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The Losing of the Sunny Boy

By K. F. PURDON

HOW this catastrophe came about has never been made clear till now. Larry, the gardener, could have told you, an' he would; but Larry had his share of that racial instinct by which an Irishman withholds information that may be awkward later on. Larry accordingly held his tongue about the Losing of the Sunny Boy, until he had been found again; for, in fact, he had only been mislaid, as often happens with small things. Now, from the outsider's view-point, the Sunny Boy being only three, was not very big. But he loomed large in the eyes of the household that enshrined him. A pebble the size of a pea may not be a large stone, but what a fine diamond it would be! The Sunny Boy was among other children as a pearl among broken oyster shells, in the opinion, naturally infallible, of those who knee wmost about him. It is pleasant, however, to reflect that many such gems exist, glittering in somewhat similar setting; to wit, a holland over-all, strap shoes, and a wide hat.

The Sunny Boy was in the garden one lovely afternoon; and as usual very hard at work; as busy, in fact, as the big bumble bees themselves that he was trying to catch in the cool, creasy, satin of the crimson peonies. He intended putting them under a flower-pot, and giving them his silver mug to make honey in.

But he was tiring of this, for the bees were quicker than his fingers. All at once he became aware of the blooms on a row of early peas, close by. They were very white and glistening, and just within reach of three-year-old fingers, and mother liked any flowers he picked for her, so he turned with fresh energy to this new business, and had the front of his short skirt—what he called his "lap"—nearly full of the pea-blossoms, when up came Larry, just in time to be too late, as indeed often happened.

"Whats' this you're after doin' here at all, at all, Master Jack?" he said. (It may be explained here that this small person had been christened John. The "Sunny Boy" was merely a name invented, for private use only, by his ineffably happy and silly young parents. His mother liked it spelt with a "u." For she was a disciple of the gospel of cheerfulness, who, though she could not exactly make sunshine, did her best always by keeping her blinds up.)

"Is it," the irate Larry continued, "that you have all the blossoms picked off o' the grand airy pavs, no less! An' we havin' it laid out to send a dish of them to the show? I never seen as bould a little thing as what ye are! Wait till yer mama catches ye, that's all!"

Well, really Larry ought to have known better! Actually scolding the Sunny Boy! Unheard of! And such waste of energy, too! For the Sunny Boy did not understand it, one bit. Mother "catchin'" him? Why, so she did, or he caught her, most evenings now, when they ran races on the tennis ground, and daddy lay smoking in his long chair.

The Sunny Boy just stood, and listened, dropping his "lap" in his bewilderment, so that the pea-blossoms fell in a soft white heap about the strap-shoes, and looking up with such wide, puzzled eyes, that Larry relented.

"Whisht now, alanna! Sure, it's not goin' to go cry, y'are!" he said. And then, Larry, like Browning's "Boy in the Desert," was stung with the splendour of a sudden thought.

He knew no one would dream of punishing the Sunny Boy. Why should not he, Larry, give him a bit of a lesson, that would "larn him to go meddlin' without Fave, another time!"

So he took the Sunny Boy by the hand and said in a tragedy voice, "Here's your mama comin'! be off wid yerself out o' this!" and hustled him through a door leading from the garden into a back lane. "I'll not tell on ye!" he whispered, reassuringly. Then he went back into the garden, and shut the door.

If the Sunny Boy had thought of listening, he might have heard Larry explaining about the peas to his mother, just as glibly as if that promise had never been made. He might have heard mother laugh a little to herself, too, as she picked up enough of the poor pea-blossoms to make a knot for the front of her pretty summer dress. Indeed, he did hear her call out, "Sunny Boy! come and say good-bye!" as indifferently as if the peas were still growing hopefully towards the honours of the show. But it was her day to visit at the Children's Hospital, so she could not wait for an answer—which, indeed, the Sunny Boy was in no mind to make. He thought this banishment into the lane was an improved kind of Hide and Seek; in which game, he had always understood that he was to say nothing, and to make himself as small as he could. The Sunny Boy always breathed very hard, and got very red in the face, during this play.

Half an hour later, when Larry, thinking the punishment had lasted long enough, opened the door and called to Master Jack, there was still no answer. There could not well be now. No Jack was there to make reply. The Losing of the Sunny Boy had begun.

But, Larry, never dreaming of such a climax in his scheme of discipline, just bade him "come in out o' that, like a good child; is it that ye're hidin' on me?" and getting no answer, "well, I can't be delayin' me time here, waitin' on ye! Sure ye'll come, when ye have yersel' plazed!"

So he left the door open, and went back to his barrow, and sat on it to have a smoke; and the cook brought him out a cup of tea she was "rather wettin'." On her way to the onion-bed she was; and it took her a good hour to get there and back. And the parlour-maid played croquet with two balls. She could have had a partner, if only the Sunny Boy had had a nurse.

But this-child had been always minded by everybody, "handed about like snuff at a wake," Larry said. For his mother liked to give him his bath herself and the cook liked to feed him, which was considered only fair, when she had the trouble of making things for him. And the parlour-maid liked to take him for walks, for reasons of her own, whenever that is, the Sunny Boy could be coaxed away from Larry and the garden.

And that is how it happened, naturally enough, that no one missed him at first. Besides, when his mother was away, the household became like a set of dancers when the music suddenly stops; they don't cease moving all at once, but their steps are spasmodic and out of time.

These people had "their minds riz from their business," as cook afterwards confessed. They enjoyed themselves, however, and without any twinges of conscience. For they knew the "mistress" liked everyone to be happy, and had "no mane little worritin' ways wid her about what might go on, when her back would be turned."

Somewhat, this made it all the worse when someone remembered that it was time for the Sunny Boy to be "claned up," and have his supper; and, behold! he was nowhere to be found! This deepened the consternation that seized them,

they had been trusted with a treasure, and it was gone!

They called and they looked; at the rabbit-hutch, the hen-house, the cherry tree, which the Sunny Boy had been known to climb, to a height of at least a foot from the ground; the water-barrels with their fascinating taps; all in vain. A horrible sense of the reality of the thing, that the Sunny Boy was in truth not to be found, was making itself felt, when the mistress came gaily home, and called, as usual, "Sunny! My Sunny Boy! where are you?" It was dreadful that nobody could tell her.

Everybody had thought that everybody else had had an eye on the child. And now, everyone thought secretly that everyone else was to blame—everybody, that is, except Larry. And he was wishing, miserably, to be able to explain the lane episode. But telling the truth is like early rising, or eating with your fork—you must begin while you're young.

The Sunny Boy's mother had a lot to tell him, about the sick babies in the Hospital—and she had been hurrying home, and was hot and flushed. But now, all the light and colour left her face, as if a flame that had been illuminating it had suddenly died out. She stood, silent and white, looking from one to another, trying to realise what had happened.

It was terrible! Could there be only a blank where that busy little fellow had been playing!

"You never think a thing so small, Could leave a place so large,"

she might have said—only people don't, as a rule, drop into poetry on such occasions.

"Sure he can't be far!" ventured the cook, consolingly.

"No len'th at all," said the house-maid, crying into the corner of her apron.

"I'll hold ye a pint, it's just hidin' on us he is," said Larry, addressing no one or thing in particular—except the spade, which he was rarely seen without—a badge of office; however, rather than a tool. And Larry thought to himself now, "It wouldn't be half so bad if she'd take and fight us, bither, all round."

But the mother of the Sunny Boy, though she may have said to herself; "Among you all, how did it happen? Didn't you know that house and garden, and all, might have taken wings, and been less missed than my little happy treasure?"—yet said no word of blame. She ran once round the garden, calling to the child, in just her usual way—then turned and flew wildly out on the road again.

"The railway! Holy Mother of God!" groaned Larry. "Stop her, some of yiz, an' tell her I'll go and search it first myself!"

The parlour-maid rushed in pursuit.

Luckily the Sunny Boy's mother had stopped—the pea-blossoms had fallen from her dress—and as she was picking them up—but oh! she wouldn't let herself think, that maybe they were the last he would give her—"I just bethought me this instant minute," quoth the parlour-maid, "to hear Master Jack talkin' about the shells he had seen on the strand—"

"God bless you," said Jack's mother, innocently, "I'll go there first."

Thus had Larry cause once more to bless the ready lie, for this led her away from the railway, and when he reached it a few minutes later "the sight left me eyes," he often related, "for wasn't Master Jack's hat there, and it all in jommetry between the metals, and just inside the tunnel of the bridge I took notice of a little heap of clothes lyin'—"

Meanwhile, where was the Sunny Boy? Well, as has been explained, he thought this was all hide and seek, and that it beloved him to crouch down behind some tall weeds in the lane, and stay still. So he did this, for quite half a minute, and then a bird fluttered by, and the Sunny Boy was sure he could catch it—if only he had the pinch of salt Larry talked about. Anyway, he followed it, and when it went soaring away out of sight, why, dear me! weren't there oyster shells, and sardine tins, heaps and heaps of things, waiting to be picked up. The Sunny Boy's "lap" had been filled and emptied again, two or three times over, before he got out of the lane and on to the road. Just there the railway ran under it.

The lane had been splendid. It had covered all the entrancing ecstasy of discovery and adventure, for the Sunny Boy had never been there before. But the railway; and the bridge! they promised the realisation of hopes often nipped in the bud.

Oh, many and many a time the Sunny Boy had wanted to climb on that parapet, and watch the trains passing below and not a bit would he be let. And now, Larry's little boy, that Master Jack's old clothes were given to, ay, and two or three other children as well, were sitting enjoyably on that wall, with the lovely steam from a passing engine curling up round their bare feet, delightful to behold!

The Sunny Boy rushed over, letting go "lap" and all.

"I'll det up, an!" he shouted. But this was more easily said than done. Try as hard as he could, and pull and help him as hard as the others could, he was not able to get up beside them. His shoes, handicapped him; bare feet are far superior, for climbing.

But this disability was a providence in disguise. The Sunny Boy would probably have fallen over in his excitement and inexperience.



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