Rasselas in the Vegetable Kingdom

By GEORGIA WOOD PANGBORN

THE make-believe of grown people lacks both realism and romance, being merely a kind of stupid falsity that neither pleases nor deceives. The house where Rasselas lived was a sort of make-believe, a large and splendid toy, Brodingnagian for any house, while Rasselas was little, even for eight years old.

The floors were slippery, the rugs dim and soft, and absent-minded statues stood about in attitudes, nobody seeming to mind their being white and unfinished. When Rasselas offered to paint them with his water colours, he was refused with empty laughter.

Had there been reality or romance anywhere, it surely would have lurked in Rasselas's play-room, one would think; but a maid and a governess were there nearly all the time; the maid to keep things neat, the governess to impart useful information in general, which included showing him how to play with his toys—and every one knows that this is no way to manage a play-room.

But the governess' ideas about geography were creditable. Egypt was good on account of the Sphinx and the Pyramids; so little being known about the inside of them; so many interesting things having been dug out of the sand. South America was good, too, because of the forests with animals in them. Then, if you cared to go to the North Pole, there were Polar bears, the aurora borealis, and snow huts.

At that time, Rasselas still supposed himself to be one Harold Marlowe, not having discovered his right name. That knowledge came out of a book filched from the great glass cases of the "mustn't touch" library; a stiff, learned book, though with some rather interesting woodcuts—he would never have tried to read a book without pictures — with misty trees on its shining leather covers, its leaves stuck together with gilding, proving Rasselas to be the first in that house who had read it. "Rasselas Johnson" was the name of the book, the words being written one above the other. It was the tale of a prince who lived in a certain Happy Valley, and did not like it.

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On one of those days when a new nurse and a new governess were to arrive in the evening, Rasselas sat long upon the verandah, beside his mother, who was reading, and she fell asleep because, Rasselas supposed, there were no pictures in the book she read—her delicate underlip relaxed, her forehead crumpled by the ray of sunlight that lay across her eyes. She was a plump, good-natured person, who, but for her toilettes and social duties, might have been cuddlesome. Then Rasselas softly departed upon a tour about the great stone wall with spikes on top, searching, in the character of that other Rasselas, means of escape from the Happy Valley, until, in that part of the grounds where the "mustn't touch" fruits grew, he came upon a grapevine which had hooked an elbow about one of the iron spikes of the wall, and seemed strong enough to give one a hand up.

He clutched the sharp points of the spikes, thrusting his toes between them, and looked upon the world as he had never done before, though he had been often out in it, riding and walking with people who eagerly told him to look at this thing and that. To really see a thing one must discover it himself.

First he considered the blue, uneven, mountains, then the roofs of the town a mile away, then the half-hidden red chimney of the little house next door; and so was approaching by degrees that which was more immediately beneath him, when he was challenged, as people must expect to be challenged at the boundaries of other people's kingdoms, and his name demanded.

"Rasselas Johnson," he replied at once.

The sentry wore a white sunbonnet, and must throw her head very far back, to train the funnel on him properly. Rasselas considered the face at the bottom of the funnel, and the result of his examination was that without further parley he slipped sidewise between the spikes and jumped down beside her.

She stuck out a tremulous underlip.

"You jumped on my moonflowers," said she. "It is the most rapid growing of all climbing vines," she recited in a voice weak with repressed tears. "Although a perennial species in the tropics (sniff), it is as readily grown from seed as any annual. The vines are literally covered with thousands of immense, pure white, fragrant flowers. Many of them measure—seven—inches—across—" The voice failed, the accusatory sunbonnet funnel turned away and was hidden in the crook of a small elbow. The sleeve was tight, and the elbow tip had worked its way through.

"There isn't any such thing," said Rasselas, looking about. Was it a game? He hardly knew what to think.

"There was going to be!"

She gesticulated backward at the print of Rasselas's hands, knees, and feet in the brown earth. Some broken, heart-shaped leaves were crushed into the soil.

"I had soaked the seeds till they were all cracked and pobby. I soaked them for days and days, and I planted them in boxes in the house, and I transplanted them into little flower-pots, and then I set them out here, and then you jumped on them."

"I'm sorry," said Rasselas sadly, for he remembered now having heard that one planted seeds in order to have flowers. "I only wanted to get out of the Happy Valley."

"It isn't; it's Mr Marlowe's place. I suppose the gardener was chasing you off, but you needn't have come down on my moonflowers."

He had begun with romance, why not continue it? Why not reconstruct all things gloriously?

"The gardener didn't chase me. He's my uncle. I can go anywhere I like and do anything I please. I should like to play with you now."

"I was playing at working in my garden, but that's no use now."

"I know a story," quoth Rasselas, and he launched into the tale of the Prince in the Happy Valley.

—"And so they went back," he finished, "into Abyssinia, because they thought they ought to; but that was silly, I think. Why should they ought? It was nicer outside. And so they named me Rasselas Johnson out of the book, and I am visiting my uncle, who is Mr Marlowe's gardener, and they let me do anything I want to. I have very good times," he asserted emphatically. "because I can go out of the gate and play with other children and make mud pies."

"Anybody can make mud pies."

"Master Harold can't. He's Mr Marlowe's little boy. They don't even let him play with me."

While they were conversing, a long, narrow shadow had been advancing upon them silently. Rasselas was the first to become aware of this shadow, as it shot beyond them, across the perished moonflowers to the wall, and was there bent in the middle, as one bends a paper doll to make it sit down; from there on, it stood upright in the likeness of a man with a wide-brimmed hat. Rasselas and the sunbonnet funnel turned at the same instant, and she said, sadly:

"He jumped on my moonflowers, papa, but he was in a hurry to get out of the Happy Valley."

The gentleman made no reply other than to sit down with them cross-legged, and, being a tall, thin person in a linen duster, one thought of those long-legged sand-coloured grasshoppers with knees drawn up in meditation. He examined the little broken plants attentively, found one whose stem was not severed, and silently replaced it, adjusting the earth about its roots.

"Half a loaf," said he, "is better than no bread; besides, you have had an adventure, which is better still. Adventures are uncommon in the Vegetable Kingdom."

"Is this the Vegetable Kingdom?" asked Rasselas.

The little girl giggled, but not so her father.

"Part of it," he mused, his face rippling into benevolent wrinkles. "Why not? I have just been putting down an insurrection of 'pusley' in the strawberry bed. Our borders are never safe against wild carrots, and I noticed the spies of the enemy were already in the potato field."

These people, Rasselas perceived, understood how to play. He blushed with pleasure. "Are you the king?"

"Yes. You don't mind my not wearing a crown? I don't very often. They haven't invented a crown yet that is worth a cent to keep off the sun; and till they do, a straw hat does very well."

"You can play it's a crown."

"Yes, I can do that. Did I understand you to say you were Rasselas, Prince of Abyssinia? You ought to be wearing crowns yourself, I should think, but I suppose you were in such a hurry to get out of the Happy Valley you couldn't stop for one."

He looked shrewdly at the boy, who amended with dignity—"Rasselas Johnson."

"Johnson! Of course, Johnson. You also described yourself, if I mistake not, as a young man of unusual freedom, whose temporary absence would be unlikely to cause alarm."

Rasselas looked anxious, but nodded. The gentleman looked him over thoughtfully. "Well," said he, "it may be that your modesty causes you to underrate your importance, or it may be—ah—in some sort, glamour poetical license. At all events, it would seem too bad to have scaled so high a wall to no purpose and—I have seen the Happy Valley." He shrugged his shoulders and rose up—so tall that he could look over the wall when he stood on his tiptoes. "I think I shouldn't care to stay in the Happy Valley myself," he muttered, when he had so surveyed it; "let's go to the Palace. What with intriguing 'pusley' and this melancholy accident to the infant ladies-in-waiting of the Princess Inez, I think we have had enough of matters of state for one day. The Vegetable Kingdom, Prince, has its cares as well as other kingdoms, but the crown, being of straw, is not so heavy as other crowns, and the head that wears it does not lie uneasy. Although a person of the least importance, as you describe yourself, I dare say you will have to be back to tea—or dinner—but in the meantime there are milk and cookies at the Palace. Your mother wants you, Inez."

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The Palace was cool and dim. No queen or other royal person was in the dining room; only two blue bowls of milk and a plate heaped with cookies. The King had announced the coming of the guest, but the Queen was too busy to bother with visiting princes that day.

Rasselas had never before seen a house like this of the Vegetable Kingdom. The floors were painted brown, and the walls a mild variation of terra cotta. Everywhere there were bookshelves, with loose papers or pamphlets inserted in the spaces left by the tops of the books—not in the least resembling a "mustn't touch" library. Also there were divans and window-seats, indicating people of leisurely habits, and many cushions, mostly grimy and out at elbow. There was a rug, with fringe singularly mutilated. A guinea pig hitched out from under the divan and began to lunch upon this rug as soon as the children had settled down to their meal.

"He thinks the fringe is grass," said Inez. "We are all wondering what he will do when he gets through with the fringe. I don't know what we should do if he kept right on and ate the rug. His name is Sardanapalus."

So they took the guinea pig with them when they went back to the garden, changing it from one thing to another as they happened to need, now an elephant and now a lion—a matter of great indifference to Sardanapalus, who, wherever you put him down, would begin to eat at once, without argument or criticism of his environment. There were few environments that Sardanapalus could not eat, but he liked green best, and picked out the clover in it first.

"Papa is a poet," said Inez. "What's yours?"

Rasselas said: "I'm a norphan, and I come from a ninstitution."

He said it rather abstractedly, for people on the other side of the wall were plainly calling: "Harold! Harold!" and among their voices Mr. Marlowe's was prominent. Soon afterward, the Marlow carriage could be seen through the trees, driving rapidly down the yellow road.

"I shouldn't wonder," said Rasselas, very calmly, "if somebody had been kidnapping that boy. They're always afraid of it. That's the trouble with being a rich child. But nobody's ever afraid about me."

And they went on playing until the west grew luminous and the shadows were long and purple. A bell rang in the direction of the Vegetable Kingdom Palace.

"That's my supper," said Inez. "Good-bye. I will forgive you about the moonflowers."

Rasselas inserted his head in the fun-