

William the Conqueror

GOOD INTENTIONS,
BUT UP TO NO GOOD



COVER
ILLUSTRATION BY
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RICHMAL CROMPTON

William the Conqueror

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Foreword by Charlie Higson

Illustrated by Thomas Henry

MACMILLAN CHILDREN'S BOOKS

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FOREWORD

I came to William Brown late in life. I was forty-odd, and had never read the books or seen any of the TV series, but I had three boys of my own and was always looking for ways to keep them entertained. They had an older cousin, Marlon, who handed down to them a battered cardboard box stuffed with cherished old cassette tapes. Surprisingly, apart from a couple of Masters of the Universe stories, the tapes were all Just William tapes. I say surprisingly because, as might be surmised from his name, Marlon was a modern London teenager through and through, cynical, streetwise and surly. His dad assured me he had loved the tapes, but somehow I didn't think my own kids would be interested. All they seemed to like were computer games and bizarre impenetrable American cartoon shows. How could they possibly relate to some schoolboy from the 1930s? But I put a tape on for them one night and left them to it.

Ever since then my two youngest boys have gone to sleep every single night to the sound of Martin Jarvis reading Richmal Crompton's ageless stories. They must have heard those tapes hundreds of times – no, thousands. The originals are worn out, replaced and updated from the huge library available. I don't know if the boys even hear the words any more, or if they have simply developed a Pavlovian response to Martin Jarvis, whose voice transports them to a safe and comforting world of tea parties, scraped knees and an endless sunny summer's afternoon that has lasted ninety years.

Listening with the kids on car journeys and in hotel bedrooms, I've grown to love the stories just as much as they have. The only problem is that when I read the originals I can't get Martin Jarvis's voice out of my head, and can't imagine how Richmal Crompton thought the boy should sound. Martin Jarvis is William Brown.

And I understand now why the stories cast such a spell over my own kids. They are boys and William is a boy, and Marlon was a boy, and boys are the same the world over and have always been the same, and probably always will be. And we never grow up. William is essence of boy. He has everything a boy could want – a dog, a stick, a penknife, a gang, a den, trees to climb, stones to throw, sweets in his pocket . . . Also, in these stories there's a war on, sheer bliss for an eleven-year-old boy so there's shrapnel to collect, soldiers to admire, parachutists to spot, spies to thwart. There is no death and hardship and horror, but the William stories are nevertheless quite tough. William and his gang are always getting into punch-ups and some of his exploits would be quite alarming to a namby-pamby, overprotective modern parent. Today William would probably be put into therapy and made the subject of a documentary on Channel Five. Except, of course, William always gets away with it. Despite the trail of chaos and anarchy he leaves behind, he always ends up as the only thing that any boy has ever wanted to be. A hero.

Charlie Higgs

CHAPTER 1

ENTER THE SWEEP

WILLIAM and the sweep took to one another at once.

William liked the sweep's colouring, and the sweep liked William's conversation. William looked up to the sweep as a being of a superior order.

'Didn't your mother *mind* you being a sweep?' he said wonderingly, as the sweep unpacked his brushes.

'N-naw,' said the sweep, slowly and thoughtfully. 'Leastways, she didn't say nothin'.'

'You don't want a partner, do you?' said William. 'I wun't mind being a sweep. I'd come an' live with you an' go round with you every day.'

'Thanks,' said the man, 'but p'raps your pa would have somethin' to say.'

William laughed bitterly and scornfully.

'Oh, yes, *they'd* fuss. *They* fuss if I get a bit of mud on my boots. As if their ole drawin'-room carpet mattered. Have you any little boys?'

'Yus, three,' said the sweep.

'I s'pose *they'll* all be sweeps,' said William gloomily, feeling that the profession was becoming overcrowded.

'Come *out* of that room, Master William,' called cook, who, in the absence of William's parents, took what William considered a wholly unjustifiable interest in him.

William extended his tongue in the direction of the voice. Otherwise he ignored it.

'I'd meant to be a robber,' went on William, 'but I think I'd as soon be a sweep. Or I might be a sweep first, an' then a robber.'

'Come out of that *room*, Master William,' called cook.

William simulated deafness.

'I'd like to be a sweep an' a robber an' a detective an' a soldier, an' some more things. I think I'd better be them about a year each, so's I can get 'em all in.'

'Um,' said the sweep. 'There's somethin' in that.'

Cook appeared in the doorway.

'Didn't you hear me telling you to *come* out of that room, Master William?' she said pugnaciously.

'You can't expect me to hear you when you go shoutin' about in the kitchen,' said William loftily. 'I just heard you *shoutin*'.'

'Well, come out of this room, anyway.'

'How can you expect me to know how it's done if I don't stay to watch? Wot's the good of me goin' to be a sweep if I don't know how it's done?'

~~‘What’s the good of me covering up all the furniture if you’re going to stay here getting black as pitch? Are you coming out?’~~

‘No,’ said William exasperated, ‘I’ve *gotter* stay an’ learn. It’s just the same as Robert goin’ to college – my stayin’ to watch the sweep. Wot’s the *good* of me bein’ a sweep if I don’t learn? Folks prob’ly wun’t pay me if I didn’t know how to do it, and *then* what’d I do?’

‘Very well, Master William,’ said cook with treacherous sweetness, ‘I’ll tell your pa when he comes in that you stayed in here with the sweep when your ma said most speshful you wasn’t to.’

William reconsidered this aspect of affairs.

‘All right, Crabbie,’ he said grudgingly. ‘An’ I hope that I jolly well *spoil* your chimney when I’m sweep with not knowing how to do it.’

He wandered round the house and watched through the window. It was a thrilling performance. He was lost in roseate dreams of himself pursuing the gloriously dirty calling of chimney sweep when the sweep appeared with a heavy sack.

‘Where shall I put the soot?’ he said.

William considered. There was a nice bit of waste ground behind the summer-house. He looked carefully round to make sure that his arch-enemy cook was nowhere in sight.

‘Jus’ here,’ he said, leading the sweep round to the summer-house.

The sweep emptied the sack. It was a soft grey-black pile. William thrilled with the pride of possession.

‘That’s *mine*, isn’t it?’ he said.

‘Well, it’s not *mine*,’ said the sweep jocularly. ‘You can ’ave it to practise on.’

He left William smiling proudly above his pile.

From over the wall behind the summer-house William could see the road. He waved his hand effusively to the sweep as he passed on his little cart.

‘I say,’ called William.

The sweep drew up.

‘Does the horse an’ cart cost much?’ said William anxiously.

‘Oh no,’ said the sweep. ‘You can get ’em dirt cheap. I’ll lend you this ’ere of mine when you go into the business.’

With a facetious wink he drove on, and William returned to the contemplation of his pile of soot.

Soon a whistle that he knew roused him from his reverie and he peeped over the wall.

Ginger, William’s lifelong friend and ally, as earnest and freckled and snub-nosed as William himself, was passing down the road. He looked up at William.



THE SWEEP EMPTIED THE SACK. WILLIAM THRILLED WITH THE PRIDE OF POSSESSION. 'THAT'S MINE, ISN'T IT?' HE SAID.

'Ello,' said William, with modest pride. 'I've gotter bit of soot in here.'

But Ginger had a rival attraction. 'They're rattin in Cooben's barn,' he said.

William weighed the attraction of rattin and soot, and finally decided in favour of rattin.

'All right,' he called, 'wait a sec. I'll come.'

He completely forgot his soot till tea-time.

Then, as he was going out of the house, he met Mr and Miss Arnold Fox coming in. They were coming to call on Mrs Brown. Both were very tall and very thin, and both possessed expansive smiles that revealed perfect sets of false teeth.

'Good afternoon, William,' said Mr Fox politely.

‘Afternoon,’ said William.

‘A rough diamond, our William,’ smiled Mr Fox to his sister.

William glared at him.

She laid her hand on William’s head.

‘Manners maketh man, dear William,’ she said.

She then bent down and kissed William.

Mr Arnold Fox took off his hat and playfully extinguished William with it. Then he laid it on the hall table and went into the drawing-room, leaving William boiling and enraged on the doorstep.

That reminded William of his soot.

William and Ginger sat lazily upon the wall watching the passers-by. Absent-mindedly they toyed with handfuls of soot.

They were cheered by the sight of Mr Arnold Fox going down the road – his forehead beneath his hat suspiciously dark.

‘That’ll teach *him*. *He’ll* take some washing,’ said William.

‘Look!’ said Ginger, excitedly, leaning over the wall.

Along the road came three children in white, Geoffrey Spencer and Joan Bell with her little sister Mary. Geoffrey Spencer, in a white sailor suit, walked along mincingly, holding Joan Bell’s little bag and purse for her. Mary, toddled along holding her elder sister’s hand.

William admired Joan intensely. Occasionally she condescended to notice his existence.

‘Hello!’ called William. ‘Where you going?’

‘Posting a letter,’ said Geoffrey primly.

‘Come in an’ play,’ said William, ‘we’ve got some soot.’

‘No,’ said Geoffrey piously. ‘Mother said I wasn’t to play with you.’

‘You’re so rough,’ explained Joan with a little fastidious sniff.

William flushed beneath his soot. He felt that this reflected upon his character. He was annoyed that anyone, even so insignificant as Geoffrey, should be forbidden to play with him.

‘Rough!’ he said indignantly. Then, ‘Well, an’ I’d rather be rough than an ole softie like you – you an’ your ole white suit!’

‘Come along, Joan,’ said Geoffrey with a superior smile. ‘I’m not going to talk to him.’

William rolled white, angry eyes in his black face.

‘Yah-boo, softie!’ he called over the wall.

Yet he was depressed by the proceeding, and even Ginger’s suggestion of trying the effect of the soot on the bed of arum lilies did not revive him much. However, the effect was certainly cheering. So they moved on to the white roses and worked with the pure joy of the artist on them till they heard the dulcet tones of Joan and Mary and Geoffrey returning from the spot. Then they went back to the wall. Joan was growing bored with Geoffrey. She looked up almost longingly towards William’s grimy face.

‘Where *is* your soot, William?’ she said.

‘Jus’ here,’ said William. ‘It’s jolly good soot.’

‘I’ll come an’ *look* at it,’ she said condescendingly. ‘I won’t come in an’ play. I’ll come in an’ *look* at it. You can go on home, Geoffrey.’

Geoffrey debated with his conscience. ‘I won’t come in,’ he said, ‘ ’cause mother says he’s so rough. I’ll wait for you out here.’

So hand-in-hand Joan and Mary came round to the back of the summer-house. William and Ginger proudly introduced them to the soot.

‘Ith lovely,’ said Mary. ‘Leth – leth danth round it – holding handth.’

‘All right,’ said William genially. ‘Come on.’

~~Nothing loth, they joined hands and danced round it.~~

Joan laughed excitedly.

‘Oh, it’s fun,’ she cried. ‘Faster.’

‘Father!’ cried Mary.

They went faster and faster. William and Ginger with the male’s innate desire of showing off his prowess began to revolve at lightning speed.

Then came the catastrophe.

Plop!

It was Mary who lost her balance and fell suddenly and violently on her face into the heap of soot.

Joan, with feminine inconsistency, turned upon William, stamping her foot.

‘You did it! You nasty, rough, horrible boy!’

‘I *didn’t*!’

‘You *did*!’

‘He *didn’t*!’ said Ginger.

‘He *did*!’

‘He *didn’t*!’

Meanwhile Mary had arisen from the soot heap – hair, eyes and mouth full of soot, soot clinging to her dress.

Her voice joined in the general uproar.

‘Oo – it taths nathy, it taths nathy – oo – oo.’

Joan wept in angry sympathy.

‘See how *you* like soot in your mouth, you nasty boy!’ she screamed at William, seizing a handful of soot and hurling it at William’s face.

That was the beginning of the battle.

Geoffrey, hearing the noise, came nobly to the rescue, to be received by a handful of soot from Ginger. It was a glorious battle. Ginger and William fought Geoffrey, and Joan fought everyone, and Mary sat on the soot heap and screamed. They threw soot till there was practically no soot left to throw. A butcher boy who was passing and heard the noise came in to arbitrate, but stayed to participate. Sheer lust of battle descended upon them all.

Then came sudden sanity. In stricken silence they gazed at each other.

Joan seized Mary by the hand. She glared round at them all from a small black face framed with grimy curls.



IT WAS A GLORIOUS BATTLE. GINGER AND WILLIAM FOUGHT GEOFFREY, AND JOAN FOUGHT EVERYONE, AND MARY SAT ON THE SOOT HEAP AND SCREAMED.

'I hate you all!' she said, stamping a small black foot.

'Hate you all!' screamed Mary, whose tears were making white tracks down her black face.

'It wasn't me,' said Geoffrey eagerly and ungrammatically.

'I hate you,' said Joan, 'worse than anybody – worse than William and worse than anyone, an' I'm going home to tell mother – so there.'

'Tho' there,' wailed Mary in concert.

With outraged dignity and clinging soot on every line of her figure, Joan led Mary from the garden.

It was more than Geoffrey could bear.

He followed them sobbing loudly, his white suit a cloudy grey-black.

Joan's voice floated out on the twilit air.

'An' I'm goin' to tell mother – you'll catch it, William Brown.'

Ginger looked round uneasily.

'I'd best be going, William,' he murmured.

Dejection descended upon William.

'A'right.'

Then he looked at Ginger and down at himself.

'Funny how it gets all over you,' he said, 'and don't it make your eyes look queer?'

'Am I's bad as you?' said Ginger apprehensively.

'Worse,' said William.

'Will it come off with cold water?'

'Dunno,' said William.

'I'll give it,' said Ginger, 'a jolly good try. What'll your folks say?'

'Dunno,' said William.

‘Well, goo’night, William.’

‘Goo’night,’ said William, despondently. Dusk had fallen.

He crept round to the back door, hoping to slip up the back stairs unobserved. But the cook’s strident voice came from the library.

‘Mrs Bell wants you on the telephone at once, please’m. It’s something about Master William.’

William beat a hasty retreat to the laurel bushes. Then, hearing footsteps on the drive, he stood on tiptoe and peered out. He met the horrified gaze of the housemaid, who was returning from her afternoon out.

With a wild yell she ran like an arrow towards the back door.

‘Oh lor! Oh lor!’ she called. ‘I seed the devil. I seed ’im in the garding.’

William among the laurel bushes smiled proudly to himself.

Then he sat down cross-legged in his retreat, black face on black hands, gleaming white eyes gazing dreamily into the distance.

He was not building castles in the air; he was not repenting of his sins; he was not thinking about future retribution. He was merely deciding that he wouldn’t be a sweep after all. It did taste so nasty.

CHAPTER 2

A BIRTHDAY TREAT

‘WHAT we goin’ to do this afternoon?’ demanded William of his boon companions, the Outlaws. They felt that as far as the morning was concerned they had pretty well exhausted the resources of the universe. They had fished in the pond with bent pins, which were attached to the end of strings which were attached to the end of sticks, and they had caught a large variety of water weeds and one sardine tin. Douglas said that he caught a fish which escaped before he could draw in his line, but this statement was greeted with open incredulity by the others.

‘A jolly big one too,’ said Douglas, unconsciously following in the footsteps of older adherents to the piscatorial art.

‘Oh, yes,’ said William sarcastically, ‘so big that none of us could see it. If it was as big as what you say it is why din’ you tell us, then we could have had a look at it?’

‘I din’ want to scare it away,’ said Douglas indignantly; then with a faint emulation of William’s sarcasm, ‘Fancy you not knowin’ that. Fancy you not knowin’ that fishes get scared of you shoutin’ an’ yellin’ about. I’m not s’prised that you only catch ole tins an’ things that can’t hear you shoutin’ an’ yellin’ about. I should think all the fishes for miles round’ve got headaches the way you’ve been shoutin’ an’ yellin’ about. I know the one I caught looked’s if it’d got a headache with it.’

William was taken aback by this outburst, but he quickly recovered.

‘Oh, yes, I dare say it looked pretty funny altogether, the one you caught. I’m sure if you caught a fish at all it was a pretty funny one.’

‘D’you say I *din’t* catch a fish?’ said Douglas furiously, squaring up to William.

‘I say no one *saw* your ole fish,’ an you oughter ask your mother to buy you a pair of spectacles s’ you can see what *is* fish an’ what’s your own ’magination.’

Ginger and Henry sat on the ground to watch the fight. It was not a long one, because Douglas lost his footing soon after they had begun and fell into the pond and was rescued by William, and the excitement of this proceeding dimmed the memory of Douglas’s alleged ‘catch’.

Then Henry thought that he saw a rabbit on the edge of the wood, so the Outlaws invaded the wood in a body with Jumble, William’s mongrel, at their head. Jumble hunted imaginary rabbits with yelps and barks and futile rushes, and the Outlaws urged him on with war-whoops and cries of ‘Good old Jumble! Fetch him out.’ Jumble caught and dismembered a leaf after pursuing it with wild excitement from tree to tree in the breeze, worried a clump of fungus, pricked his nose badly on a holly bush, and retired to bark defiance at it from a safe distance.

Tiring of rabbit hunting, the Outlaws climbed trees, and when Ginger had torn his coat and Henry split his trousers with the effort of attaining dangerous heights, they abandoned that occupation. They

~~'tracked' each other with much ostentatious secrecy and noisy 'silence' and crawling about on stomachs and sibilant whispering and 'Sh's' and stepping upon twigs and exclamations. Finally they were chased into the road again by a furious keeper and were given a ride in a farm waggon by a passing labourer, who was blessed with a good nature and rather liked the daredevil looks of the Outlaws.~~

William, drunk with ecstasy, drove and narrowly escaped precipitating the equipage into the ditch, and Ginger, while experimenting how far he could lean out at the back without falling, overbalanced and fell into the road. He climbed back cheerful and unhurt, if somewhat dishevelled.

Arrived at the village, they descended with much exuberant thanks and made their way to the disused barn that was the scene of most of their activities.

There they had a shooting match with the homemade bows and arrows that they kept concealed at the back of the barn. After breaking the window of a neighbouring cottage by accident they fled to the other end of the village, where they watched the blacksmith shoeing a horse. Ginger, to his great delight, was allowed to hold the hammer for a minute. This made him rather uppish, and his subsequent boasts of the honour thus paid him annoyed the other Outlaws so much that they all sat upon him (literally) in the ditch till he promised as well as his mouthful of mud would allow him not to mention it again.

It had been, on the whole, a thoroughly satisfactory morning. A similar afternoon was hardly to be hoped for, but the Outlaws were notoriously optimistic.

'What we goin' to do this afternoon?' repeated William.

A look of despondency came over Ginger's face.

'Gotter stay in at home,' he said mournfully.

'Why?' said the Outlaws.

'Gotter naunt comin' to stay. She's not comin' till tea-time, but they say they want her to see me clean, so I gotter stay in clean all afternoon.'

There was a murmur of indignation at this inhuman cruelty.

'Jus' like grown-ups,' said William bitterly.

'What's your aunt like?' said Henry with interest. 'Sorter one who gives decent tips?'

The Outlaws always 'went shares' in tips, and therefore each one took a personal interest in the visits of the other members' relations.

'Never seen her before,' said Ginger disconsolately. 'Don't know what she's like.'

'Sure to be awful,' said Douglas unfeelingly.

'But we don' mind that if she gives a decent tip,' added Henry.

'Oh, no,' said Ginger bitterly. '*You* don' mind. *You've* not gotter sit all afternoon clean an' doin' nothin', have you? Oh, no, I'm sure *you* don't mind.'

'She might poss'bly be nice,' said William, without much conviction.

'Oh, yes. She might,' said Ginger still more bitterly. 'S'easy for *you* to talk, isn't it? *You* don' mind. Oh, no! An' she might be nice. Oh, yes, you'd talk like that if it was *your* aunt what was comin' an' *you* what had to sit clean all afternoon, wun't you?'

When roused, Ginger could emulate William's sarcastic manner rather well . . .

The afternoon passed happily enough. William, Douglas and Henry practised lassoing Jumble in the back garden of William's house. Jumble enjoyed the game immensely. The lasso never caught him, but occasionally he caught the lasso and worried it zestfully. When, however, they had by mistake lassoed a flower pot on to and through the glass of a cucumber frame, the Outlaws very quietly left the precincts of William's home and spent the rest of the afternoon sliding down a battered hayrick in one of Farmer Jenks' fields, and bringing down a considerable portion of hay with each descent. At intervals they thought of Ginger sitting in solitary cleanliness and boredom in his family's drawing-

room waiting for his aunt.

‘Poor old Ginger!’ said Henry, as he descended from the hayrick with a bump.

‘She’ll have come by now p’raps,’ said Douglas.

‘Hope she’s rich,’ said William cheerfully.

‘Let’s go’n look at her,’ said Henry.

The idea appealed to the Outlaws, and they set off at once for Ginger’s house.

Dusk was falling when they reached it. They crept round to the back of the house, where they knew that Ginger’s drawing-room window was. There they crouched among the ivy and peered cautiously into the lighted window.

The first thing they saw was Ginger dressed in his best suit, made unfamiliar with gleaming cleanliness of face and collar, sitting on a chair opposite the window. The first thing they noticed was that he was not looking bored. He was, in fact, beaming delightedly, though he had not yet seen his friends . . .

Then the eyes of the Outlaws wandered across to Ginger’s aunt. She was sitting in front of the fire. The Outlaws’ eyes and mouths grew wide as they watched. Their noses were pressed flat against the window pane. For Ginger’s aunt was young and radiantly pretty.

‘Crumbs!’ gasped William ecstatically.

Ginger found himself unusually and unexpectedly popular the next day.

‘Hello, Ginger!’

‘G’mornin’, Ginger.’

‘How’s your aunt, Ginger?’

Ginger at first suspected sarcasm in this question, then realised with surprise that there was none.

‘V’well,’ he said laconically; ‘she’s a jolly lot better than I thought she was going to be.’

‘Nicer than you thought she was goin’ to be!’ repeated William sternly. ‘You’re jolly well not to talk like that about her. You don’ *deserve* her, that’s what it is; you don’ *deserve* an aunt like wot she is. You—’

‘You don’t know anything about her,’ said Ginger amazed and indignant.

‘Oh, *don*’ I?’ said William. ‘I bet I *do*. I bet I know all there is to know about her. I bet I know she beauteous an’ good an’ – an’ – good an’ – an’ – beauteous—’

‘Here!’ interrupted Ginger pugnaciously. ‘What you talkin’ like that about her? She’s not your aunt. She’s mine.’

‘I’ll fight you for her,’ said William.

‘A’right,’ agreed Ginger, taking off his coat.

They fought and William won.

‘Now she’s my aunt,’ said William complacently, as he put on his coat and felt tenderly and proudly a fast-swelling eye with his grimy hand.

‘Well, you can call her your aunt,’ said Ginger, ‘but the fac’ remains she’s my father’s sister.’

‘But I’ve fought you for her,’ said William indignantly.

‘A’right,’ agreed Ginger. ‘I said she was your aunt all right, but ’f you want her to be your father’s sister you’ll have to get your father to fight my father for her, an’ even then I don’ see—’

‘Let’s have her for all our aunts,’ suggested Douglas pacifically.

‘It’s her birthday next week,’ added Ginger, ‘while she’s staying with us.’

‘I say!’ said William, as though struck by a sudden brilliant idea, ‘let’s get up a sort of treat for her.’

‘Crumbs!’ said the Outlaws. ‘Yes, let’s.’

‘What’ll we have?’ said Henry brightly. ‘A picnic?’

‘No,’ said William decidedly. ‘The only decent picnic places are trespass places, an’ prob’ly she

can't run's fast as what we can 'f anyone comes.'

'Let's act something,' said Douglas.

'Don't forget she's my aunt,' said Ginger proudly. 'I mean William's aunt,' he corrected himself as he met William's eye. 'William's aunt an' my father's sister.'

'What'll we act?' said Henry.

'Oh, anythin'. 'S easy's easy to act. Jus' make somethin' up or do somethin' out of a book.'

'Means learnin',' said Ginger despondently. 'Jus' like lessons. Might's well be doin' hist'ry or g'ography as learnin' actin' stuff.'

'We needn't learn it,' said Douglas. 'We can jus' make it up as we go along.'

'Well, you know what *that's* like,' said Ginger sternly. 'You oughter, anyway, 'cause we've done it. You jus' dunno what to say when it comes to the time, or someone else says the thing you wanted to say, an' you int'rapt each other an' get fightin'. It wun't be much of a birthday treat for my aunt. I mean William's aunt an' my father's sister.'

'Well, let's do it dumb show, then,' said Douglas, 'let's act without speakin'. Jus' move our arms an' legs about an' things like that an'—'

He stopped. The Outlaws were looking at William. Upon William's freckled, homely countenance was dawning an expression that those who knew him recognised as inspiration. At last he spoke.

'I know!' he said. '*Waxworks?*'

'Crumbs!' chorused the Outlaws in delight. '*Waxworks?*'

'What'll we be?' said Henry. 'People out of history?'

' 'F you know enough history to go actin' it you can,' said William scathingly.

'Well, we could have someone bein' murdered or hung or somethin'. It'd be sort of excitin'.'

'Well, who was murdered or hung?'

'Er – Henry VIII.'

'No, he wasn't, then. He was the one what had seven wives.'

'You're gettin' a bit muddled. That was the man goin' to St Ives.'

'No, it wasn't neither. It was Henry VIII.'

'Anyway, we're not enough to do Henry VIII an' seven wives.'

'Yes – one of us could be Henry VIII, an' another could be the seven wives. We could have a label round his neck with "Seven Wives" wrote on.'

'Well, we're not goin' to. We'd rather have someone bein' murdered some way.'

'Well, let Henry VIII murder his seven wives.'

'Oh, do shut *up* about Henry VIII. Who *was* murdered in hist'ry?'

'Charles the something.'

'Charles the First – we did him last week. His head was chopped off an' he said he was sorry he took such a long time dyin' of it an' keepin' everyone waitin'.'

'Hangin'd be easier for a waxwork,' said William thoughtfully, ' 'cause their head wouldn't have t come off. They could jus' give a deep an' holier groan an' close their eyes . . . Yes, we'll have who-did-you-say-it-was bein' hung for one. We'll have to get a bit of string for it from somewhere an' we've gotter crown somewhere in our house what Ethel once had. We'll jus' have to practise it a bit, that's all. Ginger be who-did-you-say – the man, you know, in a crown an' a dressing-gown or a mackintosh or somethin' an' Douglas be the policeman with a bit of string hangin' him. Well, that's *that* one. We'll have to practise movin' jerky, that's all. We'd better not have any more history. She mayn't be much int'ested in hist'ry. She din't look's if sh'd be int'ested in hist'ry. She looked – awful nice.'

'What'll we have next, then?'

'Let's have somethin' funny. Let's have ole General Moulton walkin'. I can do him.'

As a matter of fact, William could do the half strut, half run that was General Moul't's normal mode of procedure to the life.

'That oughter make her laugh,' he added complacently.

'An' what else'll we have?' said Douglas. ' 'S not much so far.'

'Well, we can't arrange a whole long performance in one *breath*,' said William sternly. 'We've gotter *think* a bit.'

There was a short silence tense with mental effort. Then Ginger said:

'I know, let's have Dick Turpin holdin' up a coach. I've gotter pistol an' some caps.'

'An' we could borry a wheelbarrow for the coach,' suggested Douglas excitedly.

'Henry be Turpin Dick,' said William, 'an' Douglas his horse an' Ginger in the wheelbarrow an' m' pushin' it. An' I'll do the talkin' in them all.'

'What else'll we have?' said Douglas.

'That'll do to start practisin' on,' said William; 'we can think of more things's we go on.'

Rehearsals in the old barn took place daily.

William's mother noticed vaguely that life seemed very peaceful, but she happened to be very busy herself and had no time to wonder what William was doing. She had become a member of the New Era Society. The New Era Society existed chiefly to educate the village and entice speakers down from London to speak on subjects of which the village knew nothing either before or after the lectures. The Society wanted the village to be 'in the swim'. The kindred expression 'at sea' aptly describes the feelings of most of the audience. The subject this month was 'Egyptology', and in the absence of the Secretary, Mrs Brown, William's mother, and Mrs Flowerdew, Ginger's mother, were arranging for the speaker.

Mrs Brown was relieved that William seemed suddenly so unobtrusive . . .

In the intervals of hanging Charles I and holding up the stage coach with strange jerky movements as demonstrated by William, the Outlaws dogged the footsteps of Ginger's aunt. They pursued her in body with languishing eyes and bouquets of wild flowers which were generally also languishing. And strange to say, Miss Flowerdew liked it. She received the drooping bouquets with profuse thanks. She listened with due and proper excitement to their tales of adventure, she went with Jumble to hunt rats in the barn. (Jumble was wildly excited, but a large number of flies were his net 'bag'.) They told her that they were arranging a surprise 'treat' for her birthday, and she received the news with delight.

'We're not goin' to tell you what it is,' said William, 'but it's goin' to be in the ole barn at half-past four, an' you can bring any fr'en's you like to it free.'

'How lovely!' said Miss Flowerdew. 'I simply don't know how I can wait till then. I'm sure it will be most exciting.'

'Oh, yes, it's going to be a jolly good show,' said William complacently.

During the week they had added to their repertoire Columbus discovering America and Jonah and the whale. William was Columbus and Henry, Douglas and Ginger, lying on the ground side by side, were America.

William's jerky dumb show of looking for America, shading his eyes and gazing into the distance and searching upon the ground near his feet until at last he came upon the three prone forms and sat down upon them heavily was considered by the troupe to be very good.

William was showman as well as actor. As Columbus, he wore his Boy Scout's costume and an old top hat of his father's to add distinction to the *tout ensemble*. As Jonah he wore (appropriately) a mackintosh and (inappropriately) an old boudoir cap of his sister's rescued from the rag bag. The latter was supposed to add a Biblical touch.

Henry, Ginger and Douglas, were the whale. The swallowing of Jonah was almost worthy of the Russian ballet – full of drama and movement and realism. Then the whale lying upon Jonah emitted

deep groans, and Jonah finally emerged quite fresh and perky in his boudoir cap and mackintosh and swam away, leaving the whale still groaning loudly . . .

‘It’s goin’ to be a fine show,’ said William enthusiastically to Miss Flowerdew after a long and energetic rehearsal.

‘Bother!’ said Miss Flowerdew. ‘I’ve just discovered that it’s the same day as the New Era Lecture but I’ll cut that.’

‘Oh, yes!’ said William. ‘I sim’ly can’t tell you how good ours is goin’ to be. You’ll be awfully sorry if you miss it, an’ it’s bein’ all done for you, too.’

‘Oh, I’ll come. Never fear!’ said Miss Flowerdew.

Mrs Brown and Mrs Flowerdew had made all the arrangements for the New Era Society’s lecture except with regard to the hall. There were two halls in the village, the Parish Room and the Village Hall, and there was some doubt as to which would be the better for the lecture, and the final arrangement of that had been left to Mrs Flowerdew. Mrs Brown had secured as speaker a Professor Smith.

The day of the lecture, which was also the day of Miss Flowerdew’s birthday and the waxwork show, arrived.

‘I don’t yet know which room,’ Mrs Brown said distractedly at breakfast. ‘I wish Mrs Flowerdew would send a message.’

William was too much intent upon his own thoughts and plans to listen to his mother’s jeremiads. He went out into the garden – moving his arms to and fro with eloquent gestures and murmuring, ‘An’ now, ladies an’ gentlemen, kin’ly allow me to introjuce to you King Charles bein’ hung in the tower by a policeman, like what he was in ole days . . . lifelike on’ nat’ral . . . ladies and gen’l’men, kin’ly notice the policeman tyin’ the string round his neck—’

He was interrupted by a tall, pale young man who came in at the front gate and said to him:

‘Are you Mrs Brown’s little boy?’

‘Yes,’ said William ungraciously.

‘Well, Mrs Flowerdew says the Parish Room,’ said the young man; and hastily departed.

Now, the young man did not speak very distinctly, and William’s mind and heart were full of ‘Miss Flowerdew’. As a matter of fact, William rarely thought of Ginger’s mother as ‘Mrs Flowerdew’. She was just ‘Ginger’s mother’. Also William’s thoughts were full of his waxwork show.

William went off to the barn where the rest of the troupe were assembled.

‘I say,’ said William importantly, ‘she must have invited a lot of fr’en’s. I’ve just gotter message from her to say we’re to do it in the Parish Room, not the ole barn. She must’ve got a *lot* of people to come an’ watch.’

‘Crumbs!’ said the Outlaws, deeply gratified.

Then they fell to rehearsing with renewed energy.

Four-thirty arrived. The Parish Room was filled with a despondent-looking crowd of villagers whipped up by the energetic members of the New Era Society. The village was less anxious to be educated than the Society was to educate it. The speaker had arrived and had lunch with the Vicar. He and the Vicar were still talking earnestly in the Vicar’s study. They were discussing the morals of the younger generation.

‘Terrible,’ sighed Mr Monks, the Vicar. ‘The modern child is utterly devoid of those qualities of sensitiveness and humility and reverence that one used to associate with childhood. There is a boy in this very village – a boy of the name of William Brown—’ he shuddered as at many painful memories.

‘I say,’ said Professor Smith, ‘it’s nearly half-past. Ought we to—’

‘It only takes a minute across the field,’ said the Vicar, ‘we’ll give them time to settle down. They’re never punctual.’

And he went on talking with deep feeling about the boy of the name of William Brown . . .

The Outlaws arrived at the Parish Room and entered by the door behind the platform.

'I say,' whispered Ginger, impressed, 'it's *full*. She must've invited a whole *lot* 'f 'em.'

'I can't see her, can you?' said William.

'No, but there's such crowds of 'em.'

'Well, we'd better not keep 'em waitin',' said William importantly.

And the Outlaws marched up on the platform.

A gasp of mingled horror and surprise and excitement went up from the audience.

The Outlaws were wearing the clothes they would need for the waxwork show. William wore his top hat and Scout's costume. Douglas was dressed in readiness for his policeman scene in a dressing-gown and a bread basket. Ginger, in readiness for Charles I, wore a tinsel crown and a shirt of his father's, and Henry, as the highwayman, wore a home-made mask and a paint-smeared overall several sizes too large for him – the property of his father, who fondly imagined it to be still hanging in his studio.

William looked around his paralysed audience. 'Ladies an' gen'l'men,' he began, 'this is a waxwork show, 'cause of her birthday, an' I'm doin' the talkin'. The first waxwork is me. I'm not dressed for it, but you can imagine me in a long coat an' I've got these things on for Columbus an' I've not got time to go changin' every time. Ladies an' gen'l'men, this is the *only* waxwork show of its kind in the world. We're just goin' to begin an' if you'll kin'ly watch careful this is General Moulton walkin' along the road – lifelike *an'* nat'ral. This is waxwork number one, ladies an' gen'l'men. This is General Moulton walkin'. Kin'ly all watch General Moulton walkin'.'



‘LADIES AN’ GEN’L’MEN,’ SAID WILLIAM, ‘THIS IS THE *ONLY* WAXWORK SHOW OF ITS KIND IN THE WORLD.’

William assumed the pompous strut well known to all the village, and slowly and jerkily progressed across the stage.

The spell was broken. The hall was full of murmurs of mixed consternation and delight, the delight predominating. In the second row sat Mrs Brown, her eyes full of helpless horror, fixed upon her son. In the third row sat General Moulton, his face purple with fury, his eyes bulging. A group of village youths at the back of the hall, reluctantly dragged in to listen to the lecture on Egyptology, began to cheer. William bowed, gratified.



IN THE SECOND ROW SAT MRS BROWN HER EYES, FULL OF HELPLESS HORROR, WERE FIXED UPON HER SON.

‘Ladies an gen’l’men,’ he continued, ‘our second waxwork is—’

‘Crumbs!’ whispered Ginger, looking at the open door behind the stage. ‘The Vicar’s coming with a man . . . he’s goin’ to come right up on to the stage. He’s goin’ to spoil it all.’

‘No, he’s not,’ said William firmly. ‘It’s our show an’—’

Certainly the Vicar and the other man were coming up on to the stage. William, with admirable presence of mind, threw himself into the breach.

‘Ladies an’ gen’l’men, our nex’ waxwork is Mr Monks comin’ up on to the stage. Kin’ly notice Mr Monks walking up on to the stage.’

The hall was full of excited murmurs. The figure of the Vicar was seen to appear on the stage, as though in obedience to William’s stage directions, and speak to William.

The murmurs in the hall were too loud to admit of anyone’s hearing what the Vicar was saying to William. Everyone was talking excitedly. General Moulton had found his voice, and was shouting: ‘Impudence! Damned impudence! I’ll tell his father. Confound his impudence! I say, confound—’

Mrs Brown was past all power of interference. She merely watched William with a helpless, fascinated look. Above the babel rose William’s strident voice.

‘Waxwork number *three*, ladies an’ gen’l’men. Mr Monks talkin’. Mr Monks talkin’ to me. Kin’ly notice Mr Monks talkin’ to me, *ladies* an’ gen’l’men – nat’ral *an’* lifelike.’

The youths at the back of the stage applauded frenziedly. William bowed. The Vicar began to lose his self-control. He hit the palm of his left hand with his right clenched fist as he expostulated. William imitated the gesture.

‘Waxwork number four, ladies *an’* gen’l’men,’ he shouted. ‘Mr Monks doin’ this. Kin’ly notice Mr Monks doin’ this – lifelike *an’* nat’ral.’

Mr Monks caught hold of William’s collar.

‘Waxwork number *five*,’ shouted William hoarsely. ‘Mr Monks an’ me goin’ to have a fight.’

The audience had decided how to take the situation. It rocked with laughter. The youths at the back clapped and stamped. The Vicar, who was deeply attached to his sense of dignity, retired hastily.

‘Now,’ said William, who was slightly put out by the contretemps, ‘we have King Charles

discoverin' America. I mean the other way round. Ladies an' gen'l'men, if you'll kin'ly notice—'

The Vicar and Professor Smith were interrupting him again. William turned upon them sternly, no longer trying to save the situation.

'We'd all be glad,' he said indignantly, ' 'f you'd kin'ly *stop* keep comin' up here 'n int'ruptin'. This is a birthday party an' all these people've come special to see the waxworks an' you keep comin' *spoilin'* things. 'F you want to watch we'd be glad 'f you'd go down to where the others is watchin' 'stead of comin' up here int'ruptin'—'

The Vicar was speechless with fury. Professor Smith was staring at William's strange attire with bewildered horror.

'But I've come here—' he began.

'You've come here to a birthday party,' said William sternly, 'if you've been invited, an' if you've *not* been invited we'd be kin'ly glad 'f you'd *kin'ly* go home 'stead of stayin' here int'ruptin'. Ladies an' gen'l'men, will you kin'ly notice—'

Mrs Brown had decided to relieve the tension by having hysterics, and the spell that bound the members of the committee of the New Era Society was broken suddenly. They surged upon the platform and surrounded William explaining, expostulating, scolding . . .

'But she said to come here,' protested William, 'it's her birthday party. All these is her fr'en's. It's a *party*. An' you've all gone 'n *spoilt* it int'ruptin'.'

He was finally convinced of the absence of Miss Flowerdew and of the mistake. But he was still pained and aggrieved.

'Ladies an' gen'l'men,' he said to his audience with great dignity. 'This waxwork show what you've seen the beginnin' of is goin' on in the ole barn across the field.' He had a sudden inspiration. 'The other part's jolly good – better than the bit what you've seen, an' is free an' open to all on payment of one halfpenny.'

Then with great dignity he led his troupe across the field to the barn where Miss Flowerdew sat in solitary patience.

The Parish Room settled down with an audible gasp and sigh. Mrs Brown, seeing that all was over, came out of her hysterics. General Moulton ceased to shout and settled down to a fierce and sustained muttering. The Committee of the New Era Society came down from the platform to their places. The Vicar, pale and tense, took the chair. Professor Smith smoothed back his hair, took a deep draught of water, and began:

'Ladies and gentlemen, the earliest mention of Egypt in the Bible is under the name of Mizraim, which word, probably, is a plural form, testifying to the fact that Lower and Upper Egypt were regarded as distinct. The chief objects of cultivation in Egypt are millet, wheat, barley, dhurra, maize, peas, beans, lentils, clover, rice, sugar, etc. The philologist, D. I. Taylor, is of the opinion that the Egyptian alphabet, although incomplete, is one of the oldest known. Even at the time of the Eleventh and Twelfth Dynasties the hieroglyphic writing was a venerable system of vast antiquity—'

The hall was very dimly lighted, but Professor Smith began to have a vague suspicion that his audience was mysteriously thinning.

It was. Shadowy forms were creeping from the room and making their way in a furtive procession across the field to the old barn . . .

CHAPTER 3

THE LEOPARD HUNTER

MR Falkner had been staying at the Browns' house for a very long time.

He had written to Mr Brown to remind him of the fact that they had been at school together and to ask if he might pay him a short visit. Mr Falkner was like that. Also his idea of a short visit was not Mr Brown's.

Not that Mr Falkner needed much entertaining. He entertained himself. He talked. William had never met anyone who talked quite as much as his father's guest. Mr Falkner talked perpetually, and the subject of all his conversation was Mr Falkner. Mr Falkner was a never ending source of interest to Mr Falkner.

He talked about his exalted social position, his many and varied talents, his marvellous exploits, his ingenuity, his aristocratic friends.

'Oh, yes, the Duke and I are the greatest of pals. Always have been. The way the man pesters me to go and stay with him! But all my friends are the same. There's the Honourable Percy Wakefield – you've heard of him, of course? – I ran into him again last week. He simply wouldn't take "No". I managed to put him off at last. Quite a nuisance, these people. Simply won't let one alone.'

Politeness prevented Mr Brown from remarking that he did not grudge Mr Falkner to the Duke or to the Honourable Percy. Instead, Mr Brown sat, silent and oppressed, trying to read the evening paper which lay carelessly on the arm of his chair and to look as if he weren't doing so.

And Mr Falkner talked on.

Mr Falkner was small and rather stout, with a round face, a small blighted moustache, a glassy stare and a very squeaky voice.

During term time Mr Falkner did not trouble William much. William merely watched him curiously in his brief respites from school.

William practised diligently and acquired a very good imitation of Mr Falkner's squeaky voice and glassy stare. He practised them alone every evening in his bedroom.

At meals he rather welcomed the presence of Mr Falkner than otherwise. Mr Falkner's accounts of his varied exploits of dauntless bravery and dazzling cleverness seemed to induce in William's family a certain apathy of hopelessness which William thought a very proper attitude on the part of a family

No one told him to go and wash his hands and brush his hair again. No one made sarcastic remarks about his table manners. They simply had not the spirit. In fact, such is the humanising effect of a common misfortune, they almost felt drawn to him. They had thought that no family could be afflicted with an affliction worse than William. They had discovered their mistake. They had discovered Mr Falkner . . .

Then came the end of the term. The end of the term was a time of mixed feelings for William. On the one hand, there was the glorious prospect of the holidays. On the other hand, there was his report.

William's best friends could not assert that he was intellectual or industrious. He was a daring and capable leader. He was, at different times and in different moods, robber chief, pirate, Red Indian, explorer, castaway, desperado – but he was not at any time, or in any mood, a student. William's attitude towards the question was one of humility and self-effacement. He'd do without them. There were enough swots in the world without him.

So there was a certain monotony about William's reports. Masters who had a delicate shrinking from the crude and brutal truth wrote, 'Fair'. Those who had the courage of their convictions wrote, 'Poor'. The mathematical master, who was very literal, wrote, 'Uniformly bad'.

The horror and disgust of William's father at these statements was generally as simulated as William's penitence. They knew their respective roles and played them, but they had gone through the scene too many times to be able to put much spirit into the parts.

But this time Mr Falkner was there. Before Mr Brown could begin his set speech expressive of horror and disgust, he took the paper from him and began to comment on it squeakily.

'By jove, very different from the things I used to get. "Excellent" and all that sort of thing all over them. Some of them simply couldn't say enough. "Remarkable talent" and "Very industrious" and "Splendid work", and all that sort of thing. I remember the headmaster saying to my father one speech day, "Brilliant boy of yours, that!" Very keen-sighted man he was, too. Never made a mistake. I believe I was a great favourite at school. I've no doubt I'm still remembered there.'

'No, neither have I,' said Mr Brown.

'Yes,' bleated Mr Falkner, 'it's extraordinary how anyone at all above the average makes himself felt through life. So often I find that people who've only met me once remember me when I've quite forgotten them.'

Again Mr Brown had no doubt of it.

'Now, this boy of yours,' went on Mr Falkner, 'quite a good fellow, no doubt – well meaning and all that. But –' he tapped his hand upon the damning report – 'if anything below the average in intellect. I hope I don't annoy you by saying that.'

Mr Brown hastened to assure him that he didn't.

'We can't all be above the average, of course. But a boy like this wants a little friendly advice, that's all. I've no doubt that I shall be able to help him a good deal during the holidays. I always get on well with children. I could tell you most interesting stories about young friends of mine. A marked difference in them from the minute they know me.'

Again Mr Brown didn't doubt it.

'I'm sure that if I stayed here through the next term, you'd find a very different report at the end of it.'

Mr Brown thought that on the whole he'd prefer the same report and the absence of Mr Falkner, but with great exercise of self-control he remained silent.

'Very different indeed,' went on Mr Falkner. 'I wish I'd got some of my old school reports to show you. Really remarkable. I remember my form master saying when I left that the school would be a very different place without me.'

For the fourth time Mr Brown remarked that he'd no doubt of it.

During this interview William sat with his most inscrutable expression and stared at the guest unblinkingly.

The next day was the first day of the holidays. William wandered out into the garden after breakfast, and to his horror saw that the guest was accompanying him.

'Now, my boy,' squeaked Mr Falkner, 'tell me how many names of flowers you know.'

William cleared his throat sternly and threateningly and went on as though he had neither seen nor heard Mr Falkner.

‘None?’ bleated his companion. ‘Come, come! Tut, tut! That’s sad for a boy of your age! Where are you going? Out into the road? Very well. I’m at your service. I can join in all your little activities, you know. What do you like to do in the holidays? Stamp collecting, I’ve no doubt. Most instructive – and a little school work every day so as not to forget all you learnt last term? And a nice quiet walk sometimes for exercise. That’s what you like, I’ve no doubt. That’s what I liked when I was a boy. What were we talking about? Ah, flowers! Now, here in this hedge, you will see the Arum or Cuckoo Pint. Notice the large hood which is botanically termed a spathe. Notice also the spadix and the stamens—’

At the end of the road stood Ginger, Douglas and Henry. Their faces dropped as they saw William’s companion.

‘Ha!’ he said. ‘These your friends, Willy? They’re going to join us for the morning? Very well, little boys. Come along with us quietly. And what are we all going to do this morning, eh? I propose a nice little walk along the road, and you can all listen to what I’m telling Willy about the Arum or Cuckoo Pint. Notice, as I said the spathe and the spadix and the stamens. Don’t drag your toes in the dust, little boy. Think of your kind father who pays for them. And don’t whisper to each other when I’m talking. It’s not polite; I like my little friends to be polite. Now, would you like me to tell you about the habits of the busy little ant?’

The Outlaws were nonplussed. They had meant to go to the old barn where they generally played, but they felt they could not go with – this. It would spoil the old barn for them for ever. And they couldn’t escape it.

Mr Falkner’s harsh, squeaky voice had a sort of hypnotising effect. It seemed to fill the whole world. It paralysed all their faculties. Once, in the middle of the discourse on the busy little ant, they caught each other’s eyes; into their dejected faces came a gleam of hope, and they set off running. But their self-appointed ‘friend’ ran too. Despite his stoutness, he could run.

‘A little run?’ he gasped. ‘Yes, certainly. Nothing like exercise – nothing like exercise. That will do now, I think, though.’

And so utterly were their spirits broken that they let that do. They slowed down.

‘A rest here, I think. Now I’ll give you a little practice in mental arithmetic. Let us see who can get the right answer.’

It was a nightmare of a morning for the Outlaws. They could not shake him off; they could not shut out the terrible sound of his voice. And there was his glassy eye. The ancient mariner was nothing to him.

He gave them a little lecture on History and another on Geography and another on Astronomy. He spoke to them at great length on Patriotism and Manliness and Industry and the British Empire.

‘Well,’ he said brightly, when he led them back to the Browns’ house at lunch-time, ‘I’m afraid I can’t come out with you this afternoon, but tomorrow morning Willy and I will be with you early.’

The Outlaws stared at each other blankly for a minute, then Douglas, Ginger and Henry turned on William.

‘Well,’ they said sternly, ‘you’ve given us a nice mornin’.’

‘Nothin’ to do with me,’ said William. ‘I din’ make him. I din’ want him. You’d think you’d be sorry for me. You’ve only had him a mornin’. He’s *stayin’* with us.’

‘How long’s he stayin’?’

‘We don’t know,’ said William gloomily.

‘Well, we’ll wait for you tomorrow mornin’, but if we see *him* comin’ with you, we’ll jus’ run off alone.’

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