

# TOBERMORY

AND OTHER STORIES

SAKI (H.H. MUNRO)



INTRODUCTION BY VICKY DAWSON

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AND  
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*Saki*

H.H. Munro



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This eBook edition published in 2014 by

Birlinn Limited

West Newington House

Newington Road

Edinburgh

EH9 1QS

[www.birlinn.co.uk](http://www.birlinn.co.uk)

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eBook ISBN: 9780857908049

ISBN: 9781780272153

British Library Cataloguing-in-Publication Data

A catalogue record for this book is available from the British Library

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## INTRODUCTION

**B**ORN IN BURMA in 1870, Hector Hugh Munro, who wrote under the pen-name 'Saki', is one of the greatest short story writers in the English language. Scottish by descent, his writing is resolutely the product of the age of Empire at its best, in its wit and its ruthless exposure of hypocrisy and class prejudice.

He was just two when his mother came home to have her next child and was charged by a cow in Devon. A miscarriage was followed by her tragic death soon after, which led to his father Charles giving the care of his three surviving offspring to his mother and his two sisters, Aunt Tom (Charlotte) and Aunt Augusta. Charles stayed on in Burma as Inspector General for the Burmese police.

All the children were considered sickly and Saki was not sent to school until he was fourteen. It was an appalling upbringing. The Aunts, according to Saki's sister Ethel, 'hated each other with a ferocity and intensity worthy of a bigger cause'. As the Aunts fought their battles over their charges it is little wonder that maiden aunts and dreadful upbringings were to play such a major part in Saki's work. 'Both aunts were guilty of mental cruelty,' Ethel wrote. 'We often longed for revenge with an intensity I suspect we inherited from our Highland ancestry.'

The children found solace in a curious menagerie of pets and in the four-yearly visits of their father remembered by Ethel as idyllic interludes. 'He took us for picnics, and to the houses of friends with farmyards where Hector rode the pigs, climbed haystacks with [his brother] Charlie and arrived home rakish and buttonless but in unquenchable spirits.' Another theme of Saki's work, that of animals, was developing to reach its full fruition later.

His father retired from colonial work and returned home when Saki was fifteen. The children's upbringing had left them both immature and revelling in practical jokes, another theme that was to surface in Saki's writing.

In 1893 Saki left for a post his father had secured for him in Burma with the Military Police. Although he was there for only thirteen months before being invalided home with malaria, he acquired a menagerie, including a duck, a squirrel, a zebra-striped pony and a tiger kitten.

He only ever visited Scotland once, in 1901, and despite his sister Ethel's comments seems to have worn his Scottish ancestry very lightly.

After he had recovered from a bout of double pneumonia, Saki embarked on his writing career with a history inspired by Edward Gibbon called *The Rise of the Russian Empire*. From 1902 he was employed as a foreign correspondent by the *Morning Post* and sent to the Balkans, Russia and France.

This was an exciting time for Saki as his first stories were published, initially in newspapers. The pseudonym he adopted for his writing, according to Ethel, was taken from the cupbearer in Fitzgerald's hugely popular *Rubaiyat of Omar Khayyam*. His first work of fiction, a political parody in the style of Lewis Carroll, was *The Westminster Alice* (1902). This was followed in 1904 by a collection of short stories, *Reginald*. Moderate success led to the appearance of further collections.

*Reginald in Russia* in 1910, *The Chronicles of Clovis* in 1911 and a novel, *The Unbearable Bassington* in 1912.

From *The Chronicles of Clovis*, 'Tobermory' is possibly Saki's most famous short story and the most characteristic example of his work. Ostensibly about an extraordinary talking cat, it is in fact a merciless satire of the pretensions and conventions of Edwardian society and bears all the fingerprints of Saki's mature style.

His appeal was still to the connoisseur. The 1930 Omnibus edition sums this up: 'There is no greater compliment to be paid the right kind of friend . . . than to hand him Saki without comment'. A German diplomat summed him up in the wonderful phrase as 'a man that wolves have sniffed at'.

His reputation as a subversive outsider and lack of romantic involvement with the opposite sex throughout his life have led to speculation that Saki was homosexual. Some would argue that the content and tone of some of the stories demonstrate this, and the fact that his sister destroyed his papers on his death indicates that there was something to hide. At a time when homosexuality was a crime punishable by a lengthy prison sentence there was certainly every incentive for concealment. However no conclusive evidence exists as to Saki's sexuality and the subject must remain a matter for speculation.

After *The Unbearable Bassington* his next publication was a rather curious book, redolent of the time, called *When William Came* (1913), set in a future where Germany had won the impending Great War. A deeply conservative work arguing for compulsory military service, it has coloured Saki's reputation while remaining little read. *Beasts and Super-Beasts* followed in 1914.

On the outbreak of war Saki enlisted immediately. When his sister Ethel received his one-word wireless 'Enrolled', she declared it was 'the most exciting and delightful I have ever received'. Her reaction reflects the intense fervour and optimism of those early months of war.

At first his skills were used in teaching, then he was offered a commission in the Argyll and Sutherland Highlanders. His reply gives an indication of the depth of his commitment. 'I would not accept it, as I should have so much to learn that it would be a case of beginning all over again and I might never see service at all. The three and a half months' training that I have had will fit me to be a useful infantry soldier and I should be a very indifferent officer. Still it is nice to have had the offer.'

Saki is a major writer of the First World War. This collection includes three pieces written for his regimental newspaper and *The Bystander*, a weekly magazine. The range of his writing is shown by his masterful *Birds on the Western Front*, describing how birdlife adapted to conditions on the battlefield. Even today much mythology still festoons World War I. One recent commentator in the run-up to Remembrance Sunday described the Western Front as utterly devoid of flora and fauna bar the ubiquitous poppy. Both Saki and Philip Gosse in his charming *Memoirs of a Camp Follower* give the lie to this assertion.

Saki however is not usually seen as a war writer as he does not fit the popular preconception of what that should be, a preconception shaped by the angry anti-war memoirs of Graves, Sassoon and Blunden. Saki not only refused a commission, but lied about his age in order to enlist (he was 43 at the time) and wrote not with hindsight but as one serving 'in the line'.

The image that emerges of him in wartime is far removed from the somewhat unsympathetic, ironical, detached and occasionally cruel individual he is often portrayed as being. If this is how he sometimes came across, this undoubtedly would have been a form of self-protective camouflage forced on him by his childhood. The reality appears to be that he was adored by his fellow soldiers. Quite different to the languid, foppish Edwardians in middle-class parlours about whom he wrote, Saki appears to have been brave, disciplined and extremely empathetic towards his comrades in arms. One of these, W. I.

Spikesman, recorded: 'He quickly settled down to a life so entirely different from that which he had left, like so many others, but to me there was a difference. He saw the beginning of a titanic struggle he had visited the continent and other parts of the globe and he knew the French, Germans, Austrians and Russians well . . . he intended to play his part. And that part was to be as big a part as he could attain . . . Hector showed great fortitude . . . it did not matter what the circumstances were, he thought first of those who were under him, he was a corporal at this time, before ministering to his own needs. He stood and gave commands to frightened men, in such a cool, fine manner that I saw many backs stiffen and he was responsible for the organisation of a strong section, giving them a definite "front" face, and a reassuring word of advice.'

Saki probably has much in common with that other 'uncomfortable' Scot, John Buchan. Both were intrinsically conservative and colonial. Both wrote descriptions of other nationalities and faiths that we now find jarring and unacceptable. However, to dismiss them for this is to dismiss a wonderful legacy of writing that is both prescient and contemporary. The British have an unnerving knack of putting unpalatable phrases into the mouths of humorous characters to ridicule a particular type.

Saki was killed by a sniper near Beaumont-Hamel. The record on his army index card reads simply 'Kill. A 14/11/16' followed by 'requests auth to dispose of medals 29/5/22'.

A friend of Saki's from his days as a European correspondent, Rothay Reynolds, added a biographical note to the posthumously published collection *The Toys of Peace* (1919). He reports the comment of an officer of the 22nd Royal Fusiliers, Saki's regiment, that 'when peace comes, Saki will give us the most wonderful of all the books about the war'.

He never had the chance to write that book and so it is all the more important for us to treasure the range and quality of what we have as his legacy.

Vicky Dawson  
Yeadon's Bookshops, Banchory and Elgville  
May 2017



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## TOBERMORY

IT WAS A chill, rain-washed afternoon of a late August day, that indefinite season when partridges are still in security or cold storage, and there is nothing to hunt – unless one is bounded on the north by the Bristol Channel, in which case one may lawfully gallop after fat red stags. Lady Blemley's house-party was not bounded on the north by the Bristol Channel, hence there was a full gathering of her guests round the tea-table on this particular afternoon. And, in spite of the blankness of the season and the triteness of the occasion, there was no trace in the company of that fatigued restlessness which means a dread of the pianola and a subdued hankering for auction bridge. The undisguised open-mouthed attention of the entire party was fixed on the homely negative personality of Mr Cornelius Appin. Of all her guests, he was the one who had come to Lady Blemley with the vaguest reputation. Someone had said he was 'clever,' and he had got his invitation in the moderate expectation, on the part of his hostess, that some portion at least of his cleverness would be contributed to the general entertainment. Until tea-time that day she had been unable to discover in what direction, if any, his cleverness lay. He was neither a wit nor a croquet champion, a hypnotic force nor a begetter of amateur theatricals. Neither did his exterior suggest the sort of man in whom women are willing to pardon a generous measure of mental deficiency. He had subsided into mere Mr Appin, and the Cornelius seemed a piece of transparent baptismal bluff. And now he was claiming to have launched on the world a discovery beside which the invention of gunpowder, of the printing-press, and of steam locomotion were inconsiderable trifles. Science had made bewildering strides in many directions during recent decades, but this thing seemed to belong to the domain of miracle rather than scientific achievement.

'And do you really ask us to believe,' Sir Wilfrid was saying, 'that you have discovered a means for instructing animals in the art of human speech, and that dear old Tobermory has proved your first successful pupil?'

'It is a problem at which I have worked for the last seventeen years,' said Mr Appin, 'but only during the last eight or nine months have I been rewarded with glimmerings of success. Of course I have experimented with thousands of animals, but latterly only with cats, those wonderful creatures which have assimilated themselves so marvellously with our civilization while retaining all their highly developed feral instincts. Here and there among cats one comes across an outstanding superior intellect, just as one does among the ruck of human beings, and when I made the acquaintance of Tobermory a week ago I saw at once that I was in contact with a 'Beyond-cat' of extraordinary intelligence. I had gone far along the road to success in recent experiments; with Tobermory, as you call him, I have reached the goal.'

Mr Appin concluded his remarkable statement in a voice which he strove to divest of a triumphant inflection. No one said 'Rats,' though Clovis's lips moved in a monosyllabic contortion which probably invoked those rodents of disbelief.

‘And do you mean to say,’ asked Miss Resker, after a slight pause, ‘that you have taught Tobermory to say and understand easy sentences of one syllable?’

‘My dear Miss Resker,’ said the wonder-worker patiently, ‘one teaches little children and savages and backward adults in that piecemeal fashion; when one has once solved the problem of making a beginning with an animal of highly developed intelligence one has no need for those halting methods. Tobermory can speak our language with perfect correctness.’

This time Clovis very distinctly said, ‘Beyond-rats!’ Sir Wilfrid was more polite, but equally sceptical. ‘Hadn’t we better have the cat in and judge for ourselves?’ suggested Lady Blemley.

Sir Wilfrid went in search of the animal, and the company settled themselves down to the languid expectation of witnessing some more or less adroit drawing-room ventriloquism.

In a minute Sir Wilfrid was back in the room, his face white beneath its tan and his eyes dilated with excitement.

‘By Gad, it’s true!’

His agitation was unmistakably genuine, and his hearers started forward in a thrill of awakened interest.

Collapsing into an armchair he continued breathlessly: ‘I found him dozing in the smoking-room and called out to him to come for his tea. He blinked at me in his usual way, and I said, ‘Come on, Toby; don’t keep us waiting’; and, by Gad! he drawled out in a most horribly natural voice that he would come when he dashed well pleased! I nearly jumped out of my skin!’

Appin had preached to absolutely incredulous hearers; Sir Wilfrid’s statement carried instant conviction. A Babel-like chorus of startled exclamation arose, amid which the scientist sat mute, enjoying the first fruit of his stupendous discovery.

In the midst of the clamour Tobermory entered the room and made his way with velvet tread and studied unconcern across to the group seated round the tea-table.

A sudden hush of awkwardness and constraint fell on the company. Somehow there seemed an element of embarrassment in addressing on equal terms a domestic cat of acknowledged mental ability.

‘Will you have some milk, Tobermory?’ asked Lady Blemley in a rather strained voice.

‘I don’t mind if I do,’ was the response, couched in a tone of even indifference. A shiver of suppressed excitement went through the listeners, and Lady Blemley might be excused for pouring out the saucerful of milk rather unsteadily.

‘I’m afraid I’ve spilt a good deal of it,’ she said apologetically.

‘After all, it’s not my Axminster,’ was Tobermory’s rejoinder.

Another silence fell on the group, and then Miss Resker, in her best district-visitor manner, asked if the human language had been difficult to learn. Tobermory looked squarely at her for a moment and then fixed his gaze serenely on the middle distance. It was obvious that boring questions lay outside his scheme of life.

‘What do you think of human intelligence?’ asked Mavis Pellington lamely.

‘Of whose intelligence in particular?’ asked Tobermory coldly.

‘Oh, well, mine for instance,’ said Mavis, with a feeble laugh.

‘You put me in an embarrassing position,’ said Tobermory, whose tone and attitude certainly did not suggest a shred of embarrassment. ‘When your inclusion in this house-party was suggested Sir Wilfrid protested that you were the most brainless woman of his acquaintance, and that there was a wide distinction between hospitality and the care of the feeble-minded. Lady Blemley replied that your lack of brain-power was the precise quality which had earned you your invitation, as you were the only person she could think of who might be idiotic enough to buy their old car. You know, the one the

call. 'The Envy of Sisyphus,' because it goes quite nicely up-hill if you push it.'

Lady Blemley's protestations would have had greater effect if she had not casually suggested Mavis only that morning that the car in question would be just the thing for her down at her Devonshire home.

Major Barfield plunged in heavily to effect a diversion.

'How about your carryings-on with the tortoise-shell puss up at the stables, eh?'

The moment he had said it every one realized the blunder.

'One does not usually discuss these matters in public,' said Tobermory frigidly. 'From a slight observation of your ways since you've been in this house I should imagine you'd find it inconvenient I were to shift the conversation on to your own little affairs.'

The panic which ensued was not confined to the Major.

'Would you like to go and see if cook has got your dinner ready?' suggested Lady Blemley hurriedly, affecting to ignore the fact that it wanted at least two hours to Tobermory's dinner-time.

'Thanks,' said Tobermory, 'not quite so soon after my tea. I don't want to die of indigestion.'

'Cats have nine lives, you know,' said Sir Wilfrid heartily.

'Possibly,' answered Tobermory; 'but only one liver.'

'Adelaide!' said Mrs Cornett, 'do you mean to encourage that cat to go out and gossip about us the servants' hall?'

The panic had indeed become general. A narrow ornamental balustrade ran in front of most of the bedroom windows at the Towers, and it was recalled with dismay that this had formed a favourite promenade for Tobermory at all hours, whence he could watch the pigeons – and heaven knew what else besides. If he intended to become reminiscent in his present outspoken strain the effect would be something more than disconcerting. Mrs Cornett, who spent much time at her toilet table, and whose complexion was reputed to be of a nomadic though punctual disposition, looked as ill at ease as the Major. Miss Scrawen, who wrote fiercely sensuous poetry and led a blameless life, merely displayed irritation; if you are methodical and virtuous in private you don't necessarily want everyone to know. Bertie van Tahn, who was so depraved at seventeen that he had long ago given up trying to be any worse, turned a dull shade of gardenia white, but he did not commit the error of dashing out of the room like Odo Finsberry, a young gentleman who was understood to be reading for the Church and who was possibly disturbed at the thought of scandals he might hear concerning other people. Clow had the presence of mind to maintain a composed exterior; privately he was calculating how long it would take to procure a box of fancy mice through the agency of the *Exchange and Mart* as a specimen of hush-money.

Even in a delicate situation like the present, Agnes Resker could not endure to remain too long in the background.

'Why did I ever come down here?' she asked dramatically.

Tobermory immediately accepted the opening.

'Judging by what you said to Mrs Cornett on the croquet-lawn yesterday, you were out for food. You described the Blemleys as the dullest people to stay with that you knew, but said they were clever enough to employ a first rate cook; otherwise they'd find it difficult to get anyone to come down a second time.'

'There's not a word of truth in it! I appeal to Mrs Cornett—' exclaimed the discomfited Agnes.

'Mrs Cornett repeated your remark afterwards to Bertie van Tahn,' continued Tobermory, 'and said "That woman is a regular Hunger Marcher; she'd go anywhere for four square meals a day," and Bertie van Tahn said—'

At this point the chronicle mercifully ceased. Tobermory had caught a glimpse of the big yellow Tom from the Rectory working his way through the shrubbery towards the stable wing. In a flash he had vanished through the open French window.

With the disappearance of his too brilliant pupil Cornelius Appin found himself beset by a hurricane of bitter upbraiding, anxious inquiry, and frightened entreaty. The responsibility for the situation lay with him, and he must prevent matters from becoming worse. Could Tobermory impart his dangerous gift to other cats? was the first question he had to answer. It was possible, he replied, that he might have initiated his intimate friend the stable puss into his new accomplishment, but it was unlikely that his teaching could have taken a wider range as yet.

'Then,' said Mrs Cornett, 'Tobermory may be a valuable cat and a great pet; but I'm sure you will agree, Adelaide, that both he and the stable cat must be done away with without delay.'

'You don't suppose I've enjoyed the last quarter of an hour, do you?' said Lady Blemley bitterly. 'My husband and I are very fond of Tobermory – at least, we were before this horrible accomplishment was infused into him, but now, of course, the only thing is to have him destroyed as soon as possible.'

'We can put some strychnine in the scraps he always gets at dinner-time,' said Sir Wilfrid, 'and I will go and drown the stable cat myself. The coachman will be very sore at losing his pet, but I'll say a word. A catching form of mange has broken out in both cats and we're afraid of its spreading to the kennels.'

'But my great discovery!' expostulated Mr Appin; 'after all my years of research and experiment –'

'You can go and experiment on the short-horns at the farm, who are under proper control,' said Mrs Cornett, 'or the elephants at the Zoological Gardens. They're said to be highly intelligent, and they have this recommendation, that they don't come creeping about our bedrooms and under chairs, and so forth.'

An archangel ecstatically proclaiming the Millennium, and then finding that it clashed unparadonably with Henley and would have to be indefinitely postponed, could hardly have felt more crestfallen than Cornelius Appin at the reception of his wonderful achievement. Public opinion, however, was against him – in fact, had the general voice been consulted on the subject it is probable that a strong minority vote would have been in favour of including him in the strychnine diet.

Defective train arrangements and a nervous desire to see matters brought to a finish prevented an immediate dispersal of the party, but dinner that evening was not a social success. Sir Wilfrid had had rather a trying time with the stable cat and subsequently with the coachman. Agnes Resk ostentatiously limited her repast to a morsel of dry toast, which she bit as though it were a personal enemy; while Mavis Pellington maintained a vindictive silence throughout the meal. Lady Blemley kept up a flow of what she hoped was conversation, but her attention was fixed on the doorway. A plateful of carefully dosed fish scraps was in readiness on the sideboard, but sweets and savoury and dessert went their way, and no Tobermory appeared either in the dining-room or kitchen.

The sepulchral dinner was cheerful compared with the subsequent vigil in the smoking-room. Eating and drinking had at least supplied a distraction and cloak to the prevailing embarrassment. Bridge was out of the question in the general tension of nerves and tempers, and after Odo Finsberg had given a lugubrious rendering of 'Mélisande in the Wood' to a frigid audience, music was tacitly avoided. At eleven the servants went to bed, announcing that the small window in the pantry had been left open as usual for Tobermory's private use. The guests read steadily through the current batch of magazines, and fell back gradually on the 'Badminton Library' and bound volumes of *Punch*. Lady Blemley made periodic visits to the pantry, returning each time with an expression of listless depression which forestalled questioning.

At two o'clock Clovis broke the dominating silence.

'He won't turn up tonight. He's probably in the local newspaper office at the present moment dictating the first instalment of his reminiscences. Lady What's-her-name's book won't be in it. It will be the event of the day.'

Having made this contribution to the general cheerfulness, Clovis went to bed. At long intervals throughout the evening various members of the house-party followed his example.

The servants taking round the early tea made a uniform announcement in reply to a uniform question. Tobermory had not returned.

Breakfast was, if anything, a more unpleasant function than dinner had been, but before its conclusion the situation was relieved. Tobermory's corpse was brought in from the shrubbery, where the gardener had just discovered it. From the bites on his throat and the yellow fur which coated his claws it was evident that he had fallen in unequal combat with the big Tom from the Rectory.

By midday most of the guests had quitted the Towers, and after lunch Lady Blemley had sufficiently recovered her spirits to write an extremely nasty letter to the Rectory about the loss of her valuable pet.

Tobermory had been Appin's one successful pupil, and he was destined to have no successor. A few weeks later an elephant in the Dresden Zoological Garden, which had shown no previous signs of irritability, broke loose and killed an Englishman who had apparently been teasing it. The victim's name was variously reported in the papers as Oppin and Eppelin, but his front name was faithfully rendered Cornelius.

'If he was trying German irregular verbs on the poor beast,' said Clovis, 'he deserved all he got.'

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## GABRIEL-ERNEST

‘THERE IS A wild beast in your woods,’ said the artist Cunningham, as he was being driven to the station. It was the only remark he had made during the drive, but as Van Cheele had talked incessantly his companion’s silence had not been noticeable.

‘A stray fox or two and some resident weasels. Nothing more formidable,’ said Van Cheele. The artist said nothing.

‘What did you mean about a wild beast?’ said Van Cheele later, when they were on the platform.

‘Nothing. My imagination. Here is the train,’ said Cunningham.

That afternoon Van Cheele went for one of his frequent rambles through his woodland property. He had a stuffed bittern in his study, and knew the names of quite a number of wild flowers, so his aunt had possibly some justification in describing him as a great naturalist. At any rate, he was a great walker. It was his custom to take mental notes of everything he saw during his walks, not so much for the purpose of assisting contemporary science as to provide topics for conversation afterwards. When the bluebells began to show themselves in flower he made a point of informing every one of the fact; the season of the year might have warned his hearers of the likelihood of such an occurrence, but at least they felt that he was being absolutely frank with them.

What Van Cheele saw on this particular afternoon was, however, something far removed from his ordinary range of experience. On a shelf of smooth stone overhanging a deep pool in the hollow of an oak coppice a boy of about sixteen lay asprawl, drying his wet brown limbs luxuriously in the sun. His wet hair, parted by a recent dive, lay close to his head, and his light-brown eyes, so light that there was an almost tigerish gleam in them, were turned towards Van Cheele with a certain lazy watchfulness. It was an unexpected apparition, and Van Cheele found himself engaged in the novel process of thinking before he spoke. Where on earth could this wild-looking boy hail from? The miller’s wife had lost a child some two months ago, supposed to have been swept away by the mill-race, but that had been a mere baby, not a half-grown lad.

‘What are you doing there?’ he demanded.

‘Obviously, sunning myself,’ replied the boy.

‘Where do you live?’

‘Here, in these woods.’

‘You can’t live in the woods,’ said Van Cheele.

‘They are very nice woods,’ said the boy, with a touch of patronage in his voice.

‘But where do you sleep at night?’

‘I don’t sleep at night; that’s my busiest time.’

Van Cheele began to have an irritated feeling that he was grappling with a problem that was eluding him.

‘What do you feed on?’ he asked.

'Flesh,' said the boy, and he pronounced the word with slow relish, as though he were tasting it.

'Flesh! What flesh?'

'Since it interests you, rabbits, wild-fowl, hares, poultry, lambs in their season, children when I can get any; they're usually too well locked in at night, when I do most of my hunting. It's quite two months since I tasted child-flesh.'

Ignoring the chaffing nature of the last remark Van Cheele tried to draw the boy on the subject of possible poaching operations.

'You're talking rather through your hat when you speak of feeding on hares.' (Considering the nature of the boy's toilet the simile was hardly an apt one.) 'Our hillside hares aren't easily caught.'

'At night I hunt on four feet,' was the somewhat cryptic response.

'I suppose you mean that you hunt with a dog?' hazarded Van Cheele.

The boy rolled slowly over on to his back, and laughed a weird low laugh, that was pleasantly like a chuckle and disagreeably like a snarl.

'I don't fancy any dog would be very anxious for my company, especially at night.'

Van Cheele began to feel that there was something positively uncanny about the strange-eyed, strange-tongued youngster.

'I can't have you staying in these woods,' he declared authoritatively.

'I fancy you'd rather have me here than in your house,' said the boy.

The prospect of this wild, nude animal in Van Cheele's primly ordered house was certainly an alarming one.

'If you don't go I shall have to make you,' said Van Cheele.

The boy turned like a flash, plunged into the pool, and in a moment had flung his wet and glistening body half-way up the bank where Van Cheele was standing. In an otter the movement would not have been remarkable; in a boy Van Cheele found it sufficiently startling. His foot slipped as he made an involuntary backward movement, and he found himself almost prostrate on the slippery weed-grown bank, with those tigerish yellow eyes not very far from his own. Almost instinctively he half raised his hand to his throat. The boy laughed again, a laugh in which the snarl had nearly driven out the chuckle, and then, with another of his astonishing lightning movements, plunged out of view into a yielding tangle of weed and fern.

'What an extraordinary wild animal!' said Van Cheele as he picked himself up. And then he recalled Cunningham's remark, 'There is a wild beast in your woods.'

Walking slowly homeward, Van Cheele began to turn over in his mind various local occurrences which might be traceable to the existence of this astonishing young savage.

Something had been thinning the game in the woods lately, poultry had been missing from the farms, hares were growing unaccountably scarcer, and complaints had reached him of lambs being carried off bodily from the hills. Was it possible that this wild boy was really hunting the countryside in company with some clever poacher dog? He had spoken of hunting 'four-footed' by night, but then, again, he had hinted strangely at no dog caring to come near him, 'especially at night.' It was certainly puzzling. And then, as Van Cheele ran his mind over the various depredations that had been committed during the last month or two, he came suddenly to a dead stop, alike in his walk and his speculations. The child missing from the mill two months ago – the accepted theory was that it had tumbled into the mill-race and been swept away; but the mother had always declared she had heard a shriek on the hill side of the house, in the opposite direction from the water. It was unthinkable, of course, but he wished that the boy had not made that uncanny remark about child-flesh eaten two months ago. Such dreadful things should not be said even in fun.

Van Cheele, contrary to his usual wont, did not feel disposed to be communicative about his discovery in the wood. His position as a parish councillor and justice of the peace seemed somehow compromised by the fact that he was harbouring a personality of such doubtful repute on his property there was even a possibility that a heavy bill of damages for raided lambs and poultry might be laid at his door. At dinner that night he was quite unusually silent.

‘Where’s your voice gone to?’ said his aunt. ‘One would think you had seen a wolf.’

Van Cheele, who was not familiar with the old saying, thought the remark rather foolish; if he had seen a wolf on his property his tongue would have been extraordinarily busy with the subject.

At breakfast next morning Van Cheele was conscious that his feeling of uneasiness regarding yesterday’s episode had not wholly disappeared, and he resolved to go by train to the neighbouring cathedral town, hunt up Cunningham, and learn from him what he had really seen that had prompted the remark about a wild beast in the woods. With this resolution taken, his usual cheerfulness partially returned, and he hummed a bright little melody as he sauntered to the morning-room for his customary cigarette. As he entered the room the melody made way abruptly for a pious invocation. Gracefully sprawl on the ottoman, in an attitude of almost exaggerated repose, was the boy of the woods. He was drier than when Van Cheele had last seen him, but no other alternation was noticeable in his toilet.

‘How dare you come here?’ asked Van Cheele furiously.

‘You told me I was not to stay in the woods,’ said the boy calmly.

‘But not to come here. Supposing my aunt should see you!’

And with a view to minimizing that catastrophe Van Cheele hastily obscured as much of his unwelcome guest as possible under the folds of a *Morning Post*. At that moment his aunt entered the room.

‘This is a poor boy who has lost his way – and lost his memory. He doesn’t know who he is or where he comes from,’ explained Van Cheele desperately, glancing apprehensively at the waif’s face to see whether he was going to add inconvenient candour to his other savage propensities.

Miss Van Cheele was enormously interested.

‘Perhaps his underlinen is marked,’ she suggested.

‘He seems to have lost most of that, too,’ said Van Cheele, making frantic little grabs at the *Morning Post* to keep it in its place.

A naked homeless child appealed to Miss Van Cheele as warmly as a stray kitten or derelict puppy would have done.

‘We must do all we can for him,’ she decided, and in a very short time a messenger, dispatched to the rectory, where a pageboy was kept, had returned with a suit of pantry clothes, and the necessary accessories of shirt, shoes, collar, etc. Clothed, clean, and groomed, the boy lost none of his uncanniness in Van Cheele’s eyes, but his aunt found him sweet.

‘We must call him something till we know who he really is,’ she said. ‘Gabriel-Ernest, I think; those are nice suitable names.’

Van Cheele agreed, but he privately doubted whether they were being grafted on to a nice suitable child. His misgivings were not diminished by the fact that his staid and elderly spaniel had bolted out of the house at the first incoming of the boy, and now obstinately remained shivering and yapping at the farther end of the orchard, while the canary, usually as vocally industrious as Van Cheele himself, had put itself on an allowance of frightened cheeps. More than ever he was resolved to consult Cunningham without loss of time.

As he drove off to the station his aunt was arranging that Gabriel-Ernest should help her to entertain



the infant members of her Sunday-school class at tea that afternoon.

Cunningham was not at first disposed to be communicative.

‘My mother died of some brain trouble,’ he explained, ‘so you will understand why I am averse to dwelling on anything of an impossibly fantastic nature that I may see or think that I have seen.’

‘But what *did* you see?’ persisted Van Cheele.

‘What I thought I saw was something so extraordinary that no really sane man could dignify it with the credit of having actually happened. I was standing, the last evening I was with you, half-hidden behind the hedgegrowth by the orchard gate, watching the dying glow of the sunset. Suddenly I became aware of a naked boy, a bather from some neighbouring pool, I took him to be, who was standing on the bare hillside also watching the sunset. His pose was so suggestive of some wild faun of Pagan myth that I instantly wanted to engage him as a model, and in another moment I think I should have hailed him. But just then the sun dipped out of view, and all the orange and pink slid out of the landscape, leaving it cold and grey. And at the same moment an astounding thing happened – the boy vanished too!’

‘What! vanished away into nothing?’ asked Van Cheele excitedly.

‘No; that is the dreadful part of it,’ answered the artist; ‘on the open hillside where the boy had been standing a second ago, stood a large wolf, blackish in colour, with gleaming fangs and cruel, yellow eyes. You may think –’

But Van Cheele did not stop for anything as futile as thought. Already he was tearing at top speed towards the station. He dismissed the idea of a telegram. ‘Gabriel-Ernest is a werewolf’ was a hopelessly inadequate effort at conveying the situation, and his aunt would think it was a coded message to which he had omitted to give her the key. His one hope was that he might reach home before sundown. The cab which he chartered at the other end of the railway journey bore him with what seemed exasperating slowness along the country roads, which were pink and mauve with the flush of the sinking sun. His aunt was putting away some unfinished jams and cake when he arrived.

‘Where is Gabriel-Ernest?’ he almost screamed.

‘He is taking the little Toop child home,’ said his aunt. ‘It was getting so late, I thought it wasn’t safe to let it go back alone. What a lovely sunset, isn’t it?’

But Van Cheele, although not oblivious of the glow in the western sky, did not stay to discuss its beauties. At a speed for which he was scarcely geared he raced along the narrow lane that led to the home of the Toops. On one side ran the swift current of the mill-stream, on the other rose the stretch of bare hillside. A dwindling rim of red sun showed still on the skyline, and the next turning must bring him in view of the ill-assorted couple he was pursuing. Then the colour went suddenly out of things, and a grey light settled itself with a quick shiver over the landscape. Van Cheele heard a shrill wail of fear, and stopped running.

Nothing was ever seen again of the Toop child or Gabriel-Ernest, but the latter’s discarded garments were found lying in the road, so it was assumed that the child had fallen into the water, and that the boy had stripped and jumped in, in a vain endeavour to save it. Van Cheele and some workmen who were near by at the time testified to having heard a child scream loudly just near the spot where the clothes were found. Mrs Toop, who had eleven other children, was decently resigned to her bereavement, but Miss Van Cheele sincerely mourned her lost foundling. It was on her initiative that a memorial brass was put up in the parish church to ‘Gabriel-Ernest, an unknown boy, who bravely sacrificed his life for another.’

Van Cheele gave way to his aunt in most things, but he flatly refused to subscribe to the Gabriel-Ernest memorial.

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## THE MOUSE

THEODORIC VOLER HAD been brought up, from infancy to the confines of middle age, by a fond mother whose chief solicitude had been to keep him screened from what she called the coarse realities of life. When she died she left Theodoric alone in a world that was as real as ever, and a good deal coarser than he considered it had any need to be. To a man of his temperament and upbringing even a simple railway journey was crammed with petty annoyances and minor discords, and as he settled himself down in a second-class compartment one September morning he was conscious of ruffled feelings and general mental discomposure. He had been staying at a country vicarage, the inmates of which had been certainly neither brutal nor bacchanalian, but their supervision of the domestic establishment had been of that lax order which invites disaster. The pony carriage that was to take him to the station had never been properly ordered, and when the moment for his departure drew near the handyman who should have produced the required article was nowhere to be found. In this emergency Theodoric, to his mute but very intense disgust, found himself obliged to collaborate with the vicar's daughter in the task of harnessing the pony, which necessitated groping about in a dimly-lit outhouse called a stable, and smelling very like one – except in patches where it smelt of mice. Without being actually afraid of mice, Theodoric classed them among the coarser incidents of life, and considered that Providence, with a little exercise of moral courage, might long ago have recognized that they were not indispensable, and have withdrawn them from circulation. As the train glided out of the station Theodoric's nervous imagination accused himself of exhaling a weak odour in the stableyard, and possibly of displaying a mouldy straw or two on his usually well-brushed garments. Fortunately the only other occupant of the compartment, a lady of about the same age as himself, seemed inclined for slumber rather than scrutiny; the train was not due to stop till the terminus was reached, in about an hour's time, and the carriage was of the old-fashioned sort, that held no communication with a corridor, therefore no further travelling companions were likely to intrude on Theodoric's semi-privacy. And yet the train had scarcely attained its normal speed before he became reluctantly but vividly aware that he was not alone with the slumbering lady; he was not even alone with his own clothes. A warm, creeping movement over his flesh betrayed the unwelcome and highly resented presence, unseen but poignant, of a strayed mouse, that had evidently dashed into its present retreat during the episode of the pony harnessing. Furtive stamps and shakes and wildly directed pinches failed to dislodge the intruder, whose motto, indeed, seemed to be *Excelsior*; and the lawful occupant of the clothes lay back against the cushions and endeavoured rapidly to evolve some means for putting an end to the dual ownership. It was unthinkable that he should continue for the space of a whole hour in the horrible position of a Rowton House for vagrant mice (already his imagination had at least doubled the numbers of the alien invasion). On the other hand, nothing less drastic than a partial disrobing would ease him of his tormentor, and to undress in the presence of a lady, even for so laudable a purpose, was an idea that made his eartips tingle in a blush of abject shame. He had never

been able to bring himself even to the mild exposure of open-work socks in the presence of the fa-  
sex. And yet – the lady in this case was to all appearances soundly and securely asleep; the mouse, on  
the other hand, seemed to be trying to crowd a Wanderjahr into a few strenuous minutes. If there  
any truth in the theory of transmigration, this particular mouse must certainly have been in a former  
state a member of the Alpine Club. Sometimes in its eagerness it lost its footing and slipped for half an  
inch or so; and then, in fright, or more probably temper, it bit. Theodoric was goaded into the most  
audacious undertaking of his life. Crimsoning to the hue of a beetroot and keeping an agonized watch  
on his slumbering fellow-traveller, he swiftly and noiselessly secured the ends of his railway-rug to the  
racks on either side of the carriage, so that a substantial curtain hung athwart the compartment. In the  
narrow dressing-room that he had thus improvised he proceeded with violent haste to extricate himself  
partially and the mouse entirely from the surrounding casings of tweed and half-wool. As the  
unravelling mouse gave a wild leap to the floor, the rug, slipping its fastening at either end, also came  
down with a heart-curdling flop, and almost simultaneously the awakened sleeper opened her eyes.  
With a movement almost quicker than the mouse's, Theodoric pounced on the rug, and hauled it up in  
ample folds chin-high over his dismantled person as he collapsed into the further corner of the  
carriage. The blood raced and beat in the veins of his neck and forehead, while he waited dumbly for  
the communication-cord to be pulled. The lady, however, contented herself with a silent stare at her  
strangely muffled companion. How much had she seen, Theodoric queried to himself, and in any case  
what on earth must she think of his present posture?

'I think I have caught a chill,' he ventured desperately.

'Really, I'm sorry,' she replied. 'I was just going to ask you if you would open this window.'

'I fancy it's malaria,' he added, his teeth chattering slightly, as much from fright as from a desire to  
support his theory.

'I've got some brandy in my hold-all, if you'll kindly reach it down for me,' said his companion.

'Not for worlds – I mean, I never take anything for it,' he assured her earnestly.

'I suppose you caught it in the Tropics?'

Theodoric, whose acquaintance with the Tropics was limited to an annual present of a chest of tea  
from an uncle in Ceylon, felt that even the malaria was slipping from him. Would it be possible, he  
wondered, to disclose the real state of affairs to her in small instalments?

'Are you afraid of mice?' he ventured, growing, if possible, more scarlet in the face.

'Not unless they came in quantities, like those that ate up Bishop Hatto. Why do you ask?'

'I had one crawling inside my clothes just now,' said Theodoric in a voice that hardly seemed his  
own. 'It was a most awkward situation.'

'It must have been, if you wear your clothes at all tight,' she observed; 'but mice have strange ideas  
of comfort.'

'I had to get rid of it while you were asleep,' he continued; then, with a gulp, he added, 'it was  
getting rid of it that brought me to – to this.'

'Surely leaving off one small mouse wouldn't bring on a chill,' she exclaimed, with a levity that  
Theodoric accounted abominable.

Evidently she had detected something of his predicament, and was enjoying his confusion. All the  
blood in his body seemed to have mobilized in one concentrated blush, and an agony of abasement  
worse than a myriad mice, crept up and down over his soul. And then, as reflection began to asse-  
itself, sheer terror took the place of humiliation. With every minute that passed the train was rushing  
nearer to the crowded and bustling terminus where dozens of prying eyes would be exchanged for the  
one paralyzing pair that watched him from the further corner of the carriage. There was one slender

despairing chance, which the next few minutes must decide. His fellow-traveller might relapse into blessed slumber. But as the minutes throbbled by that chance ebbed away. The furtive glance which Theodoric stole at her from time to time disclosed only an unwinking wakefulness.

‘I think we must be getting near now,’ she presently observed.

Theodoric had already noted with growing terror the recurring stacks of small, ugly dwellings that heralded the journey’s end. The words acted as a signal. Like a hunted beast breaking cover and dashing madly towards some other haven of momentary safety he threw aside his rug, and struggled frantically into his dishevelled garments. He was conscious of dull suburban stations racing past the window, of a choking, hammering sensation in his throat and heart, and of an icy silence in the corner towards which he dared not look. Then as he sank back in his seat, clothed and almost delirious, the train slowed down to a final crawl, and the woman spoke.

‘Would you be so kind,’ she asked, ‘as to get me a porter to put me into a cab? It’s a shame to trouble you when you’re feeling unwell, but being blind makes one so helpless at a railway station.’

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## ESMÉ

‘ALL HUNTING STORIES are the same,’ said Clovis; ‘just as all Turf stories are the same, and all—’  
‘My hunting story isn’t a bit like any you’ve ever heard,’ said the Baroness. ‘It happened quite while ago, when I was about twenty-three. I wasn’t living apart from my husband then; you see neither of us could afford to make the other a separate allowance. In spite of everything that proverb may say, poverty keeps together more homes than it breaks up. But we always hunted with different packs. All this has nothing to do with the story.’

‘We haven’t arrived at the meet yet. I suppose there was a meet,’ said Clovis.

‘Of course there was a meet,’ said the Baroness; ‘all the usual crowd were there, especially Constance Broddle. Constance is one of those strapping florid girls that go so well with autumn scenery or Christmas decorations in church. “I feel a presentiment that something dreadful is going to happen,” she said to me; “am I looking pale?”’

‘She was looking about as pale as a beetroot that has suddenly heard bad news.’

‘“You’re looking nicer than usual,” I said, “but that’s so easy for you.” Before she had got the right bearings of this remark we had settled down to business; hounds had found a fox lying out in some gorse-bushes.’

‘I knew it,’ said Clovis; ‘in every fox-hunting story that I’ve ever heard there’s been a fox and some gorse-bushes.’

‘Constance and I were well mounted,’ continued the Baroness serenely, ‘and we had no difficulty in keeping ourselves in the first flight, though it was a fairly stiff run. Towards the finish, however, we must have held rather too independent a line, for we lost the hounds, and found ourselves plodding aimlessly along miles away from anywhere. It was fairly exasperating, and my temper was beginning to let itself go by inches, when on pushing our way through an accommodating hedge we were gladdened by the sight of hounds in full cry in a hollow just beneath us.’

‘“There they go,” cried Constance, and then added in a gasp, “In Heaven’s name, what are they hunting?”’

‘It was certainly no mortal fox. It stood more than twice as high, had a short, ugly head, and an enormous thick neck.’

‘“It’s a hyena,” I cried; “it must have escaped from Lord Pabham’s Park.”’

‘At that moment the hunted beast turned and faced its pursuers, and the hounds (there were only about six couple of them) stood round in a half-circle and looked foolish. Evidently they had broken away from the rest of the pack on the trail of this alien scent, and were not quite sure how to treat the quarry now they had got him.’

‘The hyena hailed our approach with unmistakable relief and demonstrations of friendliness. It had probably been accustomed to uniform kindness from humans, while its first experience of a pack of hounds had left a bad impression. The hounds looked more than ever embarrassed as their quarry

paraded its sudden intimacy with us, and the faint toot of a horn in the distance was seized on as a welcome signal for unobtrusive departure. Constance and I and the hyena were left alone in the gathering twilight.

“What are we to do?” asked Constance.

“What a person you are for questions,” I said.

“Well, we can’t stay here all night with a hyena,” she retorted.

“I don’t know what your ideas of comfort are,” I said; “but I shouldn’t think of staying here all night even without a hyena. My home may be an unhappy one, but at least it has hot and cold water laid on, and domestic service, and other conveniences which we shouldn’t find here. We had better make for that ridge of trees to the right; I imagine the Crowley road is just beyond.”

‘We trotted off slowly along a faintly marked cart-track, with the beast following cheerfully at our heels.

“What on earth are we to do with the hyena?” came the inevitable question.

“What does one generally do with hyenas?” I asked crossly.

“I’ve never had anything to do with one before,” said Constance.

“Well, neither have I. If we even knew its sex we might give it a name. Perhaps we might call it Esmé. That would do in either case.”

‘There was still sufficient daylight for us to distinguish wayside objects, and our listless spirits gave a upward perk as we came upon a small half-naked gipsy brat picking blackberries from a low-growing bush. The sudden apparition of two horsewomen and a hyena set it off crying, and in any case we should scarcely have gleaned any useful geographical information from that source; but there was a probability that we might strike a gipsy encampment somewhere along our route. We rode on hopefully but uneventfully for another mile or so.

“I wonder what the child was doing there,” said Constance presently.

“Picking blackberries. Obviously.”

“I don’t like the way it cried,” pursued Constance; “somehow its wail keeps ringing in my ears.”

‘I did not chide Constance for her morbid fancies; as a matter of fact the same sensation, of being pursued by a persistent fretful wail, had been forcing itself on my rather over-tired nerves. For my company’s sake I hulloed to Esmé, who had lagged somewhat behind. With a few springy bounds he drew up level, and then shot past us.

‘The wailing accompaniment was explained. The gipsy child was firmly, and I expect painfully, held in his jaws.

“Merciful Heaven!” screamed Constance, “what on earth shall we do? What are we to do?”

‘I am perfectly certain that at the Last Judgment Constance will ask more questions than any of the examining Seraphs.

“Can’t we do something?” she persisted tearfully, as Esmé cantered easily along in front of our tired horses.

‘Personally I was doing everything that occurred to me at the moment. I stormed and scolded and coaxing in English and French and gamekeeper language; I made absurd, ineffectual cuts in the air with my thongless hunting-crop; I hurled my sandwich case at the brute; in fact, I really don’t know what more I could have done. And still we lumbered on through the deepening dusk, with that dauntless uncouth shape lumbering ahead of us, and a drone of lugubrious music floating in our ears. Suddenly Esmé bounded aside into some thick bushes, where we could not follow; the wail rose to a shriek and then stopped altogether. This part of the story I always hurry over, because it is really rather horrible. When the beast joined us again, after an absence of a few minutes, there was an air of patience.

understanding about him, as though he knew that he had done something of which we disapproved but which he felt to be thoroughly justifiable.

“How can you let that ravening beast trot by your side?” asked Constance. She was looking more than ever like an albino beetroot.

“In the first place, I can’t prevent it,” I said; “and in the second place, whatever else he may be, I doubt if he’s ravening at the present moment.”

‘Constance shuddered. “Do you think the poor little thing suffered much?” came another of her futile questions.

“The indications were all that way,” I said; “on the other hand, of course, it may have been crying from sheer temper. Children sometimes do.”

‘It was nearly pitch-dark when we emerged suddenly into the high road. A flash of lights and the whir of a motor went past us at the same moment at uncomfortably close quarters. A thud and a sharp screeching yell followed a second later. The car drew up, and when I had ridden back to the spot I found a young man bending over a dark motionless mass lying by the roadside.

“You have killed my Esmé,” I exclaimed bitterly.

“I’m so awfully sorry,” said the young man; “I keep dogs myself, so I know what you must feel about it. I’ll do anything I can in reparation.”

“Please bury him at once,” I said; “that much I think I may ask of you.”

“Bring the spade, William,” he called to the chauffeur. Evidently hasty roadside interments were contingencies that had been provided against.

‘The digging of a sufficiently large grave took some little time. “I say, what a magnificent fellow,” said the motorist as the corpse was rolled over into the trench. “I’m afraid he must have been rather a valuable animal.”

“He took second in the puppy class at Birmingham last year,” I said resolutely.

‘Constance snorted loudly.

“Don’t cry, dear,” I said brokenly; “it was all over in a moment. He couldn’t have suffered much.”

“Look here,” said the young fellow desperately, “you simply must let me do something by way of reparation.”

‘I refused sweetly, but as he persisted I let him have my address.

‘Of course, we kept our own counsel as to the earlier episodes of the evening. Lord Pabham never advertised the loss of his hyena; when a strictly fruit-eating animal strayed from his park a year or two previously he was called upon to give compensation in eleven cases of sheep-worrying and practical to re-stock his neighbours’ poultry-yards, and an escaped hyena would have mounted up to something on the scale of a Government grant. The gipsies were equally unobtrusive over their missing offspring. I don’t suppose in large encampments they really know to a child or two how many they’ve got.’

The Baroness paused reflectively, and then continued:

‘There was a sequel to the adventure, though. I got through the post a charming little diamond brooch, with the name Esmé set in a sprig of rosemary. Incidentally, too, I lost the friendship of Constance Broddle. You see, when I sold the brooch I quite properly refused to give her any share of the proceeds. I pointed out that the Esmé part of the affair was my own invention, and the hyena part of it belonged to Lord Pabham, if it really was his hyena, of which, of course, I’ve no proof.’

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## SREDNI VASHTAR

CONRADIN WAS TEN years old, and the doctor had pronounced his professional opinion that the boy would not live another five years. The doctor was silky and effete, and counted for little, but his opinion was endorsed by Mrs De Ropp, who counted for nearly everything. Mrs De Ropp was Conradin's cousin and guardian, and in his eyes she represented those three-fifths of the world that are necessary and disagreeable and real; the other two-fifths, in perpetual antagonism to the foregoing, were summed up in himself and his imagination. One of these days Conradin supposed he would succumb to the mastering pressure of wearisome necessary things – such as illnesses and coddling restrictions and drawn-out dullness. Without his imagination, which was rampant under the spur of loneliness, he would have succumbed long ago.

Mrs De Ropp would never, in her honestest moments, have confessed to herself that she disliked Conradin, though she might have been dimly aware that thwarting him 'for his good' was a duty which she did not find particularly irksome. Conradin hated her with a desperate sincerity which he was perfectly able to mask. Such few pleasures as he could contrive for himself gained an added relief from the likelihood that they would be displeasing to his guardian, and from the realm of his imagination she was locked out – an unclean thing, which should find no entrance.

In the dull, cheerless garden, overlooked by so many windows that were ready to open with a message not to do this or that, or a reminder that medicines were due, he found little attraction. The few fruit-trees that it contained were set jealously apart from his plucking, as though they were rare specimens of their kind blooming in an arid waste; it would probably have been difficult to find a market-gardener who would have offered ten shillings for their entire yearly produce. In a forgotten corner, however, almost hidden behind a dismal shrubbery, was a disused tool-shed of respectable proportions, and within its walls Conradin found a haven, something that took on the varying aspects of a playroom and a cathedral. He had peopled it with a legion of familiar phantoms, evoked partly from fragments of history and partly from his own brain, but it also boasted two inmates of flesh and blood. In one corner lived a ragged-plumaged Houdan hen, on which the boy lavished an affection that had scarcely another outlet. Further back in the gloom stood a large hutch, divided into two compartments, one of which was fronted with close iron bars. This was the abode of a large polecat ferret, which a friendly butcher-boy had once smuggled, cage and all, into its present quarters, in exchange for a long-secreted hoard of small silver. Conradin was dreadfully afraid of the lithe, sharp-fanged beast, but it was his most treasured possession. Its very presence in the tool-shed was a secret and fearful joy, to be kept scrupulously from the knowledge of the Woman, as he privately dubbed his cousin. And one day, out of Heaven knows what material, he spun the beast a wonderful name, and from that moment it grew into a god and a religion. The Woman indulged in religion once a week at a church near by, and took Conradin with her, but to him the church service was an alien rite in the House of Rimmon. Every Thursday, in the dim and musty silence of the tool-shed, he worshipped



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