

XII

THE PLEASANTEST CLUB IN LONDON

ALL perambulators lead to the Kensington Gardens.

Not, however, that you will see David in his perambulator much longer, for soon after I first shook his faith in his mother, it came to him to be up and doing, and he up and did in the Broad Walk itself, where he would stand alone most elaborately poised, signing imperiously to the British public to time him, and looking his most heavenly just before he fell. He fell with a dump, and as they always laughed then, he pretended that this was his funny way of finishing.

That was on a Monday. On Tuesday he climbed the stone stair of the Gold King, looking over his shoulder gloriously at each step, and on Wednesday he struck three and went into knickerbockers. For the Kensington Gardens, you must know, are full of short cuts, familiar to all who

play there ; and the shortest leads from the baby in long clothes to the little boy of three riding on the fence. It is called the Mother's Tragedy.

If you are a burgess of the gardens (which have a vocabulary of their own), the faces of these quaint mothers are a clock to you, in which you may read the ages of their young. When he is three they are said to wear the knickerbocker face, and you may take it from me that Mary assumed that face with a sigh ; fain would she have kept her boy a baby longer, but he insisted on his rights, and I encouraged him that I might notch another point against her. I was now seeing David once at least every week, his mother, who remained culpably obtuse to my sinister design, having instructed Irene that I was to be allowed to share him with her, and we had become close friends, though the little nurse was ever a threatening shadow in the background. Irene, in short, did not improve with acquaintance. I found her to be high and mighty, chiefly, I think, because she now wore a nurse's cap with streamers, of which the little creature was ludicrously proud. She assumed the airs of an official person, and always talked as if generations of babies had passed through her hands. She was also ex-

tremely jealous, and had a way of signifying disapproval of my methods that led to many coldnesses and even bickerings between us, which I now see to have been undignified. I brought the following accusations against her :—

That she prated too much about right and wrong.

That she was a martinet.

That she pretended it was a real cap, with real streamers, when she knew Mary had made the whole thing out of a muslin blind. I regret having used this argument, but it was the only one that really damped her.

On the other hand, she accused me of spoiling him.

Of not thinking of his future.

Of never asking him where he expected to go to if he did such things.

Of telling him tales that had no moral application.

Of saying that the handkerchief disappeared into nothingness, when it really disappeared into a small tin cup attached to my person by a piece of elastic.

To this last charge I plead guilty, for in those days I had a pathetic faith in legerdemain, and the eyebrow feat (which, however, is entirely an affair of skill) having yielded such good results, I

naturally cast about for similar diversions when it ceased to attract. It lost its hold on David suddenly, as I was to discover was the fate of all of them; twenty times would he call for my latest, and exult in it, and the twenty-first time (and ever afterwards) he would stare blankly, as if wondering what the man meant. He was like the child queen who, when the great joke was explained to her, said coldly, 'We are not amused,' and, I assure you, it is a humiliating thing to perform before an infant who intimates, after giving you ample time to make your points, that he is not amused. I hoped that when David was able to talk—and not merely to stare at me for five minutes and then say 'hat'—his spoken verdict, however damning, would be less expressive than his verdict without words, but I was disillusioned. I remember once in those later years, when he could keep up such spirited conversations with himself that he had little need for any of us, promising him to do something exceedingly funny with a box and two marbles, and after he had watched for a long time he said gravely, 'Tell me when it begins to be funny.'

I confess to having received a few simple lessons in conjuring, in a dimly-lighted chamber beneath

a shop, from a gifted young man with a long neck and a pimply face, who as I entered took a barber's pole from my pocket, saying at the same time, 'Come, come, sir, this will never do.' Whether because he knew too much, or because he wore a trick shirt, he was the most depressing person I ever encountered ; he felt none of the artist's joy, and it was sad to see one so well calculated to give pleasure to thousands not caring a dump about it.

The barber's pole I successfully extracted from David's mouth, but the difficulty (not foreseen) of knowing how to dispose of a barber's pole in the Kensington Gardens is considerable, there always being polite children hovering near who run after you and restore it to you. The young man, again, had said that any one would lend me a bottle or a lemon ; but though these were articles on which he seemed ever able to lay his hand, I found (what I never had noticed before) that there is a curious dearth of them in the Gardens. The magic egg-cup I usually carried about with me, and with its connivance I did some astonishing things with pennies ; but even the penny that costs sixpence is uncertain, and just when you are saying triumphantly that it will be found in the egg-cup, it may clatter to the ground, whereon some

ungenerous spectator, such as Irene, accuses you of fibbing and corrupting youthful minds. It was useless to tell her, through clenched teeth, that the whole thing was a joke, for she understood no jokes except her own, of which she had the most immoderately high opinion, and that would have mattered little to me had not David liked them also. There were times when I could not but think less of the boy, seeing him rock convulsed over antics of Irene that have been known to every nursemaid since the year One. While I stood by, sneering, he would give me the ecstatic look that meant, 'Irene is really very entertaining, isn't she?

We were rivals, but I desire to treat her with scrupulous fairness, and I admit that she had one good thing, to wit, her gutta-percha tooth. In earlier days one of her front teeth, as she told me, had fallen out; but instead of then parting with it, the resourceful child had hammered it in again with a hair-brush, which she offered to show me, with the dents on it. This tooth, having in time passed away, its place was supplied by one of gutta-percha, made by herself, which seldom came out except when she sneezed, and if it merely fell at her feet this was a sign that the cold was to be

a slight one, but if it shot across the room she knew she was in for something notable. Irene's tooth was very favourably known in the Gardens, where the perambulators used to gather round her to hear whether it had been doing anything to-day, and I would not have grudged David his proprietary pride in it, had he seemed to understand that Irene's one poor little accomplishment, though undeniably showy, was without intellectual merit. I have sometimes stalked away from him, intimating that if his regard was to be got so cheaply I begged to retire from the competition, but the Gardens are the pleasantest club in London, and I soon returned. How I scoured the Gardens looking for him, and how skilful I became at picking him out far away among the trees, though other mothers imitated the picturesque attire of him, to Mary's indignation. I also cut Irene's wings (so to speak) by taking her to a dentist.

And David did some adorable things. For instance, he used my pockets as receptacles into which he put any article he might not happen to want at the moment. He shoved it in, quite as if they were his own pockets, without saying, By your leave, and perhaps I discovered it on reaching home—a tin-soldier, or a pistol—when I put

it on my mantel-shelf and sighed. And here is another pleasant memory. One day I had been over-friendly to another boy, and, after enduring it for some time David up and struck him. It was exactly as Porthos does when I favour other dogs (he knocks them down with his foot and stands over them, looking very noble and stern), so I knew its meaning at once; it was David's first public intimation that he knew I belonged to him.

Irene scolded him for striking that boy, and made him stand in disgrace at the corner of a seat in the Broad Walk. The seat at the corner of which David stood suffering for love of me is the one nearest to the Round Pond to persons coming from the north.

You may be sure that she and I had words over this fiendish cruelty. When next we met I treated her as one who no longer existed, and at first she bridled and then was depressed, and as I was going away she burst into tears. She cried because at neither meeting nor parting had I lifted my hat to her, a foolish custom of mine, of which, as I now learned to my surprise, she was very proud. She and I still have our tiffs, but I have never since then forgotten to lift my hat to Irene.

I also made her promise to bow to me, at which she affected to scoff, saying I was taking my fun off her, but she was really pleased, and I tell you, Irene has one of the prettiest and most touching little bows imaginable; it is half to the side (if I may so express myself), which has always been my favourite bow, and, I doubt not, she acquired it by watching Mary.

I should be sorry to have it thought, as you may now be thinking, that I look on children as on puppy-dogs, who care only for play. Perhaps that was my idea when first I tried to lure David to my unaccustomed arms, and even for some time after, for if I am to be candid, I must own that until he was three years old I sought merely to amuse him. God forgive me, but I had only one day a week in which to capture him, and I was very raw at the business.

I was about to say that David opened my eyes to the folly of it, but really I think this was Irene's doing. Watching her with children, I learned that partial as they are to fun they are moved almost more profoundly by moral excellence. So fond of babes was this little mother that she had always room near her for one more, and often have I seen her in the Gardens the centre of a dozen mites,

who gazed awestruck at her while she told them severely how little ladies and gentlemen behave. They were children of the well-to-pass, and she was from Drury Lane, but they believed in her as the greatest of all authorities on little ladies and gentlemen, and the more they heard of how these romantic creatures keep themselves tidy and avoid pools and wait till they come to a gate, the more they admired them, though their faces showed how profoundly they felt that to be little ladies and gentlemen was not for them. You can't think what hopeless little faces they were.

Children are not at all like puppies, I have said. But do puppies care only for play? That wistful look, which the merriest of them sometimes wear, I wonder whether it means that they would like to hear about the good puppies?

As you shall see, I invented many stories for David, practising the telling of them by my fire-side as if they were conjuring feats, while Irene knew only one, but she told it as never has any other fairy-tale been told in my hearing. It was the prettiest of them all, and was recited by the heroine.

'Why were the king and queen not at home?' David would ask her breathlessly.

‘I suppose,’ said Irene, thinking it out, ‘they was away buying the victuals.’

She always told the story gazing into vacancy, so that David thought it was really happening somewhere up the Broad Walk, and when she came to its great moments her little bosom heaved. Never shall I forget the concentrated scorn with which the prince said to the sisters, ‘Neither of you ain’t the one what wore the glass slipper.’

‘And then—and then—and then——,’ said Irene, not artistically to increase the suspense, but because it was all so glorious to her.

‘Tell me—tell me quick,’ cried David, though he knew the tale by heart.

‘She sits down like,’ said Irene, trembling in second-sight, ‘and she tries on the glass slipper, and it fits her to a T; and then the prince, he cries in a ringing voice, “This here is my true love, Cinderella, what now I makes my lawful wedded wife.”’

Then she would come out of her dream, and look round at the grandees of the Gardens with an extraordinary elation. ‘Her, as was only a kitchen drudge,’ she would say in a strange soft voice and with shining eyes, ‘but was true and faithful in word and deed, such was her reward.’

I am sure that had the fairy godmother appeared just then and touched Irene with her wand, David would have been interested rather than astonished. As for myself, I believe I have surprised this little girl's secret. She knows there are no fairy godmothers nowadays, but she hopes that if she is always true and faithful she may some day turn into a lady in word and deed, like the mistress whom she adores.

It is a dead secret, a Drury Lane child's romance; but what an amount of heavy artillery will be brought to bear against it in this sad London of ours. Not much chance for her, I suppose.

Good luck to you, Irene.