught David's eye, and at once he appealed to me with the most perfect confidence. She failed

to see what I did, for I shyly gave her my back, but the effect on David was miraculous ; he signed to her to go, for he was engaged for the afternoon.

What would you have done then, reader? I didn't. In my great moment I had strength of character to raise my hat for the third time and walk away, leaving the child to judge between us. I walked slowly, for I knew I must give him time to get it out, and I listened eagerly ; but that was unnecessary, for when it did come it was a very roar of anguish. I turned my head, and saw David fiercely pushing the woman aside, that he might have one last long look at me. He held out his wistful arms and nodded repeatedly, and I faltered, but my glorious scheme saved me, and I walked on. It was a scheme conceived in a flash, and ever since relentlessly pursued—to burrow under Mary's influence with the boy, expose her to him in all her vagaries, take him utterly from her and make him mine.