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GENTLEMAN OPPOSITE.

BY E. CHILTON. FROM SHORT STORIES.



HE road was dusty; but the bank was green. Robin lay back, his fair curls streaming over the grass, one hand full of cuckoo flowers and red campion, the other plucking at the tall blades which sprang around—his bright gaze resting upon a spray of wild roses above his head, while he balanced his chances of reaching or not reaching the fame, should he summon energy to clamber so far as the hedge.

Suddenly he was startled by melodious laughter. A lady stood in the road, bending towards him across the narrow ditch.

"Little Lad! Little Lad!" she cried, joyously; and laughed again.

Robin stared in solemn silence.

Was she old or young? Her hair under her brown shady hat, which was tied with ribbons, had gleams of faded yellow; her cheeks were minutely wrinkled here and there, but pink and very soft; her eyes were blue—shining like big blue stars, Robin thought. He had never before seen any face so wild and strange. But he was not afraid. She looked at him, smiling and nodding, as if they had been friends long ago.

"Just as I always said!" she exclaimed, her voice musical like her laugh. "There is no such thing—no such thing as death! Why, you seem none the worse, Little Lad—you're not even wet!" She stretched forward and felt Robin's holland blouse. "But where did you go when we lost sight of you under the water, my Little Lad?"

And now Robin did feel fear. Those bright eyes were so very bright. He scrambled to his feet.

A wall, long and high, skirted the other side of the road. As Robin rose, the lady's attention was distracted. A white pigeon flew from over this wall to the roof of a little red-brick house which faced it; and perched upon the slates.

"Do you see that?" whispered the lady, pointing. "I can guess what it is—a Bird of Paradise. There's a blessing on that house."

"It's my house," said Robin, retreating up the bank.

"And who lives there?" asked the lady, waving her hand towards the wall.

"The Gentleman Opposite lives there," returned Robin, succinctly. "The milkman told Clara his name; but she forgets."

The lady went on a few paces, regarded the wall intently, and turned back.

"You can't trust milkmen," she confidentially remarked; "they water the milk. But I've proved you of old, Little Lad. Come half a step nearer."

She looked, despite her wildness, so kind and sweet that Robin's fears subsided. He descended to his former post.

"The milkman knows nothing about it," said the lady, whispering again. "A ghost lives there. You don't forget—? But perhaps the water affected your memory. Never mind. The person behind that wall is a ghost. He came out of the great gates last—last—was it last Tuesday? That accounts for the bird," she added suddenly aloud. "It followed him, no doubt."

At this moment in a distant angle of the road, appeared two female figures—one tall, one short and sturdy—running as if alarmed. The lady glanced towards them, and laughed as at first, observing in a casual undertone:

"Poor, kind creatures! They can't bear me out of their sight. Don't excite yourselves, pray," she cried, with unexpected shrillness; "you'll both have fits, running in this heat. Good-bye, my Little Lad."

She blew a kiss over her shoulder to Robin, and tripped, youthfully agile, to join the strangers.

The child watched until the trio had vanished along the winding road—the lady between her companions, giving each, apparently, an arm.

Robin knew that the gray wall guarded a beautiful old house a striking contrast to his father's brick cottage. From an upper window of that cottage he had seen its richly-carved gables, its long oaken porch, also carved, and shaded by flowering trees; moreover, in the distance, among its grounds, an avenue of heavy black cedars, and sometimes, under those cedars, a tall figure walking to and fro—advancing, as from far gloom, and thither retreating, shortly, in like manner, to reappear.

It's the Gentleman, Clara, the maid-of-all-work, had asserted. He's scarce ever found outside them gates; for all that the land, so far 's we sees, belongs to him, except the bit this 'ouse stands on, as were bound by a lease. This 'ouse were built to spite him, the milkman says."

"Mammy, how can our house spite the Gentleman Opposite?" inquired Robin, after private meditation.

But Robin's mother was ill and heavy-laden, and she made no answer, only turning on her pillow with closed eyes, that he might not see her tears.

Now, after his interview with the lady, his curiosity was beyond control. He scrambled back into the road and stared about him. At his left, some half-mile distant, a dense cloud blackened the sky—a cloud of smoke from the great manufacturing town whence, with his parents and Clara, he had fitted a month before. To his right stretched green fields, amid which only one house was visible—large and white, with many windows glaring from the slope of a low hill.

His mother's blind flapped dreamily. She was asleep, he knew. His father was in the town, Clara occupied in regions unseen. His heart beat faster than ever before; but his adventurous instincts were strong. He pushed with all his might at the heavy gates in the wall. The hinges were unfastened; the iron hinges creaked; the portal moved with slow dignity. Directly the aperture

would admit his slim little form, he found himself in the kingdom of the afraid.

"But I'm not afraid of ghosts," said Robin aloud. "They can't hurt. And I must see if it's true."

How strange his little voice sounded! Despite his bold words, Robin's heart thumped yet more loudly. He stole on tiptoe round the sweep of the drive. Here, close upon him, the old house stretched long and low; the carved faces looking from the eaves, the deep porch leading far inward to a massive door.

His red brick home and the hot road might have been miles away. It was very silent here, shady and cool. Robin passed the porch, and went on round the end of the house. Now green lawns began, fragrant with flowers. An exquisite garden stretched to a stone balustrade. Three steps led down to fair paths among rose bowers. Beyond lay the cedar avenue, its branches in black relief against the blue June sky. Overlooking all, stood another long, low front, and more carved faces met Robin's startled eyes. Half way a glass door opened upon the turf. The boy, stealthily approaching, peeped in.

He saw a room, also long and low, with a ceiling carved like the gables, carved book-cases covering the walls in every direction save one. At a table laden with huge volumes, with papers under weights of varied forms, with miniatures on standing frames, with crests and coats-of-arms on red sealing-wax with military medals and gorgets, sat a tall old gentleman, writing very intently; his figure erect and spare, his fingers—conspicuous upon his nimble pen—long and bony, his hair white and smooth, his eyes black and brilliant; his dress, including a swallow-tailed coat, precise in the extreme.

Robin remembered a terrible ballad about a ghost with a cork leg, which was always running, running. Might there not just as well be a ghost with a pen, obliged to write, write write? And what face was this, gazing from a large gilt frame which filled the one space unoccupied by book-shelves? The child felt himself in a world of enchantment. He stole nearer; his shadow fell across the sheet of foolscap.

"Hallo!" said the old gentleman, dropping his pen. His black eyes opened widely. "Good heavens, what a likeness!" he exclaimed.

"Are you—are you—a—I shan't be frightened," said Robin, with a struggle.

"Come in, my little fellow. What do you want?" asked the gentleman, recovering his self-control.

The child stepped through the open doorway, nothing loth.

"It is not true," he said; "you're nothing but a man."

The old gentleman laughed heartily.

"Come here, my funny little chap," he said, holding out his hand. "I almost thought at first— But there's no fool like an old fool! What is your name, my boy?"

"My name's Robin Savile," said the child, advancing, his flapping bat pressed nervously to his back, his fair curls flowing over his blouse.

The old gentleman flushed a deep red.

"How remarkable! How exceedingly remarkable! And who is your father, my little man?"

"My father is the curate of St. Chad's. We've left the town, because mammy's ill. The doctor said she would die without fresh air; so father walks there and back every day. Father's a vicar in our real home, only that is ever so far away. The bishoplet us come here because we were so poor, and father thought we could save money. But I don't believe it, and Clara doesn't; and mammy cries nearly all day."

It was a long speech, but at each pause Robin was encouraged by some sign or sound of interest.

"Ah! . . . That's all very sad, my little fellow. Does your mother care for strawberries? But where do you live, by the bye?"

"We live"—Robin hesitated, apologetically—"we didn't know when we came. We live at the little house opposite. We didn't know it was built to spite you, till the milkman told us."

"The milkman told you that, did he?" said the old gentleman, looking very angry. "The saucy jackanapes! Tell him he ought to be ashamed of himself," he added, irascibly. "And your name's Robin Savile? The Robin Savile I knew was just your height, and you are his living image. I must call on your father. Or, stay—I never make calls. Will you ask him if he had a brother—or no—a cousin, perhaps—or an uncle of your name, who was drowned in a boating expedition? Just at your age or so—I should fancy."

"I'm seven," said Robin. Then he looked up at the great picture.

"She talked as if I'd been drowned!" he murmured, musing. "Are you a soldier?" he added, with a sudden change of demeanour, as his eyes met the bright hues of regimental colours in a MS. open on the table.

"I was a soldier once."

The old gentleman paused abruptly.

"I'm writing a history of my regiment, my little man. I've been at it, more or less, since I stopped soldiering. It keeps me busy, as you see. I intersperse with it biographical details. Here are the officers' crests, ancestral portraits, and so forth. You shall come again and see them. Just now you must help me to find a few strawberries for my mother. It was a splendid regiment—the 17th Lancers. You'll read about it in history, my boy."

"Father told me. The Charge of the Light Brigade! I learned the verses. Did you know any of the Six Hundred?"

"I was one of them," said the old gentleman proudly. "I rode in the Charge."

Robin stared, dumb with admiration.

"Perhaps that was why she took you for a ghost," he said, as his kind friend led him over the grass. "She fancied you'd been killed."

"And, pray, who took me for a ghost?" asked the old gentleman, half amused, half annoyed.

"You know her. You've got her picture. I saw who it was, directly. Only in the picture she's rounder and she's got no wrinkles. But her eyes are just as blue."

The old gentleman stood still.

"Of what lady are you speaking?" said he.

"The lady in the great picture, where you sat. Though in the picture she's a girl. I don't know her name; but I saw her this afternoon in the road. That why I came—she told me a ghost lived here. She meant you. She's very kind, but so funny! She thought she knew me. She called me Little Lad."

"Little Lad! Yes, that was his pet name. She recognised then—she remembered! And you saw her this afternoon?"

The old gentleman had forgotten the strawberries. He dropped the child's hand.

"A ghost! Only a ghost!" he muttered, and went rapidly down the steps to the cedar avenue; and there walked to and fro as was his custom, his white head bowed upon his breast.

"So Robin pays calls!" said Mrs Savile, faintly smiling. She lay propped up with pillows, her young face thin and worn, but happier than in the afternoon, because now her husband had finished his long day's work in the black city, and was resting at her bedside.

"Did I never tell you, dear, that I was christened Robert after a little uncle drowned ten years before my birth? I remember now, Mr Savile added, musingly, "my mother's calling me Robin, and my father's forbidding it on account of the painful associations. The great shock was still vivid, he said, in my grandmother's mind, So then I degenerated into Bob."

"You were Robert only and always to me," said his wife—*Robert, toi que j'aime!* But how curious that I should have hit upon Robin to specialize this child, knowing nothing of his predecessor!"

"Ma'am," said Clara, precipitately entering, "please to look at this here beautiful basket. The piles of strawberries!—red 'uns and white 'uns. And I never see such roses! There's asparagus, ma'am, underneath, and young green peas."

"I know! I know!" cried Robin, capering.

From the Gentleman Opposite, ma'am, with his respectful compliments, hoping as you'll pardon the liberty, and will Master Robin take back the basket at his convenience? Mr Belton, the butler, left that message! A pompous piece! He wouldn't wait for thanks. He said as, if you sent 'em, he dursn't give 'em. His master, he said, would thank you, ma'am, for condescending to accept such trifles."

"Robert, these roses are heavenly!" cried Mrs Savile, burying her tired face in the mass of fragrance.

"I shall thank him myself," said the curate, starting up.

But he re-appeared with tidings of "No Admittance."

The servant described by Clara had explained, majestically courteous, that his master never received visitors.

"It's all according to what the milkman said," remarked Clara in the kitchen. "He can't bear no one a-nigh him."

"You mustn't trust milkmen," quoted Robin oracularly; "they water the milk."

"This 'un don't then," replied Clara with tartness. "He's a most respectable young fellow. Our landlord—that's his master, Mr Cudds, ad owns the cows—wanted to run up a shed on some waste ground beyond the Gentleman's garden. It 'ud be handy for Mr Cudds' big meadow, and there's a spring convenient for the cows—the cows, not the milk," she added sharply. "But no, the old gentleman wouldn't hear on it, though the bit of land's too rough to be cultivated. So Mr Cudds ran up this 'ouse instead, facing his front gates."

"Out of spite," said Robin, quoting again.

"Mr Cudds is sorry now, the milkman says. But him and the Gentleman had had words. The Gentleman's uncommon hasty. And yet, that generous! A cart calls for broken meats regular, to be gave away in the town. It's queer he should set such store by a bit o' waste—that rough, and at the back of his kitchen garden."

Robin heard this recital with much interest, and, the following afternoon, set forth again, secretly resolved on further investigation. Once more, making his way round the house, he peeped in upon the long room. A quill pen in the open inkpot looked fresh from its master's hand, but the master was not there. The child's spirit of adventure burned within him. He crossed the lawn and jumped down the steps of the terrace.

Presently he was in the cedar avenue. The dark boughs crossed overhead, with contrasting gleams of sky. Below was a silent cloister. He had gone some way in the stillness, when—yet several yards distant—he saw the peaked roof of a summer-house—little needed, apparently, in this sequestered spot. Farther, the mellow wall of the kitchen garden was visible, and beyond, an irregular patch instantly recognised by sharp Robin as the waste ground desired of Mr Cudds. It rose towards a meadow, here bounding the precincts of the white house so prominent from the road. A hilly garden, not thence visible, was now conspicuous, with female figures dotted over the grass. Lower, nearer the meadow, three together walked up and down, up and down.

Robin watched them with a curious fascination, but soon his mind recurred to the summer-house. His courage faltered; what strange wood-gnome might burst forth and confront him? But he remembered the Six Hundred, thinking, with shame, how the old gentleman, who was one of them, would despise him! He clenched his little fist to hold fast his torridity, and went forward through the shadows.

The door was open. One very small window, a mere port-hole, was open likewise. Pointed towards this port-hole stood a telescope, and behind the stand, absorbed in some private scrutiny, sat the Gentleman Opposite.

His sharp elbows rested on his knees; his hands were clasped with the resolution which had prompted Robin's