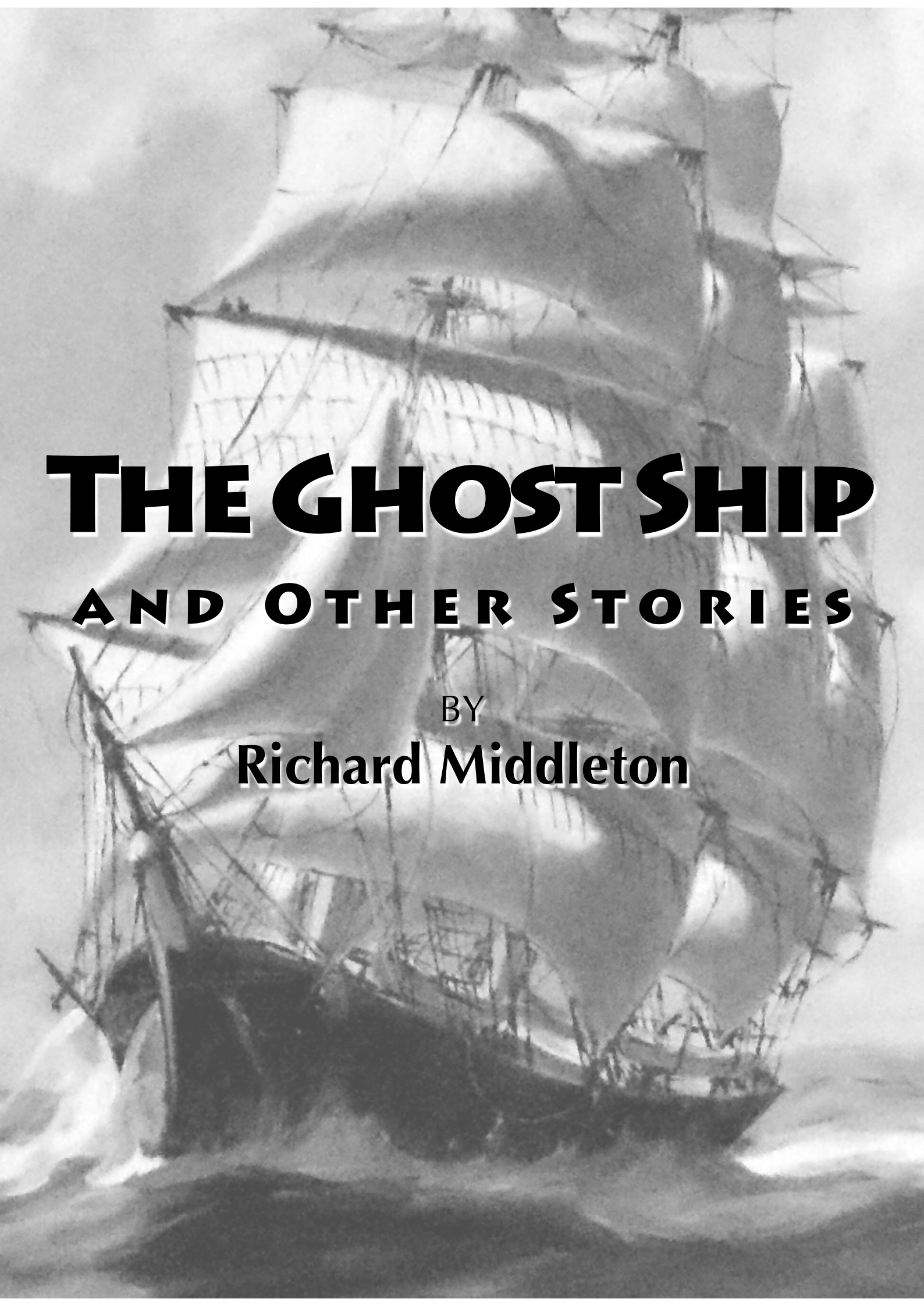

The Ghost Ship

and Other Stories

BY

Richard Middleton

PREFACE

THE other day I said to a friend, "I have just been reading in proof a volume of short stories by an author named Richard Middleton. He is dead. It is an extraordinary book, and all the work in it is full of a quite curious and distinctive quality. In my opinion it is very fine work indeed."

It would be so simple if the business of the introducer or preface-writer were limited to such a straightforward, honest, and direct expression of opinion; unfortunately that is not so. For most of us, the happier ones of the world, it is enough to say "I like it," or "I don't like it," and there is an end: the critic has to answer the everlasting "Why?" And so, I suppose, it is my office, in this present instance, to say why I like the collection of tales that follows.

I think that I have found a hint as to the right answer in two of these stories. One is called "The Story of a Book," the other "The Biography of a Superman." Each is rather an essay than a tale, though the form of each is narrative. The first relates the sad bewilderment of a successful novelist who feels that, after all, his great work was something less than nothing.

> *He could not help noticing that London had discovered the secret which made his intellectual life a torment. The streets were more than a mere assemblage of houses, London herself was more than a tangled skein of streets, and overhead heaven was more than a meeting-place of individual stars. What*

was this secret that made words into a book, houses into cities, and restless and measurable stars into an unchanging and immeasurable universe?

Then from "The Biography of a Superman" I select this very striking passage:—

> *Possessed of an intellect of great analytic and destructive force, he was almost entirely lacking in imagination, and he was therefore unable to raise his work to a plane in which the mutually combative elements of his nature might have been reconciled. His light moments of envy, anger, and vanity passed into the crucible to come forth unchanged. He lacked the magic wand, and his work never took wings above his conception.*

Now compare the two places; "the streets were more than a mere assemblage of houses;" "his light moments . . . passed into the crucible to come forth unchanged. He lacked the magic wand." I think these two passages indicate the answer to the "why" that I am forced to resolve; show something of the secret of the strange charm which "The Ghost Ship" possesses.

It delights because it is significant, because it is no mere assemblage of words and facts and observations and incidents; it delights because its matter has not passed through the crucible unchanged. On the contrary, the jumble of experiences and impressions which fell to the lot of the author as to us all had assuredly been placed in the athanor of art, in that furnace of the sages which is said to be governed with wisdom. Lead entered the burning of the fire, gold came forth from it.

This analogy of the process of alchemy which Richard Middleton has himself suggested is one of the finest and the fittest for our purpose; but there are many others. The "magic wand" analogy comes to much the same thing; there is the like notion of something ugly and insignificant changed to something beautiful and significant. Something ugly; shall we not say rather something formless transmuted into form? After all, the Latin Dictionary declares solemnly that "beauty" is one of the meanings of "forma." And here we are away from alchemy and the magic wand ideas, and pass to the thought of the first place that I have quoted: "the streets were more than a mere assemblage of houses." The puzzle is solved; the jig-saw—I think they call it—has been successfully fitted together. There in a box lay all the jagged, irregular pieces, each in itself crazy and meaningless and irritating by its very lack of meaning: now we see each part adapted to the other and the whole is one picture and one purpose.

But the first thing necessary to this achievement is the recognition of the fact that there is a puzzle. There are many people who go through life persuaded that there isn't a puzzle at all; that it was only the infancy and rude childhood of the world which dreamed a vain dream of a picture to be made out of the jagged bits of wood. There never has been a picture, these persons say, and there never will be a picture; all we have to do is to take the bits out of the box, look at them, and put them back again. Or, returning to Richard Middleton's excellent example: there is no such thing as London, there are only houses. No man has seen London at any time; the very word (meaning "the fort on the lake") is nonsensical; no human eye has ever beheld aught else but a number

of houses; it is clear that this "London" is as mythical and monstrous and irrational a concept as many others of the same class. Well, people who talk like that are doubtless sent into the world for some useful but mysterious process; but they can't write real books. Richard Middleton knew that there was a puzzle; in other words, that the universe is a great mystery; and this consciousness of his is the source of the charm of "The Ghost Ship."

I have compared this orthodox view of life and the universe and the fine art that results from this view to the solving of a puzzle; but the analogy is not an absolutely perfect one. For if you buy a jig-saw in a box in the Hay-market, you take it home with you and begin to put the pieces together, and sooner or later the toil is over and the difficulties are overcome: the picture is clear before you. Yes, the toil is over, but so is the fun; it is but poor sport to do the trick all over again. And here is the vast inferiority of the things they sell in the shops to the universe: our great puzzle is never perfectly solved. We come across marvellous hints, we join line to line and our hearts beat with the rapture of a great surmise; we follow a certain track and know by sure signs and signals that we are not mistaken, that we are on the right road; we are furnished with certain charts which tell us "here there be water-pools," "here is a waste place," "here a high hill riseth," and we find as we journey that so it is. But, happily, by the very nature of the case, we can never put the whole of the picture together, we can never recover the perfect utterance of the Lost Word, we can never say "here is the end of all the journey." Man is so made that all his true delight arises from the contemplation of

mystery, and save by his own frantic and invincible folly, mystery is never taken from him; it rises within his soul, a well of joy unending.

Hence it is that the consciousness of this mystery, resolved into the form of art, expresses itself usually (or always) by symbols, by the part put for the whole. Now and then, as in the case of Dante, as it was with the great romance-cycle of the Holy Graal, we have a sense of completeness. With the vision of the Angelic Rose and the sentence concerning that Love which moves the sun and the other stars there is the shadow of a catholic survey of all things; and so in a less degree it is as we read of the translation of Galahad. Still, the Rose and the Graal are but symbols of the eternal verities, not those verities themselves in their essences; and in these later days when we have become clever—with the cleverness of the Performing Pig—it is a great thing to find the most obscure and broken indications of the things which really are. There is the true enchantment of true romance in the Don Quixote—for those who can understand—but it is delivered in the mode of parody and burlesque; and so it is with the extraordinary fantasy, "The Ghost Ship," which gives its name to this collection of tales. Take this story to bits, as it were; analyse it; you will be astonished at its frantic absurdity: the ghostly galleon blown in by a great tempest to a turnip-patch in Fairfield, a little village lying near the Portsmouth Road about half-way between London and the sea; the farmer grumbling at the loss of so many turnips; the captain of the weird vessel acknowledging the justice of the claim and tossing a great gold brooch to the landlord by way of satisfying the debt; the deplorable fact that all the decent village

ghosts learned to riot with Captain Bartholomew Roberts; the visit of the parson and his godly admonitions to the Captain on the evil work he was doing; mere craziness, you will say?

Yes; but the strange thing is that as, in spite of all jocose tricks and low-comedy misadventures, Don Quixote departs from us with a great light shining upon him; so this ghost-ship of Richard Middleton's, somehow or other, sails and anchors and resails in an unearthly glow; and Captain Bartholomew's rum that was like hot oil and honey and fire in the veins of the mortals who drank of it, has become for me one of the nobilium poculorum of story. And thus did the ship put forth from the village and sail away in a great tempest of wind—to what unimaginable seas of the spirit!

> *The wind that had been howling outside like an outrageous dog had all of a sudden turned as melodious as the carol-boys of a Christmas Eve.*
>
> *We went to the door, and the wind burst it open so that the handle was driven clean into the plaster of the wall. But we didn't think much of that at the time; for over our heads, sailing very comfortably through the windy stars, was the ship that had passed the summer in landlord's field. Her portholes and her bay-window were blazing with lights, and there was a noise of singing and fiddling on her decks. "He's gone" shouted landlord above the storm, "and he's taken half the village with him!" I could only nod in answer, not having lungs like bellows of leather.*

I declare I would not exchange this short, crazy, enchanting fantasy for a whole wilderness of seemly novels, proclaiming in

decorous accents the undoubted truth that there are milestones on the Portsmouth Road.

ARTHUR MACHEN.

CONTENTS

The Ghost Ship

Fairfield is a little village lying near the Portsmouth Road about half-way between London and the sea. Strangers who find it by accident now and then, call it a pretty, old-fashioned place; we who live in it and call it home don't find anything very pretty about it, but we should be sorry to live anywhere else. Our minds have taken the shape of the inn and the church and the green, I suppose. At all events we never feel comfortable out of Fairfield.

Of course the Cockneys, with their vasty houses and noise-ridden streets, can call us rustic if they choose, but for all that Fairfield is a better place to live in than London. Doctor says that when he goes to London his mind is bruised with the weight of the houses, and he was a Cockney bone. He had to live there himself when he was a little chap, but he knows better now. You gentlemen may laugh perhaps some of you come from London way but it seems to me that a witness like that is worth a gallon of arguments.

Dull? Well, you might find it dull, but I assure you that I've listened to all the London yarns you have spun to-night, and they're absolutely nothing to the things that happen at Fairfield. It's because of our way of thinking and minding our own business. If one of your

Londoners were set down on the green of a Saturday night when the ghosts of the lads who died in the war keep tryst with the lasses who lie in the churchyard, he couldn't help being curious and interfering, and then the ghosts would go somewhere where it was quieter. But we just let them come and go and don't make any fuss, and in consequence Fairfield is the ghostiest place in all England. Why, I've seen a headless man sitting on the edge of the well in broad daylight, and the children playing about his feet as if he were their father. Take my word for it, spirits know when they are well off as much as human beings.

Still, I must admit that the thing I'm going to tell you about was queer even for our part of the world, where three packs of ghost-hounds hunt regularly during the season, and blacksmith's great-grandfather is busy all night shoeing the dead gentlemen's horses. Now that's a thing that wouldn't happen in London, because of their interfering ways, but blacksmith he lies up aloft and sleeps as quiet as a lamb. Once when he had a bad head he shouted down to them not to make so much noise, and in the morning he found an old guinea left on the anvil as an apology. He wears it on his watch-chain now. But I must get on with my story; if I start telling you about the queer happenings at Fairfield I'll never stop.

It all came of the great storm in the spring of '97, the year that we had two great storms. This was the first

one, and I remember it very well, because I found in the morning that it had lifted the thatch of my pigsty into the widow's garden as clean as a boy's kite. When I looked over the hedge, widow—Tom Lamport's widow—that was was prodding for her nasturtiums with a daisy-grubber. After I had watched her for a little I went down to the "Fox and Grapes" to tell landlord what she had said to me. Landlord he laughed, being a married man and at ease with the sex. "Come to that," he said, "the tempest has blowed something into my field. A kind of a ship I think it would be."

I was surprised at that until he explained that it was only a ghost-ship and would do no hurt to the turnips. We argued that it had been blown up from the sea at Portsmouth, and then we talked of something else. There were two slates down at the parsonage and a big tree in Lumley's meadow. It was a rare storm.

I reckon the wind had blown our ghosts all over England. They were coming back for days afterwards with foundered horses and as footsore as possible, and they were so glad to get back to Fairfield that some of them walked up the street crying like little children. Squire said that his great-grandfather's great-grandfather hadn't looked so dead-beat since the battle of Naseby, and he's an educated man.

What with one thing and another, I should think it was a week before we got straight again, and then one

afternoon I met the landlord on the green and he had a worried face. "I wish you'd come and have a look at that ship in my field," he said to me "it; seems to me it's leaning real hard on the turnips. I can't bear thinking what the missus will say when she sees it."

I walked down the lane with him, and sure enough there was a ship in the middle of his field, but such a ship as no man had seen on the water for three hundred years, let alone in the middle of a turnip-field. It was all painted black and covered with carvings, and there was a great bay window in the stern for all the world like the Squire's drawing-room. There was a crowd of little black cannon on deck and looking out of her port-holes, and she was anchored at each end to the hard ground. I have seen the wonders of the world on picture-postcards, but I have never seen anything to equal that.

"She seems very solid for a ghost-ship," I said, seeing the landlord was bothered.

"I should say it's a betwixt and between," he answered, puzzling it over, "but it's going to spoil a matter of fifty turnips, and missus she'll want it moved." We went up to her and touched the side, and it was as hard as a real ship. "Now there's folks in England would call that very curious," he said.

Now I don't know much about ships, but I should think that that ghost-ship weighed a solid two hundred tons, and it seemed to me that she had come to stay, so

that I felt sorry for landlord, who was a married man. "All the horses in Fairfield won't move her out of my turnips," he said, frowning at her.

Just then we heard a noise on her deck, and we looked up and saw that a man had come out of her front cabin and was looking down at us very peaceably. He was dressed in a black uniform set out with rusty gold lace, and he had a great cutlass by his side in a brass sheath. "I'm Captain Bartholomew Roberts," he said, in a gentleman's voice, "put in for recruits. I seem to have brought her rather far up the harbour."

"Harbour!" cried landlord; "why, you're fifty miles from the sea."

Captain Roberts didn't turn a hair. "So much as that, is it?" he said coolly. " Well, it's of no consequence."

Landlord was a bit upset at this. "I don't want to be unneighbourly," he said, "but I wish you hadn't brought your ship into my field. You see, my wife sets great store on these turnips."

The captain took a pinch of snuff out of a fine gold box that he pulled out of his pocket, and dusted his fingers with a silk handkerchief in a very genteel fashion. "I'm only here for a few months," he said; " but if a testimony of my esteem would pacify your good lady I should be content," and with the words he loosed a great gold brooch from the neck of his coat and tossed it down to landlord.

Landlord blushed as red as a strawberry. "I'm not

denying she's fond of jewellery," he said, "but it's too much for half a sackful of turnips." And indeed it was a handsome brooch.

The captain laughed. " Tut, man," he said, "it's a forced sale, and you deserve a good price. Say no more about it; "and nodding good-day to us, he turned on his heel and went into the cabin. Landlord walked back up the lane like a man with a weight off his mind. "That tempest has blowed me a bit of luck," he said; "the missus will be main pleased with that brooch. It's better than blacksmith's guinea, any day."

Ninety-seven was Jubilee year, the year of the second Jubilee, you remember, and we had great doings at Fairfield, so that we hadn't much time to bother about the ghost-ship, though anyhow it isn't our way to meddle in things that don't concern us. Landlord, he saw his tenant once or twice when he was hoeing his turnips and passed the time of day, and landlord's wife wore her new brooch to church every Sunday. But we didn't mix much with the ghosts at any time, all except an idiot lad there was in the village, and he didn't know the difference between a man and a ghost, poor innocent! On Jubilee Day, however, somebody told Captain Roberts why the church bells were ringing, and he hoisted a flag and fired off his guns like a loyal Englishman. 'Tis true the guns were shotted, and one of the round shot knocked a hole in Farmer Johnstone's barn, but nobody thought much of that in such a

season of rejoicing.

It wasn't till our celebrations were over that we noticed that anything was wrong in Fairfield. 'Twas shoemaker who told me first about it one morning at the "Fox and Grapes." "You know my great great-uncle?" he said to me.

"You mean Joshua, the quiet lad," I answered, knowing him well.

"Quiet!" said shoemaker indignantly.

"Quiet you call him, coming home at three o'clock every morning as drunk as a magistrate and waking up the whole house with his noise."

"Why, it can't be Joshua" I said, for I knew him for one of the most respectable young ghosts in the village.

"Joshua it is," said shoemaker "and one; of these nights he'll find himself out in the street if he isn't careful."

This kind of talk shocked me, I can tell you, for I don't like to hear a man abusing his own family, and I could hardly believe that a steady youngster like Joshua had taken to drink. But just then in came butcher Aylwin in such a temper that he could hardly drink his beer. "The young puppy! the young puppy!" he kept on saying; and it was some time before shoemaker and I found out that he was talking about his ancestor that fell at Senlac.

"Drink?" said shoemaker hopefully, for we all like company in our misfortunes, and butcher nodded

grimly.

"The young noodle," he said, emptying his tankard.

Well, after that I kept my ears open, and it was the same story all over the village. There was hardly a young man among all the ghosts of Fairfield who didn't roll home in the small hours of the morning the worse for liquor. I used to wake up in the night and hear them stumble past my house, singing outrageous songs. The worst of it was that: we couldn't keep the scandal to ourselves, and the folk at Greenhill began to talk of "sodden Fairfield" and taught their children to sing a song about us:

"Sodden Fairfield, sodden Fairfield, has no use for bread-and-butter,
Rum for breakfast, rum for dinner, rum for tea, and rum for supper!"

We are easy-going in our village, but we didn't like that.

Of course we soon found out where the young fellows went to get the drink, and landlord was terribly cut up that his tenant should have turned out so badly, but his wife wouldn't hear of parting with the brooch, so that he couldn't give the Captain notice to quit. But as time went on, things grew from bad to worse, and at all hours of the day you would see those young reprobates sleeping it off on the village green. Nearly every afternoon a ghost-wagon used to jolt down to the ship with a lading of rum, and though the older ghosts

seemed inclined to give the Captain's hospitality the go-by, the youngsters were neither to hold nor to bind.

So one afternoon when I was taking my nap I heard a knock at the door, and there was parson looking very serious, like a man with a job before him that he didn't altogether relish. "I'm going down to talk to the Captain about all this drunkenness in the village, and I want you to come with me," he said straight out.

I can't say that I fancied the visit much myself, and I tried to hint to parson that as, after all, they were only a lot of ghosts, it didn't very much matter.

"Dead or alive, I'm responsible for their good conduct," he said, "and I'm going to do my duty and put a stop to this continued disorder. And you are coming with me, John Simmons." So I went, parson being a persuasive kind of man.

We went down to the ship, and as we approached her I could see the Captain tasting the air on deck. When he saw parson he took off his hat very politely, and I can tell you that I was relieved to find that he had a proper respect for the cloth. Parson acknowledged his salute and spoke out stoutly enough. "Sir, I should be glad to have a word with you."

"Come on board, sir; come on board," said the Captain, and I could tell by his voice that he knew why we were there. Parson and I climbed up an uneasy kind of ladder, and the Captain took us into the great cabin at the back of the ship, where the bay-window was. It

was the most wonderful place you ever saw in your life, all full of gold and silver plate, swords with jewelled scabbards, carved oak chairs, and great chests that look as though they were bursting with guineas. Even parson was surprised, and he did not shake his head very hard when the Captain took down some silver cups and poured us out a drink of rum. I tasted mine, and I don't mind saying that it changed my view of things entirely. There was nothing betwixt and between about that rum, and I felt that it was ridiculous to blame the lads for drinking too much of stuff like that. It seemed to fill my veins with honey and fire.

Parson put the case squarely to the Captain, but I didn't listen much to what he said; I was busy sipping my drink and looking through the window at the fishes swimming to and fro over landlord's turnips. Just then it seemed the most natural thing in the world that they should be there, though afterwards, of course, I could see that that proved it was a ghost-ship.

But even then I thought it was queer when I saw a drowned sailor float by in the thin air with his hair and beard all full of bubbles. It was the first time I had seen anything quite like that at Fairfield.

All the time I was regarding the wonders of the deep parson was telling Captain Roberts how there was no peace or rest in the village owing to the curse of drunkenness, and what a bad example the youngsters were setting to the older ghosts. The Captain listened

very attentively, and only put in a word now and then about boys being boys and young men sowing their wild oats. But when parson had finished his speech he filled up our silver cups and said to parson, with a flourish, "I should be sorry to cause trouble anywhere where I have been made welcome, and you will be glad to hear that I put to sea tomorrow night. And now you must drink me a prosperous voyage." So we all stood up and drank the toast with honour, and that noble rum was like hot oil in my veins.

After that Captain showed us some of the curiosities he had brought back from foreign parts, and we were greatly amazed, though afterwards I couldn't clearly remember what they were. And then I found myself walking across the turnips with parson, and I was telling him of the glories of the deep that I had seen through the window of the ship. He turned on me severely. "If I were you, John Simmons," he said, "I should go straight home to bed." He has a way of putting things that wouldn't occur to an ordinary man, has parson, and I did as he told me.

Well, next day it came on to blow, and it blew harder and harder, till about eight o'clock at night I heard a noise and looked out into the garden. I dare say you won't believe me, it seems a bit tall even to me, but the wind had lifted the thatch of my pigsty into the widow's garden a second time. I thought I wouldn't wait to hear what widow had to say about it, so I went across the

green to the "Fox and Grapes," and the wind was so strong that I danced along on tip-toe like a girl at the fair. When I got to the inn landlord had to help me shut the door; it seemed
as though a dozen goats were pushing against it to come in out of the storm.

"It's a powerful tempest," he said, drawing the beer. "I hear there's a chimney down at Dickory End."

"It's a funny thing how these sailors know about the weather," I answered. "When Captain said he was going to-night, I was thinking it would take a capful of wind to carry the ship back to sea, but now here's more than a capful."

"Ah, yes," said landlord, "it's to-night he goes true enough, and, mind you, though he treated me handsome over the rent, I'm not sure it's a loss to the village. I don't hold with gentrice who fetch their drink from London instead of helping local traders to get their living."

"But you haven't got any rum like his," I said, to draw him out.

His neck grew red above his collar, and I was afraid I'd gone too far; but after a while he got his breath with a grunt.

"John Simmons," he said, "if you've come down here this windy night to talk a lot of fool's talk, you've wasted a journey."

Well, of course, then I had to smooth him down with

praising his rum, and Heaven forgive me for swearing it was better than Captain's. For the like of that rum no living lips have tasted save mine and parson's. But somehow or other I brought landlord round, and presently we must have a glass of his best
to prove its quality.

"Beat that if you can!" he cried, and we both raised our glasses to our mouths, only to stop half-way and look at each other in amaze. For the wind that had been howling outside like an outrageous dog had all of a sudden turned as melodious as the carol-boys of a Christmas Eve.

"Surely that's not my Martha," whispered landlord; Martha being his great-aunt that lived in the loft overhead.

We went to the door, and the wind burst it open so that the handle was driven clean into the plaster of the wall. But we didn't think about that at the time; for over our heads, sailing very comfortably through the windy stars, was the ship that had passed the summer in landlord's field. Her portholes and her bay-window were blazing with lights, and there was a noise of singing and fiddling on her decks. "He's gone," shouted landlord above the storm, "and he's taken half the village with him!" I could only nod in answer, not having lungs like bellows of leather.

In the morning we were able to measure the strength of the storm, and over and above my pigsty there was

damage enough wrought in the village to keep us busy. True it is that the children had to break down no branches for the firing that autumn, since the wind had strewn the woods with more than they could carry away. Many of our ghosts were scattered abroad, but this time very few came back, all the young men having sailed with Captain; and not only ghosts, for a poor half-witted lad was missing, and we reckoned that he had stowed himself away or perhaps shipped as cabin-boy, not knowing any better.

What with the lamentations of the ghost-girls and the grumblings of families who had lost an ancestor, the village was upset for a while, and the funny thing was that it was the folk who had complained most of the carryings-on of the youngsters, who made most noise now that they were gone. I hadn't any sympathy with shoemaker or butcher, who ran about saying how much they missed their lads, but it made me grieve to hear the poor bereaved girls calling their lovers by name on the village green at nightfall. It didn't seem fair to me that they should have lost their men a second time, after giving up life in order to join them, as like as not. Still, not even a spirit can be sorry for ever, and after a few months we made up our mind that the folk who had sailed in the ship were never coming back, and we didn't talk about it any more.

And then one day, I dare say it would be a couple of years after, when the whole business was quite

forgotten, who should come trapesing along the road from Portsmouth but the daft lad who had gone away with the ship, without waiting till he was dead to become a ghost. You never saw such a boy as that in all your life. He had a great rusty cutlass hanging to a string at his waist, and he was tattooed all over in fine colours, so that even his face looked like a girl's sampler. He had a handkerchief in his hand full of foreign shells and old-fashioned pieces of small money, very curious, and he walked up to the well outside his mother's house and drew himself a drink as if he had been nowhere in particular.

The worst of it was that he had come back as soft-headed as he went, and try as we might we couldn't get anything reasonable out of him. He talked a lot of gibberish about keel-hauling and walking the plank and crimson murders—things which a decent sailor should know nothing about, so that it seemed to me that for all his manners Captain had been more of a pirate than a gentleman mariner. But to draw sense out of that boy was as hard as picking cherries off a crab-tree. One silly tale he had that he kept on drifting back to, and to hear him you would have thought that it was the only thing that happened to him in his life. "We was at anchor," he would say, "off an island called the Basket of Flowers, and the sailors had caught a lot of parrots and we were teaching them to swear. Up and down the decks, up and down the decks, and the language they

used was dreadful. Then we looked up and saw the masts of the Spanish ship outside the harbour. Outside the harbour they were, so we threw the parrots into the sea and sailed out to fight. And all the parrots were drownded in the sea and the language they used was dreadful." That's the sort of boy he was, nothing but silly talk of parrots when we asked him about the fighting. And we never had a chance of teaching him better, for two days after he ran away again, and hasn't been seen since.

That's my story, and I assure you that things like that are happening at Fairfield all the time. The ship has never come back, but somehow as people grow older they seem to think that one of these windy nights she'll come sailing in over the hedges with all the lost ghosts on board. Well, when she comes, she'll be welcome. There's one ghost-lass that has never grown tired of waiting for her lad to return. Every night you'll see her out on the green, straining her poor eyes with looking for the mast-lights among the stars. A faithful lass you'd call her, and I'm thinking you'd be right.

Landlord's field wasn't a penny the worse for the visit, but they do say that since then the turnips that have been grown in it have tasted of rum.

A Drama of Youth

I

For some days school had seemed to me even more tedious than usual. The long train journey in the morning, the walk through Farringdon Meat Market, which æsthetic butchers made hideous with mosaics of the intestines of animals, as if the horror of suety pavements and bloody sawdust did not suffice, the weariness of inventing lies that no one believed to account for my lateness and neglected homework, and the monotonous lessons that held me from my dreams without ever for a single instant capturing my interest—all these things made me ill with repulsion. Worst of all was the society of my cheerful, contented comrades, to avoid which I was compelled to mope in deserted corridors, the prey of a sorrow that could not be enjoyed, a hatred that was in no way stimulating. At the best of times the atmosphere of the place disgusted me. Desks, windows, and floors, and even the grass in the quadrangle, were greasy with London soot, and there was nowhere any clean air to breathe or smell. I hated the gritty asphalt that gave no peace to my feet and cut my knees when my clumsiness made me fall. I hated the long stone corridors whose echoes seemed to

me to mock my hesitating footsteps when I passed from one dull class to another. I hated the stuffy malodorous class-rooms, with their whistling gas-jets and noise of inharmonious life. I would have hated the yellow fogs had they not sometimes shortened the hours of my bondage. That five hundred boys shared this horrible environment with me did not abate my sufferings a jot; for it was clear that they did not find it distasteful, and they therefore became as unsympathetic for me as the smell and noise and rotting stones of the school itself.

The masters moved as it were in another world, and, as the classes were large, they understood me as little as I understood them. They knew that I was idle and untruthful, and they could not know that I was as full of nerves as a girl, and that the mere task of getting to school every morning made me physically sick. They punished me repeatedly and in vain, for I found every hour I passed within the walls of the school an overwhelming punishment in itself, and nothing made any difference to me. I lied to them because they expected it, and because I had no words in which to express the truth if I knew it, which is doubtful. For some reason I could not tell them at home why I got on so badly at school, or no doubt they would have taken me away and sent me to a country school, as they did afterwards. Nearly all the real sorrows of childhood are due to this dumbness of the emotions; we teach children to convey facts by means of words, but we do

not teach them how to make their feelings intelligible. Unfortunately, perhaps, I was very happy at night with my story-books and my dreams, so that the real misery of my days escaped the attention of the grown-up people. Of course I never even thought of doing my homework, and the labour of inventing new lies every day to account for my negligence became so wearisome that once or twice I told the truth and simply said I had not done it; but the masters held that this frankness aggravated the offence, and I had to take up anew my tiresome tale of improbable calamities. Sometimes my stories were so wild that the whole class would laugh, and I would have to laugh myself; yet on the strength of this elaborate politeness to authority I came to believe myself that I was untruthful by nature.

The boys disliked me because I was not sociable, but after a time they grew tired of bullying me and left me alone. I detested them because they were all so much alike that their numbers filled me with horror. I remember that the first day I went to school I walked round and round the quadrangle in the luncheon-hour, and every boy who passed stopped me and asked me my name and what my father was. When I said he was an engineer every one of the boys replied, "Oh! the man who drives the engine." The reiteration of this childish joke made me hate them from the first, and afterwards I discovered that they were equally unimaginative in everything they did. Sometimes I

would stand in the midst of them, and wonder what was the matter with me that I should be so different from all the rest. When they teased me, repeating the same questions over and over again, I cried easily, like a girl, without quite knowing why, for their stupidities could not hurt my reason; but when they bullied me I did not cry, because the pain made me forget the sadness of my heart. Perhaps it was because of this that they thought I was a little mad.

Grey day followed grey day, and I might in time have abandoned all efforts to be faithful to my dreams, and achieved a kind of beast-like submission that was all the authorities expected of notorious dunces. I might have taught my senses to accept the evil conditions of life in that unclean place; I might even have succeeded in making myself one with the army of shadows that thronged in the quadrangle and filled the air with meaningless noise.

But one evening when I reached home I saw by the faces of the grown-up people that something had upset their elaborate precautions for an ordered life, and I discovered that my brother, who had stayed at home with a cold, was ill in bed with the measles. For a while the significance of the news escaped me; then, with a sudden movement of my heart, which made me feel ill, I realised that probably I would have to stay away from school because of the infection. My feet tapped on the floor with joy, though I tried to appear unconcerned.

Then, as I nursed my sudden hope of freedom, a little fearfully lest it should prove an illusion, a new and enchanting idea came to me. I slipped from the room, ran upstairs to my bedroom and, standing by the side of my bed, tore open my waistcoat and shirt with clumsy, trembling fingers. One, two, three, four, five! I counted the spots in a triumphant voice, and then with a sudden revulsion sat down on the bed to give the world an opportunity to settle back in its place. I had the measles, and therefore I should not have to go back to school! I shut my eyes for a minute and opened them again, but still I had the measles. The cup of happiness was at my lips, but I sipped delicately because it was full to the brim, and I would not spill a drop.

This mood did not last long. I had to run down the house and tell the world the good news. The grown-up people rebuked my joyousness, while admitting that it might be as well that I should have the measles then as later on. In spite of their air of resignation I could hardly sit still for excitement. I wanted to go into the kitchen and show my measles to the servants, but I was told to stay where I was in front of the fire while my bed was moved into my brother's room. So I stared at the glowing coals till my eyes watered, and dreamed long dreams. I would lie in bed for days, all warm from head to foot, and no one would interrupt my pleasant excursions in the world I preferred to this. If I had heard of the beneficent microbe to which I owed my

happiness, I would have mentioned it in my prayers.

Late that night I called over to my brother to ask how long measles lasted. He told me to go to sleep, so that I knew he did not know the answer to my question. I lay at ease tranquilly turning the problem over in my mind. Four weeks, six weeks, eight weeks; why, if I was lucky, it would carry me through to the holidays! At all events, school was already very far away, like a nightmare remembered at noon. I said good-night to my brother, and received an irritated grunt in reply. I did not mind his surliness; tomorrow when I woke up, I would begin my dreams.

II

When I found myself in bed in the morning, already sick at heart because even while I slept I could not forget the long torment of my life at school, I would lie still for a minute or two and try to concentrate my shuddering mind on something pleasant, some little detail of the moment that seemed to justify hope. Perhaps I had some money to spend or a holiday to look forward to; though often enough I would find nothing to save me from realising with childish intensity the grey-ness of the world in which it was my fate to move. I did not want to go out into life; it was dull and cruel and greasy with soot. I only wanted to stop at

home in any little quiet corner out of everybody's way and think mylong, heroic thoughts. But even while I mumbled my hasty breakfast and ran to the station to catch my train the atmosphere of the school was all about me, and my dreamer's courage trembled and vanished.

When I woke from sleep the morning after my good fortune, I did not at first realise the extent of my happiness; I only knew that deep in my heart I was conscious of some great cause for joy. Then my eyes, still dim with sleep, discovered that I was in my brother's bedroom, and in a flash the joyful truth was revealed to me. I sat up and hastily examined my body to make sure that the rash had not disappeared, and then my spirit sang a song of thanksgiving of which the refrain was, "I have the measles!" I lay back in bed and enjoyed the exquisite luxury of thinking of the evils that I had escaped. For once my morbid sense of atmosphere was a desirable possession and helpful to my happiness. It was delightful to pull the bedclothes over my shoulders and conceive the feelings of a small boy who should ride to town in a jolting train, walk through a hundred kinds of dirt and a hundred disgusting smells to win to prison at last, where he should perform meaningless tasks in the distressing society of five hundred mocking apes. It was pleasant to see the morning sun and feel no sickness in my stomach, no sense of depression in my tired brain.

Across the room my brother gurgled and choked in his sleep, and in some subtle way contributed to my ecstasy of tranquillity. I was no longer concerned for the duration of my happiness. I felt that this peace that I had desired so long must surely last for ever.

To the grown-up folk who came to see us during the day—the doctor, certain germ-proof unmarried aunts, truculently maternal, and the family itself—my brother's case was far more interesting than mine because he had caught the measles really badly. I just had them comfortably; enough to be infectious, but not enough to feel ill, so I was left in pleasant solitude while the women competed for the honour of smoothing my brothers' pillow and tiptoeing in a fidgeting manner round his bed. I lay on my back and looked with placid interest at the cracks in the ceiling. They were like the main roads in a map, and I amused myself by building little houses beside them houses full of books and warm hearthrugs, and with a nice pond lively with tadpoles in the garden of each. From the windows of the houses you could watch all the traffic that went along the road, men and women and horses, and best of all, the boys going to school in the morning boys who had not done their homework and who would be late for prayers. When I talked about the cracks to my brother he said that perhaps the ceiling would give way and fall on our heads. I thought about this too, and found it quite easy to picture myself lying in the bed with a smashed head,

and blood all over the pillow. Then it occurred to me that the plaster might smash me all over, and my impressions of Farringdon Meat Market added a gruesome vividness to my conception of the consequences. I always found it pleasant to imagine horrible things; it was only the reality that made me sick.

Towards nightfall I became a little feverish, and I heard the grown-ups say that they would give me some medicine later on. Medicine for me signified the nauseous powders of Dr. Gregory, so I pretended to be asleep every time any one came into the room, in order to escape my destiny, until at last some one stood by my bedside so long that I became cramped and had to pretend to wake up. Then I was given the medicine, and found to my surprise that it was delicious and tasted of oranges. I felt that there had been a mistake somewhere, but my head sat a little heavily on my shoulders, and I would not trouble to fix the responsibility. This time I fell asleep in earnest, and woke in the middle of the night to find my brother standing by my bed, making noises with his mouth. I thought that he had gone mad, and would kill me perhaps, but after a time he went back to bed saying all the bad words he knew. The excitement had made me wide awake, and I tossed about thinking of the cracked ceiling above my head. The room was quite dark, and I could see nothing, so that it might be bulging over me

without my knowing it. I stood up in bed and stretched up my arm, but I could not reach the ceiling; yet when I lay down again I felt as though it had sunk so far that it was touching my hair, and I found it difficult to breathe in such a small space. I was afraid to move for fear of bringing it down upon me, and in a short while the pressure upon my body became unbearable, and I shrieked out for help. Some one came in and lit the gas, and found me looking very foolish and my brother delirious. I fell asleep almost immediately, but was conscious through my dreams that the gas was still alight and that they were watching by my brother's bedside.

In the morning he was very ill and I was no longer feverish, so it was decided to move me back into my own bedroom. I was wrapped up in the bedclothes and told to sit still while the bed was moved. I sat in an armchair, feeling like a bundle of old clothes, and looking at the cracks in the ceiling which seemed to me like roads. I knew that I had already lost all importance as an invalid, but I was very happy nevertheless. For from the window of one of my little houses I was watching the boys going to school, and my heart was warm with the knowledge of my own emancipation. As my legs hung down from the chair I found it hard to keep my slippers on my stockingless feet.

III

There followed for me a period of deep and unbroken satisfaction. I was soon considered well enough to get up, and I lived pleasantly between the sofa and the fireside waiting on my brother's convalescence, for it had been settled that I should go away with him to the country for a change of air. I read Dickens and Dumas in English, and made up long stories in which I myself played important but not always heroic parts. By means of intellectual exercises of this kind I achieved a tranquillity like that of an old man, fearing nothing, desiring nothing, regretting nothing. I no longer reckoned the days or the hours, content to enjoy a passionless condition of being that asked no questions and sought none of me, nor did I trouble to number my journeys in the world of infinite shadows. But in that long hour of peace I realised that in some inexplicable way I was interested in the body of a little boy, whose hands obeyed my unspoken wishes, whose legs sprawled before me on the sofa. I knew that before I met him, this boy, whose littleness surprised me, had suffered ill dreams in a nameless world, and now, worn out with tears and humiliation and dread of life, he slept, and while he slept I watched him dispassionately, as I would have looked at a crippled daddy-long-legs. To have felt compassion for him would have disturbed the tranquillity that was a necessary condition of my

existence, so I contented myself with noticing his presence and giving him a small part in the pageant of my dreams. He was not so beautiful as I wished all my comrades to be, and he was besides very small; but shadows are amiable play-friends, and they did not blame him because he cried when he was teased and did not cry when he was beaten, or because the wild unreason of his sorrow made him find cause for tears in the very fullness of his rare enjoyment. For the first time in my life it seems to me I saw this little boy as he was, squat-bodied, big-headed, thick-lipped, and with a face swept clean of all emotions save where his two great eyes glowed with a sulky fire under exaggerated eyebrows. I noticed his grimy nails, his soiled collar, his unbrushed clothes, the patent signs of defeat changing to utter rout, and from the heights of my great peace I was not sorry for him. He was like that, other boys were different, that was all.

And then on a day fear returned to my heart, and my newly discovered Utopia was no more. I do not know what chance word of the grown-up people or what random thought of mine did the mischief; but of a sudden I realised that for all my dreaming I was only separated by a measurable number of days from the horror of school. Already I was sick with fear, and in place of my dreams I distressed myself by visualising the scenes of the life I dreaded—the Meat Market, the dusty shadows of the gymnasium, the sombre reticence

of the great hall. All that my lost tranquillity had given me was a keener sense of my own being; my smallness, my ugliness, my helplessness in the face of the great cruel world. Before I had sometimes been able to dull my emotions in unpleasant circumstances and thus achieve a dogged calm; now I was horribly conscious of my physical sensations, and, above all, of that deadly sinking in my stomach called fear. I clenched my hands, telling myself that I was happy, and trying to force my mind to pleasant thoughts; but though my head swam with the effort, I continued to be conscious that I was afraid. In the midst of my mental struggles I discovered · that even if I succeeded in thinking happy things I should still have to go back to school after all, and the knowledge that thought could not avert calamity was like a bruise on my mind. I pinched my arms and legs, with the idea that immediate pain would make me forget my fears for the future; but I was not brave enough to pinch them really hard, and I could not forget the motive for my action. I lay back on the sofa and kicked the cushions with my feet in a kind of forlorn anger. Thought was no use, nothing was any use, and my stomach was sick, sick with fear. And suddenly I became aware of an immense fatigue that overwhelmed my mind and my body, and made me feel as helpless as a little child. The tears that were always near my eyes streamed down my face, making my cheek sore against the wet cushion, and my breath came in

painful, ridiculous gulps. For a moment I made an effort to control my grief; and then I gave way utterly, crying with my whole body like a little child, until, like a little child, I fell asleep.

When I awoke the room was grey with dusk, and I sat up with a swaying head, glad to hide the shame of my foolish swollen face amongst the shadows. My mouth was still salt with tears, and I was very thirsty, but I was always anxious to hide my weakness from other people, and I was afraid that if I asked for something to drink they would see that I had been crying. The fire had gone out while I slept, and I felt cold and stiff, but my abandonment of restraint had relieved me, and my fear was now no more than a vague unrest. My mind thought slowly but very clearly. I saw that it was a pity that I had not been more ill than I was, for then, like my brother, I should have gone away for a month instead of a fortnight. As it was, everybody laughed at me because I looked so well, and said they did not believe that I had been ill at all If I had thought of it earlier I might have been able to make myself worse somehow or other, but now it was too late. When the maid came in and lit the gas for tea she blamed me for letting the fire out, and told me that I had a dirty face. I was glad of the chance to slip away and wash my burning cheeks in cold water. When I had finished and dried my face on the rough towel I looked at myself in the glass. I looked as if I had been to the seaside for a

holiday, my cheeks were so red!

That night as I lay sleepless in my bed, seeking for a cool place between the sheets in which to rest my hot feet, the sickness of fear returned to me, and I knew that I was lost. I shut my eyes tightly, but I could not shut out the vivid pictures of school life that my memory had stored up for my torment; I beat my head against the pillow, but I could not change my thoughts. I recalled all the possible events that might interfere with my return to school, a new illness, a railway accident, even suicide, but my reason would not accept these romantic issues. I was helpless before my destiny, and my destiny made me afraid.

And then, perhaps I was half asleep or fond with fear, I leapt out of bed and stood in the middle of the room to meet life and fight it. The hem of my nightshirt tickled my shin and my feet grew cold on the carpet; but though I stood ready with my fists clenched I could see no adversary among the friendly shadows, I could hear no sound but the drumming of the blood against the walls of my head. I got back into bed and pulled the bedclothes about my chilled body. It seemed that life would not fight fair, and being only a little boy and not wise like the grown-up people, I could find no way in which to outwit it.

IV

My growing panic in the face of my im- minent return to school spoilt my holiday, and I watched my brother's careless delight in the Surrey pine-woods with keen envy. It seemed to me that it was easy for him to enjoy himself with his month to squander; and in any case he was a healthy, cheerful boy who liked school well enough when he was there, though of course he liked holidays better. He had scant patience with my moods, and secretly I too thought they were wicked. We had been taught to believe that we alone were responsible for our sins, and it did not occur to me that the causes of my wickedness might lie beyond my control. The beauty of the scented pines and the new green of the bracken took my breath and filled my heart with a joy that changed immediately to overwhelming grief; for I could not help contrasting this glorious kind of life with the squalid existence to which I must return so soon. I realised so fiercely the force of the contrast that I was afraid to make friends with the pines and admire the palm-like beauty of the bracken lest I should increase my subsequent anguish; and I hid myself in dark corners of the woods to fight the growing sickness of my body with the feeble weapons of my panic-stricken mind. There followed moments of bitter sorrow, when I blamed myself for not taking advantage of my hours of freedom, and I hurried along the sandy lanes in a desolate effort to enjoy myself before it was too late.

In spite of the miserable manner in which I spent my days, the fortnight seemed to pass with extraordinary rapidity. As the end approached, the people around me made it difficult for me to conceal my emotions, the grown-ups deducing from my melancholy that I was tired of holidays and would be glad to get back to school, and my brother burdening me with idle messages to the other boys—messages that shattered my hardly formed hope that school did not really exist. I stood ever on the verge of tears, and I dreaded meal-times, when I had to leave my solitude, lest some turn of the conversation should set me weeping before them all, and I should hear once more what I knew very well myself, that it was a shameful thing for a boy of my age to cry like a little girl. Yet the tears were there and the hard lump in my throat, and I could not master them, though I stood in the woods while the sun set with a splendour that chilled my heart, and tried to drain my eyes dry of their rebellious, bitter waters. I would choke over my tea and be rebuked for bad manners.

When the last day came that I had feared most of all, I succeeded in saying goodbye to the people at the house where I had stopped, and in making the mournful train journey home without disgracing myself. It seemed as though a merciful stupor had dulled my senses to a mute acceptance of my purgatory. I slept in the train, and arrived home so sleepy that I was allowed to go straight to bed without comment.

For once my body dominated my mind, and I slipped between the sheets in an ecstasy of fatigue and fell asleep immediately.

Something of this rare mood lingered with me in the morning, and it was not until I reached the Meat Market that I realised the extent of my misfortune. I saw the greasy, red-faced men with their hands and aprons stained with blood. I saw the hideous carcases of animals, the masses of entrails, the heaps of repulsive hides; but most clearly of all I saw an ugly sad little boy with a satchel of books on his back set down in the midst of an enormous and hostile world. The windows and stones of the houses were black with soot, and before me there lay school, the place that had never brought me anything but sorrow and humiliation. I went on, but as I slid on the cobbles, my mind caught an echo of peace, the peace of pine-woods and heather, the peace of the library at home, and, my body trembling with revulsion, I leant against a lamp-post, deadly sick. Then I turned on my heels and walked away from the Meat Market and the school for ever. As I went I cried, sometimes openly before all men, sometimes furtively before shop-windows, dabbing my eyes with a wet pocket-handkerchief, and gasping for breath. I did not care where my feet led me, I would go back to school no more.

I had played truant for three days before the grown-ups discovered that I had not returned to school. They

treated me with that extraordinary consideration that they always extended to our great crimes and never to our little sins of thoughtlessness or high spirits. The doctor saw me. I was told that I would be sent to a country school after the next holidays, and meanwhile I was allowed to return to my sofa and my dreams. I lay there and read Dickens and was very happy. As a rule the cat kept me company, and I was pleased with his placid society, though he made my legs cramped. I thought that I too would like to be a cat.