

I

DAVID AND I SET FORTH UPON A JOURNEY

SOMETIMES the little boy who calls me father brings me an invitation from his mother : 'I shall be so pleased if you will come and see me,' and I always reply in some such words as these : 'Dear madam, I decline.' And if David asks why I decline, I explain that it is because I have no desire to meet the woman.

'Come this time, father,' he urged lately, 'for it is her birthday, and she is twenty-six,' which is so great an age to David, that I think he fears she cannot last much longer.

'Twenty-six, is she, David?' I replied. 'Tell her I said she looks more.'

I had my delicious dream that night. I dreamt that I too was twenty-six, which was a long time ago, and that I took train to a place called my home, whose whereabouts I see not in my waking hours ; and when I alighted at the station a dear

lost love was waiting for me, and we went away together. She met me in no ecstasy of emotion, nor was I surprised to find her there ; it was as if we had been married for years and parted for a day. I like to think that I gave her some of the things to carry.

Were I to tell my delightful dream to David's mother, to whom I have never in my life addressed one word, she would droop her head and raise it bravely, to imply that I make her sad but proud, and she would be wishful to lend me her absurd little pocket handkerchief. And then, had I the heart, I might make a disclosure that would startle her, for it is not the face of David's mother that I see in my dreams.

Has it ever been your lot, reader, to be persecuted by a pretty woman who thinks, without a tittle of reason, that you are bowed down under a hopeless partiality for her? It is thus that I have been pursued for several years now by the unwelcome sympathy of the tender-hearted and virtuous Mary A——. When we pass in the street the poor deluded soul subdues her buoyancy, as if it were shame to walk happy before one she has lamed, and at such times the rustle of her gown is whispered words of comfort to me, and her arms

are kindly wings that wish I was a little boy like David. I also detect in her a fearful elation, which I am unaware of until she has passed, when it comes back to me like a faint note of challenge. Eyes that say you never must, nose that says why don't you? and a mouth that says I rather wish you could: such is the portrait of Mary A—— as she and I pass by.

Once she dared to address me, so that she could boast to David that I had spoken to her. I was in the Kensington Gardens, and she asked would I tell her the time please, just as children ask, and forget as they run back with it to their nurse. But I was prepared even for this, and raising my hat I pointed with my staff to a clock in the distance. She should have been overwhelmed, but as I walked on listening intently, I thought with displeasure that I heard her laughing.

Her laugh is very like David's, whom I could punch all day in order to hear him laugh. I dare say she put this laugh into him. She has been putting qualities into David, altering him, turning him for ever on a lathe since the day she first knew him, and indeed long before, and all so deftly that he is still called a child of nature. When you release David's hand he is immediately lost like an

arrow from the bow. No sooner do you cast eyes on him than you are thinking of birds. It is difficult to believe that he walks to the Kensington Gardens ; he always seems to have alighted there : and were I to scatter crumbs I opine he would come and peck. This is not what he set out to be ; it is all the doing of that timid-looking lady who affects to be greatly surprised by it. He strikes a hundred gallant poses in a day ; when he tumbles, which is often, he comes to the ground like a Greek god ; so Mary A—— has willed it. But how she suffers that he may achieve ! I have seen him climbing a tree while she stood beneath in unutterable anguish ; she had to let him climb, for boys must be brave, but I am sure that, as she watched him, she fell from every branch.

David admires her prodigiously ; he thinks her so good that she will be able to get him into heaven, however naughty he is. Otherwise he would trespass less light-heartedly. Perhaps she has discovered this ; for, as I learn from him, she warned him lately that she is not such a dear as he thinks her.

‘ I am very sure of it,’ I replied.

‘ Is she such a dear as you think her ?’ he asked me.

‘Heaven help her,’ I said, ‘if she be not dearer than that.’

Heaven help all mothers if they be not really dears, for their boy will certainly know it in that strange short hour of the day when every mother stands revealed before her little son. That dread hour ticks between six and seven ; when children go to bed later the revelation has ceased to come. He is lapt in for the night now and lies quietly there, madam, with great mysterious eyes fixed upon his mother. He is summing up your day. Nothing in the revelations that kept you together and yet apart in play-time can save you now ; it is the boy’s hour, and you have come up for judgment.

‘Have I done well to-day, my son?’ You have got to say it, and nothing may you hide from him ; he knows all. How like your voice has grown to his, but more tremulous, and both so solemn, so unlike the voice of either of you by day.

‘You were a little unjust to me to-day about the apple ; were you not, mother?’

Stand there, woman, by the foot of the bed, and cross your hands and answer him.

‘Yes, my son, I was. I thought——’

But what you thought will not affect the verdict.

‘Was it fair, mother, to say that I could stay out till six, and then pretend it was six before it was quite six?’

‘No, it was very unfair. I thought——’

‘Would it have been a lie if I had said it was quite six?’

‘O my son, my son! I shall never tell you a lie again.’

‘No, mother, please don’t.’

‘My boy, have I done well to-day on the whole?’

Suppose he were unable to say yes?

These are the merest peccadilloes, you may say. Is it then a little thing to be false to the agreement you signed when you got the boy? There are mothers who avoid their children in that hour, but this will not save them. Why is it that so many women are afraid to be left alone with their thoughts between six and seven? I am not asking this of you, Mary. I believe that when you close David’s door softly there is a gladness in your eyes, and the awe of one who knows that the God to whom little boys say their prayers has a face very like their mother’s.

I may mention here that David is a stout believer in prayer, and has had his first fight with another

young Christian who challenged him to the jump and prayed for victory, which David thought was taking an unfair advantage.

‘So Mary is twenty-six! I say, David, she is getting on. Tell her that I am coming in to kiss her when she is fifty-two.’

He told her, and I understand that she pretended to be indignant. When I pass her in the street now she pouts. Clearly preparing for our meeting. She has also said, I learn, that I shall not think so much of her when she is fifty-two, meaning that she will not be so pretty then. So little does the sex know of beauty. Surely a spirited old lady may be the prettiest sight in the world. For my part, I confess that it is they, and not the young ones, who have ever been my undoing. Just as I was about to fall in love I suddenly found that I preferred the mother. Indeed, I cannot see a likely young creature without impatiently considering her chances for, say, fifty-two. O you mysterious girls, when you are fifty-two we shall find you out; you must come into the open then. If the mouth has fallen sourly yours the blame: all the meannesses your youth concealed have been gathering in your face. But the pretty thoughts and sweet ways and dear, forgotten kindnesses

linger there also, to bloom in your twilight like evening primroses.

Is it not strange that, though I talk thus plainly to David about his mother, he still seems to think me fond of her? How now, I reflect, what sort of bumpkin is this? and perhaps I say to him cruelly: 'Boy, you are uncommonly like your mother.'

To which David: 'Is that why you are so kind to me?'

I suppose I am kind to him, but if so it is not for love of his mother, but because he sometimes calls me father. On my honour as a soldier, there is nothing more in it than that. I must not let him know this, for it would make him conscious, and so break the spell that binds him and me together. Oftenest I am but Captain W—— to him, and for the best of reasons. He addresses me as father when he is in a hurry only, and never have I dared ask him to use the name. He says, 'Come, father,' with an accursed beautiful carelessness. So let it be, David, for a little while longer.

I like to hear him say it before others, as in shops. When in shops he asks the salesman how much money he makes in a day, and which drawer he keeps it in, and why his hair is red, and does he like Achilles, of whom David has lately heard,

and is so enamoured that he wants to die to meet him. At such times the shopkeepers accept me as his father, and I cannot explain the peculiar pleasure this gives me. I am always in two minds then, to linger that we may have more of it, and to snatch him away before he volunteers the information, 'He is not really my father.'

When David meets Achilles I know what will happen. The little boy will take the hero by the hand, call him father, and drag him away to some Round Pond.

One day, when David was about five, I sent him the following letter: 'Dear David: If you really want to know how it began, will you come and have a chop with me to-day at the club?'

Mary, who, I have found out, opens all his letters, gave her consent, and, I doubt not, instructed him to pay heed to what happened so that he might repeat it to her, for despite her curiosity she knows not how it began herself. I chuckled, guessing that she expected something romantic.

He came to me arrayed as for a mighty journey, and looking unusually solemn, as little boys always do look when they are wearing a greatcoat. There was a shawl round his neck. 'You can take some of them off,' I said, 'when we come to summer.'

‘Shall we come to summer?’ he asked, properly awed.

‘To many summers,’ I replied, ‘for we are going away back, David, to see your mother as she was in the days before there was you.’

We hailed a hansom. ‘Drive back six years,’ I said to the cabby, ‘and stop at the Junior Old Fogies’ Club.’

He was a stupid fellow, and I had to guide him with my umbrella.

The streets were not quite as they had been in the morning. For instance, the book-shop at the corner was now selling fish. I dropped David a hint of what was going on.

‘It doesn’t make me littler, does it?’ he asked anxiously; and then, with a terrible misgiving: ‘It won’t make me too little, will it, father?’ by which he meant that he hoped it would not do for him altogether. He slipped his hand nervously into mine, and I put it in my pocket.

You can’t think how little David looked as we entered the portals of the club.