

THE SHRIMP

I

SHYNESS is said (by the hyper-shy) to be incurable. That was the opinion of Horatio Mervyn, who supported himself, not too well, with his pen. He had enjoyed a mild measure of success as a writer, or compiler, of symposia published in popular magazines. He admitted modestly that anybody could "do" it. Horatio, for example, would approach an editor by letter. He was far too shy to demand a personal interview. Whenever he essayed that, he would walk swiftly to the editorial offices, stare at some imposing building which seemed somehow to contradict the affirmation (made by publishers) that the publishing business was on the rocks, and then retire as swiftly to the nearest tavern where he would consume with appetite a chop and a tankard of small ale. Thus fortified he would write his letter. Pen in hand, shyness fled from Horatio. He would point out to his editor that an ever-increasing circle of readers wished to know whether the foremost novelists of the day wore bedsocks or warmed cold feet with hot water-bottles. That, or any other subject of national importance, sufficed as a "starter." Let us give Horatio his due. His cleverness in selecting the judicious theme, something that satisfied the great British Public's inordinate appetite for "personalities," was his *cheval de bataille*. He displayed even more cleverness in approaching authors or other celebrities to whom he might apply. His epistolary style combined courtesy with audacity. The Tritons were invited to be magnanimous to a minnow.

As a rule they responded splendidly, partly out of good nature, partly, perhaps, because the still rising man gobbles any fly that is presented as advertisement camouflaged. With the fully risen, Horatio baited the hook with the assurance that help to the helpless was indeed the only capital that the mighty ones of the earth could take with them when the time came to cross the Styx.

After landing his fish, Horatio had to secure a photograph of the quarry which, unless sorely driven, he did not buy from a professional agent who would charge a guinea for what was, nine times out of ten, a *libel*. In his suavest manner Horatio would intimate this. Then he would ask delicately for a characteristic presentment, a speaking likeness, an authentic portrait.

Are the Tritons vain ?

It is a fact that Horatio generally got what he asked for. The rest, as he put it, was shelling peas. But he did not pay super-tax to His Majesty's Commissioners.

We find Horatio in lodgings at Bumford-on-Sea. Two days previously in London he had received a letter from an editor of his acquaintance :

" I hear " (wrote the great man), " that Miss Viola Tippinge is at Bumford-on-Sea. She has never been interviewed. There is a mystery about her. For some years she has lived out of England. We'll pay reasonable ex's if you care to tackle a difficult job. If you succeed in getting hold of the right stuff it will be a feather in your cap and fifty pounds in your pocket. Three thousand words—world's rights. What say you ? "

Horatio, after consideration, said " I'll try. "

Miss Tippinge, the authoress of *Love's Crucifix*, had taken The-House-in-the-Wood. There is only one small wood near the beach and it is surrounded by a formidable fence. The writer of a column entitled " Pith " in the *Bumford-on-Sea Banner* intimated in no uncertain

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tones that Miss Tippinge was seeking privacy after a world-wide publicity which (to Horatio) was painfully glaring.

The lady was a "best-seller."

Horatio read *Love's Crucifix* going down in the train. He decided that Miss Tippinge must possess an immense experience of life and love. The two were twins from Horatio's point of view. It was impossible to conceive of Miss Tippinge as shy. The boldness of her outlook could only be measured by the magnitude of her output. Horatio was immensely struck by an injunction quoted by a reviewer of *Love's Crucifix* found at the end of the novel on a page devoted to excerpts from flattering Press notices.

"De l'audace, toujours de l'audace!"

She had written, in all, three novels dealing with life and love.

Presently Horatio wandered round the wood in the hope of getting a glimpse of the house. Forbidding pines met his eye. Presumably oaks and beeches refused to grow at Bumford-on-Sea.

Miss Tippinge, let it be noted, had sent Horatio a valued contribution to a symposium *Books that have Helped ME*. But he had never met the accomplished lady.

"De l'audace," he whispered to himself.

II

He came to a white gate and looked over it. A smug drive, bordered by turf and rhododendrons, swept itself out of sight in an exasperating curve.

Horatio lit his pipe. It occurred to him that eleven in the morning was an hour when best-sellers might take the air. He rehearsed a scene. Through the gate Miss Tippinge would pass. He envisaged her as a young woman of distinction, carrying a high head. He knew

that she was not a high-brow. Her observant eyes would rest for an instant upon a young man—himself. She might smile. In fancy Horatio addressed her :

“ You are Miss Tippinge ? ”

“ I am.”

“ My name is Mervyn, Horatio Mervyn. You were good enough to send me a contribution to my symposium : *Books that have Helped ME.*”

“ So I did. I’m very glad to meet you, Mr. Mervyn.”

Horatio, carried away on the flowing tide of imagination, acted and spoke the part. He lifted his straw hat ; he smiled ; he bowed ; he spoke his lines articulately.

And he had his back to the gate. Suddenly, he heard a voice other than his own :

“ Do it again. Please, please, do it again.”

Horatio turned to behold a small boy in a sailor’s suit perched upon the top bar of the gate.

Horatio recognized the boy instantly as “ Mummy’s darling.” It was stamped upon him in indelible ink. Mummy, however, to the great relief of Horatio, was not in sight.

“ Who are you ? ” he asked politely.

“ I’m the Shrimp. Were you playing a game by yourself ? ”

Horatio nodded, adding cautiously :

“ Is Mummy about ? ”

“ Mummy is in her bath. I gave Nanny the slip. She’s looking for me somewhere else. I say, do you ever get bored with women ? ”

Horatio admitted candidly that there were moments when the society of the fair drove him from them. But he answered perfunctorily. He was asking himself questions. Was this kid the child of Miss Tippinge ? He seemed to be thoroughly at home on the gate. From his appearance he might be the son of a best-seller. Obviously he did not suffer from shyness.

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“ You live here ? ”

The Shrimp—he was not more than seven—replied superbly :

“ We have taken the house for three months. I s’pose you’ve heard of my Mummy, ’cos everybody has heard of her.”

“ Miss Viola Tippinge ? ”

“ You bet.”

Horatio, emboldened by the knowledge that Miss Tippinge was in her bath, and that Nanny was happily somewhere else, continued easily :

“ What do you think of Bumford-on-the-Sea ? ”

The Shrimp replied incisively :

“ I don’t think about it.”

“ You are perfectly right,” said Horatio. “ Bumford hardly bears thinking about.”

“ Too—chariabangy,” suggested the Shrimp.

“ Your Mummy says that ? ”

“ Yes. I say, what shall I call you ? I like you. You seem to be a joky man.”

“ You can call me—Horatio.”

“ Honest Injun, is that your name ? ”

“ It is.”

“ I know. You kept the bridge, didn’t you ? ”

“ I haven’t kept anything. Horatius, not Horatio, kept the bridge. That was in the brave days of yore. My great-grandfather happened to be a godson of Lord Nelson’s. You have heard of Lord Nelson ? ”

“ Not yet. A lord wanted to marry Mummy.”

“ Did he ? ”

“ But he was a lollapaloozer, and Mummy wouldn’t have him.”

Horatio ventured to affirm that Mummy was right. With her ripe experience of life lollapaloozers would be labelled as such unflinchingly.

“ Is your Mummy writing ? ” he asked.

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" 'Course she is. That's why she's in her bath."

Horatio didn't grasp the connection, unless—which was extremely improbable—Miss Tippinge used a faulty fountain pen. But the Shrimp went on to explain that Mummy wrote at night, and rose late. He added an illuminating phrase :

" She knows the stuff to give the troops."

Horatio agreed, not without a pang of regret, that such knowledge had not been vouchsafed to him apart from the symposia. At this moment a tempestuous petticoat with something inside it that frightened Horatio fluttered round the bend in the drive. The Shrimp said coolly :

" Here's that silly old Nanny. I'll look out for you on the beach this afternoon."

" Rightie O ! " replied Mr. Mervyn.

III

Left alone with his thoughts, Horatio was sensible of cerebral disturbance which did not yield to the soothing influence of the mildest tobacco. Supermen—be they wives or widows—might elect to be known by their maiden names. Still, it was Horatio's special business to find out such matters. He hurried back to his lodgings to read again the autobiographical notice of Miss Tippinge in *Who's Who*, a volume which he carried with him everywhere. There was no mention of any marriage. Miss Tippinge, like himself, was an orphan. With a reticence rare in her sex she seemed to have avoided personal details about her parentage. She had written many books. Under the head of " Recreation " was a significant line :

" Minding my own business."

" It is worth minding," reflected Horatio.

He remembered that Miss Tippinge had not sent him

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her photograph with the valued contribution to *Books that have Helped ME*. At the time, he had rashly assumed that photographs failed to do justice to the eminent authoress. He now remembered further that he had never seen a photograph of Miss Tippinge in those papers that specialize in such wares.

“Bag o’ mystery!” exclaimed Horatio.

Without a thought of sausages in his active mind, he dwelt upon this description of a best-seller. *She knew what stuff to give the troops*. Did she ladle it out with her tongue in her cheek? No. That was unbelievable. Sincerity informed her writing even though it misinformed her readers. Critics who damned her style, who refused positively to regard as a serious contribution to literature work that pleased the million, had to admit that Viola Tippinge “felt” what she described so exuberantly. Much of it might be “sob stuff”—the troops wallowed in sentiment—but the sob was not simulated by the writer.

Had she thrown her hat over the windmill?

He sauntered from his lodgings on to the beach, where the mixed bathing was overmixed for a delicate palate. He wondered vaguely why stout ladies exposed their charms in one-piece bathing suits. He was aware, blushing, that glad eyes rested upon him.

“Minxes!” he murmured.

None the less, he was secretly pleased that he did not entirely escape notice, although he proposed to bathe by himself half a mile farther on. The boldness of the maidens disconcerted him and hampered the spirit of adventure. He regarded with envy, young men who exchanged jests with young women whom they addressed as “darling” without the formality of an introduction. Life and love appeared to be rampant on the beach at Bumford-on-Sea. A theme for a symposium occurred to him: *Are Men more modest than Women?*

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The Shrimp and he met again after the mid-day meal, which was an unhappy compromise between luncheon and dinner. Nanny, so it appeared, disapproved of mixed bathing. So she retired with her charge to the less-frequented part of the beach. The Shrimp introduced her to Horatio.

"This is Nanny. She's very old, but you don't mind that, do you?"

"Not at all."

"She's a oner to hold her tongue."

"A very rare accomplishment," said Horatio pleasantly. He lifted his hat to the nurse, who bowed with dignity. She was sitting under a large white umbrella, sewing diligently. Horatio felt that he was being inspected and getting creditably through the ordeal. Nanny said austereley :

"If he bothers you, sir, send him back to me."

Horatio's hand was gripped firmly.

"I don't bother men," said the Shrimp. "Let's paddle, Horatio. Do star-fish bite?"

"Not if you treat them with ordinary civility."

As they were taking off their shoes, the Shrimp said suddenly :

"I told Mummy all about you. She doesn't mind my playing with a great-grandson of Lord Nelson. She says he wasn't a lollapaloozer. And I made her laugh telling about your talking to yourself and taking off your hat to creatures of 'magination."

"Did—did you repeat what I—er—said?"

"No. 'Cos I didn't hear what you said. What is a creature of 'magination?"

Horatio rose to the occasion.

"The dream people," he said softly, "are creatures of imagination. To some of us they are more real, and much pleasanter to meet, than those we can see and hear. Your Mummy knows a lot of 'em. They are not easy to

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know well. But they're real friends when they make friends with you. I've had splendid times with the few I know."

The Shrimp was visibly impressed.

"Are they all grown-ups?"

"Mine," confessed Horatio, "are mostly kiddies. I'm not shy, you see, with kiddies."

But he had to explain at length what a raging pestilence shyness was. Then they paddled, and got so wet that Nanny rated both of them soundly, so soundly that the elder child whispered to the younger:

"You told me she was a oner for holding her tongue——!"

The Shrimp whispered back:

"She only talks when you don't want her to."

They parted sworn friends.

IV

For three days Miss Tippinge remained invisible. The Shrimp explained that she was writing in the garden. He added innocently that Mummie was tremendously interested in Horatio, who divined—from intimate knowledge of the Shrimp—that Mummie might be already "fed up" with a man whom she had never met in the flesh.

Meantime, without pumping his little friend, Horatio was gleaning remarkable information about a mysterious celebrity. An unscrupulous profiteer of Grub Street might have earned fifty pounds by setting down what the Shrimp said, *verbatim et seriatim*. It transpired in the course of many conversations that Miss Tippinge did her own typing; she ate sausages for breakfast on Sunday; she played the piano; she read many books; she trimmed her own hats; and her best pal was an Airedale terrier. The lollapaloozing lord had proposed by letter. *He had*

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never seen Miss Tippinge. The Shrimp was so positive about this that Horatio believed the incredible story.

As to her appearance—and Horatio, perhaps, was indiscreetly inquisitive on this important point—the Shrimp affirmed solemnly that Mummy was “lovely.” That might mean anything—or nothing. Horatio regretfully suspended judgment. But, even more regretfully, he had come to the inevitable conclusion that Viola Tippinge had thrown one of the self-trimmed hats over the windmill.

Une petite faute—and not so little either !

The Shrimp, in fine, accounted adequately for the mystery that encompassed a best seller.

Boldly and bashfully Horatio expressed a wish to meet Mummy. The Shrimp replied promptly :

“ You must make a ‘pointment.’ ”

“ But, correct me if I am wrong, surely your Mummy makes that ? ”

The Shrimp nodded pensively, as an idea burgeoned in his mind. Next day a “ ‘pointment ’ ” was made. Horatio was invited by Mummie to drink tea with her in the garden——

A glance into a mirror was not too reassuring. Horatio examined critically a thin, brown face surmounted by thick dark hair that resisted frontal attacks on it with a brush.

“ Jungle ! ” murmured Horatio.

His brown eyes sparkled, none the less, because this was really an adventure. To discover some unknown land is exciting enough ; to discover an unknown celebrity is—words failed Horatio, as he subdued, temporarily, refractory locks with a wet sponge.

The Shrimp led him trembling to the lovely lady. And she wasn't lovely. Miss Tippinge looked almost insignificant and preposterously young. Where and when had she accumulated her knowledge of life and love ?

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Another disconcerting discovery. She was painfully shy. Fortunately the Shrimp played host.

"This is my Mummie, Horatio. She knows all 'bout you, 'cos I told her."

"I am glad to meet Mr. Mervyn," said Miss Tippinge primly. It was at once obvious to Horatio that his name as a writer of symposia had escaped from Miss Tippinge's memory. This was an opportunity to say brightly something about the lady's contribution, but Horatio remained mute.

There was a devastating pause, broken by the Shrimp.

"Mummy is lovely, isn't she?"

Miss Tippinge said hastily:

"Tea will be here directly."

The Shrimp added genially:

"We are going to have hot brandysnaps—curly ones."

Perceiving no radiant smile upon his friend's face, he continued politely:

"I daresay your belly is not your God. Nanny says that mine is."

Miss Tippinge laughed; the ice was broken. The three began to talk with animation about food which opens hearts as often as mouths. Horatio found something to say about the board at his lodgings:

"It looks even worse than it tastes."

"That is why I love France," said Miss Tippinge.

"The food there tastes even better than it looks."

"You know France well?"

"Yes."

"We live there," added the Shrimp. "Hooray! Here's tea."

During and after tea Horatio hoped that Miss Tippinge would talk shop. He had never met an authoress who didn't. He recalled to mind one in particular who was the daughter of a writer much more famous than herself. Horatio had wished to discuss the father's masterpiece.

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The lady took infinite pains to persuade Horatio that her sire's masterpiece was—herself.

Finally, in desperation, he said quite irrelevantly :

“ Do you ever talk about your work, Miss Tippinge ? ”

“ I don't think I do—much. But, why ? ”

Another lost opportunity ! Horatio ought to have declared that he was a brother scribe. He hesitated. Miss Tippinge said modestly :

“ My work means much to me. I—I think I could talk about it, but I have never done so to strangers.”

Horatio winced ; the little lady apologized sincerely :

“ I don't regard you quite as a stranger, Mr. Mervyn. If I did you would not be drinking tea with me. By this time you will have discovered that I suffer from an incurable disease—shyness.”

“ So do I,” said Horatio. “ But—is it incurable ? ”

“ I fear so.”

They looked at each other. The Shrimp was romping with the terrier.

“ It makes it easier, somehow, Mr. Mervyn, to know that you are shy.”

“ God intended me to be bold,” said Horatio. “ In imagination I am bold.”

“ But so am I—at my typewriter. Perhaps I am too bold ? ”

“ Not for me,” said Horatio firmly. “ Before I had the honour of meeting you, after reading your books, I imagined you, boldly, as having a firm grasp on life.”

“ But—I haven't. I—I imagine life. My experience of the real thing is, second-hand. I read a great deal.”

“ So do I.”

“ And I try to portray life as I think it ought to be.”

“ Ah ! That accounts for your strangle-hold on the British public. You work at night ? ”

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"Yes. More than I should. But the silence of the night whispers things to me. The wind in these pines tells me stories. The beach here, in daytime, is detestable, but at night——"

"You walk on the beach at night?"

"I do. I steal copy from the waves."

"I'm not surprised that you are a best-seller."

"That has always surprised me, Mr. Mervyn. I can assure you that I've never tried to please my public. I write to please myself. . . ." She broke off, abruptly, continuing in a different voice :

"Do you know that the Shrimp adores you?"

"He's a little topper," said Horatio, with enthusiasm.

"Mummy's darling—*unspoiled!*"

"Thanks."

Again they looked at each other and smiled. Miss Tippinge murmured demurely :

"If I hadn't known you so well through him, I shouldn't be talking to you now. Because I hate strangers, they pester me. Interviewers——!"

"They have to live, poor devils. You have never been interviewed?"

"Never."

"Why not?"

She frowned at him.

"My private life concerns nobody."

She spoke with slight defiance. Horatio blushed inwardly. What he knew already of the lady's private life would "run" to three thousand words and fifty pounds. He felt at the moment that he could describe her vividly. Winged words came to him—adjectives and adverbs.

He said lightly :

"Perhaps, after all, the curiosity you excite in your readers is an asset."

She made no reply.

Walking slowly back to his lodgings, Horatio tried to co-ordinate his first impressions of a best seller.

He failed dismally.

But he knew, with unassailable conviction, that he liked the woman better than her novels.

"No swank," he kept on repeating. Swank to Horatio was anathema. Of all the variegated sorts of swank he disliked most high-brow swank, simply because in his humble judgment high-brows ought to soar above anything approximating to intellectual slobbery. Nobody accused Miss Tippinge of being a high-brow. High-brows curved themselves into knots when her name was mentioned. They writhed in anguish indescribable when her "sales" were quoted. They growled out fiercely :

"She sells by the hundredweight."

But Horatio was not a high-brow. And he had recognized—and acclaimed—in Miss Tippinge the qualities which distinguish best sellers and extinguish high-brows, to wit : romance, imagination, and a lyrical sense of life as it ought to be.

That was the stuff to give the troops.

He failed, really, in his attempt to reconcile the woman with the novelist. On the surface of things the task seemed easy. The Shrimp appeared to solve the problem. But did he ?

"I can't get over the Shrimp," he thought.

The Shrimp, as the child of Miss Tippinge, was as difficult to digest as the boiled beef served with indestructible dumplings at dinner.

After dinner, Horatio seized his fountain pen. He wrote three thousand words in an hour and a half, almost a record for him. Then, to cool a fevered head, he went out, without a hat, on to the beach. As he rattled over

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the shingle he told himself that his article on Viola Tippinge was the stuff to give the troops. Millions in the Disunited Kingdom and the United States of America would read it—and ask for more.

Dare he send it to his editor?

Whether he signed it or not SHE would know.

He thought of her as SHE, being at grips with life and—and love.

Was he in love with a best-seller? No. His honest heart thrilled because at long last he had met a woman as shy as himself. With her he ceased to be shy. He became a man. For a full hour, before he left *The-House-in-the-Wood*, they had talked of books. They liked the same books. They capped each other's quotations from the poets. Metaphorically they hugged each other over *The Ode to the West Wind*. Towards the end of that memorable hour they had talked of the Shrimp. Over the Shrimp they met almost conjugally. Horatio told himself that he had been vouchsafed a glimpse into the paradise of a mother's heart. He came away abashed, reverential. . . .

And then reaction had inspired his article.

He passed the wood of pines, sable against the argent of the moonlit downs. As he glanced at it, he remembered that Miss Tippinge stole copy from the waves at night.

He stood still, contemplating retreat. But he looked ahead. It was past eleven o'clock. In the far distance he discerned a figure.

Was it SHE?

The figure was approaching slowly.

It occurred to Horatio that Miss Tippinge had courage to walk unprotected upon a lonely beach. Hardly had this thought entered his mind, when he saw the faithful Airedale, padding behind his mistress.

It was SHE.

The terrier greeted him affectionately ; and he was, a dog, as his mistress knew, of nice discrimination in the choice of friends. Miss Tippinge contended that he, too, was shy.

She expressed no surprise at meeting Horatio. He dared to wonder whether she expected to meet him. Glancing up at the moon, it seemed that the Man in it winked. From the wavelets kissing the shingle came a sibilant murmur of applause.

“ This is jolly,” said Horatio.

It wasn't. But shy men never use the right adjectives except when they are alone. Miss Tippinge took him a shade too seriously :

“ Is it ? ” she asked. “ Perhaps it ought to be.”

She spoke regretfully. It was impossible to think of her as a coquette, but Horatio, with ever-increasing sympathy and understanding, guessed that she was recalling, as he was, times which the hyper-shy might have found “ jolly ” and didn't.

He said deprecatingly :

“ I should like to be jolly with you.”

Her too rare laugh tinkled.

“ The Shrimp says you are jolly.”

“ Bless him ! ”

The benediction was so fervent that Miss Tippinge moved six inches nearer to Horatio. They were walking side by side.

“ Do you really like him ? ”

“ I love him.”

“ Why ? ”

The banal answer lay pat to his lip. Fortunately, it remained there. He replied, after a pause :

“ Shrimps are a weakness of mine. They dart about ; they dart into odd corners of one's mind and heart ; they

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are elusive ; also they make no inordinate demands upon a poor man's purse."

" You are—poor ? "

" I'm not rich enough to entertain, or to be entertained by, payers of super-tax. No complaints ! "

" But—the Shrimp. I return to him."

" Please don't be in a hurry to do that. He is as happily asleep as I am happily awake."

Admittedly, for a shy man, he was getting on. Miss Tippinge acknowledged a delicate compliment by moderating her pace.

" I worry about the Shrimp, Mr. Mervyn. He is an immense responsibility."

" Most certainly he's growing out of his sailor's suit. You see him as prawn, as lobster—with ~~salmon~~ ? "

" I do—I do. If shrimps could remain shrimps—— ! "

She sighed. Greatly emboldened, Horatio dared to whisper :

" If you would care to talk to me about him—— ? "

She hesitated, standing still. The great-grandson of a godson of a hero put boldly to sea.

" We are too near to Bumford to talk even of shrimps at our ease. Let's wander away from it."

He took her arm. They turned backs on Bumford.

" Ought he to go to school ? "

" Not for three years at least."

" His father is dead. There is nobody to share my responsibilities. If he were a girl—— ! "

" But you are so glad he isn't ? "

" Yes. Between ourselves, Mr. Mervyn, he has nobody to look after him except me."

Horatio replied warmly :

" I say this unreservedly : he is exceptionally fortunate."

" You say that with no knowledge of—of his antecedents ? "

" Antecedents be—blowed ! "

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He pressed her arm.

"If I told you that his father was—— Will you catch cold without a hat?"

"Nature has thatched me too generously. You were saying——?"

"His father was not—er—quite——"

"Like the heroes in your books?"

"I didn't draw them from him. However, he is dead."

"I snap my fingers at heredity, Miss Tippinge. Give me environment every time. And, mind you, it is a physiological fact that a child in the right environment is more likely to inherit the virtues of his mother than the vices of his father."

"I—I can't talk to you about the mother."

"You could, if you would."

"Not now, please."

VII

After breakfast, upon the morning following, Horatio re-read his article, and found it surprisingly good. But he made it better before luncheon. He added convincing touches. He whispered to himself:

"It's illuminating."

It was the best work of his hand and heart. To scrap such work, to hurl it into the waste-paper basket, would be iconoclastic; and yet he knew that he would never send it to his editor. Decency raised a forbidding finger. He typed it out carefully. He entitled it:

"*Viola Tippinge*: by Horatio Mervyn."

It had been done *au premier coup*, a flight of fancy, a labour of love. He placed it in his breast pocket, and tackled his luncheon heroically. As he toyed with desiccated cold chicken and tasteless ham, he wondered whether any man with fifty pounds next his heart had ever put such uninspiring food into his stomach.

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At three punctually, he met the Shrimp, who delivered a message from Mummy :

" We want you to drink tea with us again to-morrow. Mummy promises shrimps and new brown bread and butter. I can eat heaps of shrimps."

" Cannibal," murmured Horatio.

" We should have asked you to come to-day, but Mummy is in bed."

" Ill ? "

" Tired. Too much 'citement. You 'cited her."

" I can't believe it, Shrimp."

" You did. She likes you, 'cos you have a nice mind. You've made a hit, Horatio, with Mummy. Nanny says so."

Nanny held her tongue. It was difficult to associate the use of slang with Nanny, but, apparently, she and no other had enriched the Shrimp's vocabulary. It was possible that Nanny, still on the sunny side of forty, walked out with an ex-service man.

Games were played. It was " up " to Horatio to invent new games. Unexpected drafts upon imagination were honoured. Many diversions wiled away the hours. They had tea on the pier and a turn or two on the roundabouts.

It was seven when Horatio found himself back in his bedroom. Changing his clothes before dinner, he emptied his pockets as usual.

The appreciation of Miss Tippinge was missing.

He remembered instantly when and where he had lost it : during a furious pillow-fight on the beach. Pillows not being common objects upon the seashore coats had been successfully substituted. The Shrimp had wielded terrifically Horatio's coat. Horatio, cruelly handicapped, had defended himself with Nanny's " woolly."

Horatio hurried to the field of battle. The precious paper was not.

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Benedictions, like curses, return home to roost. The appreciation was delivered, next morning, by post. A letter accompanied it.

"Miss Tippinge returns to Mr. Mervyn a paper which she has not read. But the title explains itself. The paper was found on the beach by some tourist and left by him at The-House-in-the-Wood. Miss Tippinge quite understands Mr. Mervyn's interest in herself, but she resents his methods. Under all the circumstances Miss Tippinge, very regretfully, must decline the honour of Mr. Mervyn's further acquaintance."

Shy men soon acquire the habit of speaking aloud. Horatio said bitterly :

"She regards me as a lollapaloozer."

A very sorry breakfast put no heart into him. He worded—as he mumbled his bacon—half a dozen abject apologies. But the stark fact obtruded itself. He had obtained goods under false pretences ; he had stolen information. He recalled Miss Tippinge's firm little chin. If he called on her, she would refuse to see him. A woman with sufficient strength of mind to return *unread* an " appreciation " of herself would return, also unread, any letter from a lollapaloozer.

VIII

What he tried to eat at luncheon may be held responsible for Horatio's decisive action in packing his bag. Bumford-on-Sea had become unendurable.

He was addressing a label, when the Shrimp burst into his bedroom, hatless and gasping for breath. He rushed at Horatio, clutched him, and stammered out :

" I've r-r-runned away."

" We think alike about everything," said his friend.

" You're not a cad, are you? What does a ' cad '

Dew of the Sea

mean? Something beastly, I know. Horatio, w-what—w-w-what have you done?”

Horatio groaned.

“W-w-why have you made M-m-mummy c-cry?”

“Is she crying?”

“’Course she is. But I’m not crying, am I?”

“No. Sit down, Shrimp. Two heads are better than one. You’re a friend worth having. You are really a tower of strength to me. Let us try to be calm. Is Nanny pursuing you?”

The Shrimp ceased to stammer. He said triumphantly:

“She made me lie down. She locked the door, the old blighter! I comed down the trellis by the window. I was funky, but I did it. Nobody seed me.”

Horatio nodded. He remembered the trellis, which had appeared to him to be rotten. He held out his hand.

“Put it there, Shrimp.”

“You’re not a cad.”

“I’m not a cad. Appearances are sadly against me, but I’m not a cad.”

They shook hands violently.

“We’ll have some ginger pop presently. But first of all we must send a telegram. Is there a telephone at your house?”

“No.”

Horatio took a form from his bag and scribbled a line:

“The Shrimp is with me at Mignonette Cottage. I hold him as a hostage—MERVYN.”

Re-reading the message, he scratched out Mervyn and substituted Horatio. Bumford-on-Sea has one merit. It is small. It will, alas! never grow smaller. Within five minutes the telegram was despatched. Horatio and the Shrimp returned to the bed-sitting-room.

Explanations were in order and forthcoming.

“I have made your Mummy cry,” began Horatio,

The Shrimp

cheerfully. "But you have faith in me, Shrimp, which must be justified. I'm not a cad. Put that into the pickle barrel for keeps. But your Mummy has reason to think the worst of me. Thanks to you I'm in a position to—to make terms with her. I count on you to stand by."

The Shrimp nodded intelligently.

"Will you stand by till your Mummy comes for you?"

"I will."

"Good."

"Mummy may send a p'liceman."

"No. Your Mummy isn't built that way. She can mind her own business without calling in the police."

"She may send Nanny."

Horatio replied boldly without a trace of shyness:

"If Nanny comes we lower the portcullis. In the mean language of this abominable century we lock the door. We turn her own weapon, the key, against Nanny."

"Hooray!"

"We will keep all applause till the end of the play."

"Then it is a play?"

"Yes; a tragedy—thanks again to you—has turned into a comedy. We have nothing to do but sit tight."

"We might play 'Old Maid.'"

"We will."

They did.

IX

The telegram, so it transpired afterwards, was delivered promptly, but, possibly, eyes cannot be dried properly in less than half an hour. It was after four, when a smirking maidservant informed Horatio that a lady wished to see him.

"Are you quite sure she is a lady?" asked the cautious Horatio.

"Yus. She give no name, but she's quite the lady, and young. I showed her into the droring-room."

Dew of the Sea

“ I will see the lady.”

The maidservant withdrew. Horatio took both the Shrimp's hands into his and pressed them. The Shrimp thought his friend looked white and queer, but he was too polite to say so.

“ I must see your Mummy alone. Will you stay here quietly till I come back ? ”

“ On my Sam, Horatio ? ”

“ On your Sam, Shrimp. It may be dull for you, but you'll stick it out for the sake of a pal, won't you ? ”

“ You bet.”

Horatio moved reluctantly to the door. His knees were as wax ; his tongue clave to his palate. The Shrimp had the last word :

“ You can give Mummy a kiss, Horatio, and tell her I'm quite all right.”

Miss Tippinge was staring at a shell-work table when Horatio entered the drawing-room. To his immense relief she was alone. Her opening remark was not encouraging :

“ You pile outrage on outrage, Mr. Mervyn.”

“ You think I kidnapped the Shrimp ? He came here because a child's instinct is infallible and his faith in a friend sublime. You misjudged me unheard. He didn't.”

“ You're a journalist.”

“ You are a public character.”

“ What you have done is indefensible. I refuse to listen to explanations or apologies. I say only this : you ought to be on the stage. As an actor I congratulate you.”

“ I offer no apologies, none,” said Horatio calmly. “ And no explanations. I'm too proud of what I have done.”

“ Proud—— ! ”

“ My terms are these. Before I return the Shrimp,

The Shrimp

you will read my appreciation of you. Nobody else will read it. It was written, in its present form, for my eye alone."

Miss Tippinge sat down. She stared at Horatio, who produced the script and held it out.

"Three thousand words—worth a cool hundred in the international market."

"And if—if I refuse to read it?"

"I promise in that case to father the *Shrimp* till the police interfere. If they do, there will be the biggest demand for your books on record. Incidentally, my appreciation of Viola Tippinge will fetch two hundred."

"You threaten me with notoriety. You hold a pistol to my head. Under protest, Mr. Mervyn, I will read what you have written."

"Under protest, Miss Tippinge, and without prejudice."

He watched her as she read. He noted a mantling blush, and trembling fingers. But she read on in silence to the end. When she spoke it was impossible to suppress the emotion in her voice.

"Why did you write this?"

"I repeat, in its present form it was written to please myself. That, perhaps, is the best way of pleasing the public."

"You evade my question. I ask again why do you understand me better than I understand myself? There is much in this that—that does not please me; there is much more that moves me profoundly."

"You insist on an answer? I may shock and distress you."

She hesitated.

"I think I'll risk that."

"I was writing about the woman I love."

She jumped to her feet.

"And I didn't know that till I began to write."

Dew of the Sea

"You—you mean you love me?"

"I can't help it. I do. Perhaps my 'abysmal ignorance of life and love excuses partly the presumption. Shall I fetch the Shrimp?"

"One moment, please. You love me in spite of the Shrimp?"

"Yes."

"You ask no questions?"

"Not one."

"You are a very singular man."

"I call you a singular woman."

"You can fetch the Shrimp, but before you do so I will say this. He came into this world unwelcomed, by—the path that skirts the altar."

"I guessed as much."

"Because of that I cherish him the more."

"Of course you do."

"He was born in France. His father died in France, fighting. His mother——"

"Yes?"

"Died when he was born. She was my sister."

"And the Shrimp doesn't know that yet?"

"I want to keep that knowledge from him as long as I can. That's all. Fetch him."

Horatio stood still.

"I'm beginning to think that you are right——"

"About what?"

"Shyness is incurable. The Shrimp charged me with a special message to you. I dare not deliver it."

"What was the message?"

"He told me to kiss you and tell you that he is quite all right."

Miss Tippinge blushed from her ears to her toes. Then, in her turn, she grasped life and love.

"Why don't you do it?" she whispered.