

Billee felt the time had come to go and see his mother and sister in Devonshire, and make the sun shine twice as brightly for them during a month or so, and the dew fall softer!

So one fine August morning found him at the Great Western Station—the nicest station in all London, I think—except the stations that book you to France and far away.

It always seems so pleasant to be going west! Little Billee loved that station, and often went there for a mere stroll, to watch the people starting on their westward way, following the sun towards Heaven knows what joys or sorrows, and envy them their sorrows or their joys—any sorrows or joys that were not merely physical, like a chocolate drop or a pretty tune, a bad smell or a toothache.

And as he took a seat in a second-class carriage (it would be third in these democratic days), south corner, back to the engine, with *Silas Marner*, and Darwin's *Origin of Species* (which he was reading for the third time), and *Punch*, and other literature of a lighter kind, to beguile him on his journey, he felt rather bitterly how happy he could be if the little spot, or knot, or blot, or clot which paralyzed that convolution of his brain where he kept his affections could but be conjured away!

The dearest mother, the dearest sister in the world, in the dearest little sea-side village (or town) that ever was! and other dear people—especially Alice, sweet Alice with hair so brown, his sister's friend, the simple, pure, and pious maiden of his boyish dreams: and himself, but for that wretched little kill-joy cerebral



CUP-AND BALL

occlusion, as sound, as healthy, as full of life and energy, as he had ever been!

And when he wasn't reading *Silas Marner*, or looking out of window at the flying landscape, and watching it revolve round its middle distance (as it always seems to do), he was sympathetically taking stock of his fellow-passengers, and mildly envying them, one after another, indiscriminately!

A fat, old, wheezy philistine, with a bulbous nose and only one eye, who had a plain, sickly daughter, to whom he seemed devoted, body and soul; an old lady, who still wept furtively at recollections of the parting with her grandchildren, which had taken place at the station (they had borne up wonderfully, as grandchildren do); a consumptive curate, on the opposite corner seat by the window, whose tender, anxious wife (sitting by his side) seemed to have no thoughts in the whole world but for him; and her patient eyes were his stars of consolation, since he turned to look into them almost every minute, and always seemed a little the happier for doing so. There is no better stargazing than that!

So Little Billee gave her up *his* corner seat, that the poor sufferer might have those stars where he could look into them comfortably without turning his head.

Indeed (as was his wont with everybody), Little Billee made himself useful and pleasant to his fellow-travellers in many ways—so many that long before they had reached their respective journeys' ends they had almost grown to love him as an old friend, and longed to know who this singularly attractive and brilliant youth, this genial, dainty, benevolent little

princekin could possibly be, who was dressed so fashionably, and yet went second class, and took such kind thought of others; and they wondered at the happiness that must be his at merely being alive, and told him more of their troubles in six hours than they told many an old friend in a year.

But he told them nothing about himself—that self he was so sick of—and left them to wonder.

And at his own journey's end, the farthest end of all, he found his mother and sister waiting for him, in a beautiful little pony-carriage—his last gift—and with them sweet Alice, and in her eyes, for one brief moment, that unconscious look of love surprised which is not to be forgotten for years and years and years—which can only be seen by the eyes that meet it, and which, for the time it lasts (just a flash), makes all women's eyes look exactly the same (I'm told): and it seemed to Little Billee that, for the twentieth part of a second, Alice had looked at him with Trilby's eyes—or his mother's, when that he was a little tiny boy.

It all but gave him the thrill he thirsted for! Another twentieth part of a second, perhaps, and his brain-trouble would have melted away; and Little Billee would have come into his own again—the kingdom of love!

A beautiful human eye! *Any* beautiful eye—a dog's, a deer's, a donkey's, an owl's even! To think of all that it can look, and all that it can see! all that it can even *seem*, sometimes! What a prince among gems! what a star!

But a beautiful eye that lets the broad white light

of infinite space (so bewildering and garish and diffused) into one pure virgin heart, to be filtered there! and lets it out again, duly warmed, softened, concentrated, sublimated, focussed to a point as in a precious stone, that it may shed itself (a love-laden effulgence) into some stray fellow-heart close by—through pupil and iris, *entre quatre-z-yeux*—the very elixir of life!

Alas! that such a crown-jewel should ever lose its lustre and go blind!

Not so blind or dim, however, but it can still see well enough to look before and after, and inward and upward, and drown itself in tears, and yet not die! And that's the dreadful pity of it. And this is a quite uncalled-for digression; and I can't think why I should have gone out of my way (at considerable pains) to invent it! In fact—

“Of this here song, should I be axed the reason for to show, I don't exactly know, I don't exactly know!
But all my fancy dwells upon Nancy.” . . .

“How pretty Alice has grown, mother! quite lovely, I think! and so nice; but she was always as nice as she could be!”

So observed Little Billee to his mother that evening as they sat in the garden and watched the crescent moon sink to the Atlantic.

“Ah! my darling Willie! If you *could* only guess how happy you would make your poor old mammy by growing fond of Alice. . . . And Blanche, too! what a joy for *her*!”

“Good heavens! mother. . . . Alice is not for the likes of *me*! She's for some splendid young Devon

squire, six foot high, and acred and whiskered within an inch of his life! . . .”

“Ah, my darling Willie! you are not of those who ask for love in vain. . . . If you only *knew* how she believes in you! She almost beats your poor old mammy at *that*!”

And that night he dreamed of Alice—that he loved her as a sweet good woman should be loved; and knew, even in his dream, that it was but a dream; but, oh! it was good! and he managed not to wake; and it was a night to be marked with a white stone! And (still in his dream) she had kissed him, and healed

him of his brain-trouble forever. But when he woke next morning, alas! his brain-trouble was with him still, and he felt that no dream kiss would ever cure it—nothing but a real kiss from Alice's own pure lips!

And he rose thinking of Alice, and dressed and breakfasted thinking of her—and how fair she was, and how innocent, and how well and carefully trained up the way she should go—the beau ideal of a wife. . . . Could she possibly care for a shrimp like himself?

For in his love of outward form he could not understand that any woman who had eyes to see should ever quite condone the signs of physical weakness in



SWEET ALICE

man, in favor of any mental gifts or graces whatsoever.

Little Greek that he was, he worshipped the athlete, and opined that all women without exception—all English women especially—must see with the same eyes as himself.

He had once been vain and weak enough to believe in Trilby's love (with a Taffy standing by—a careless, unsusceptible Taffy, who was like unto the gods of Olympus!)—and Trilby had given him up at a word, a hint—for all his frantic clinging.

She would not have given up Taffy, *pour si peu*, had Taffy but lifted a little finger! It is always “just whistle, and I'll come to you, my lad!” with the likes of Taffy . . . but Taffy hadn't even whistled! Yet still he kept thinking of Alice—and he felt he couldn't think of her well enough till he went out for a stroll by himself on a sheep-trimmed down. So he took his pipe and his Darwin, and out he strolled into the early sunshine—up the green Red Lane, past the pretty church, Alice's father's church—and there, at the gate, patiently waiting for his mistress, sat Alice's dog—an old friend of his, whose welcome was a very warm one.

Little Billee thought of Thackeray's lovely poem in *Pendennis*:

“She comes—she's here—she's past!
May heaven go with her! . . .”

Then he and the dog went on together to a little bench on the edge of the cliff—within sight of Alice's

bedroom window. It was called “the Honeymooners' Bench.”

“That look—that look—that look! Ah—but Trilby had looked like that, too! And there are many Taffys in Devon!”

He sat himself down and smoked and gazed at the sea below, which the sun (still in the east) had not yet filled with glare and robbed of the lovely sapphire-blue, shot with purple and dark green, that comes over it now and again of a morning on that most beautiful coast.

There was a fresh breeze from the west, and the long, slow billows broke into creamier foam than ever, which reflected itself as a tender white gleam in the blue concavities of their shining shoreward curves as they came rolling in. The sky was all of turquoise but for the smoke of a distant steamer—a long thin horizontal streak of dun—and there were little brown or white sails here and there, dotting; and the stately ships went on. . . .

Little Billee tried hard to feel all this beauty with his heart as well as his brain—as he had so often done when a boy—and cursed his insensibility out loud for at least the thousand and first time.

Why couldn't these waves of air and water be turned into equivalent waves of sound, that he might feel them through the only channel that reached his emotions! That one joy was still left to him—but, alas! alas! he was only a painter of pictures—and not a maker of music!

He recited “Break, break, break,” to Alice's dog, who loved him, and looked up into his face with sapi-

ent, affectionate eyes—and whose name, like that of so many dogs in fiction and so few in fact, was simply Tray. For Little Billee was much given to monologues out loud, and profuse quotations from his favorite bards.

Everybody quoted that particular poem either mentally or aloud when they sat on that particular bench—except a few old-fashioned people, who still said,

“Roll on, thou deep and dark blue ocean, roll!”

or people of the very highest culture, who only quoted the nascent (and crescent) Robert Browning; or people of no culture at all, who simply held their tongues—and only felt the more!

Tray listened silently.

“Ah, Tray, the best thing but one to do with the sea is to paint it. The next best thing to that is to bathe in it. The best of all is to lie asleep at the bottom. How would *you* like that?”

“‘And on thy ribs the limpet sticks,
And in thy heart the scrawl shall play. . . .’”

Tray’s tail became as a wagging point of interrogation, and he turned his head first on one side and then on the other—his eyes fixed on Little Billee’s, his face irresistible in its genial doggy wistfulness.

“Tray, what a singularly good listener you are—and therefore what singularly good manners you’ve got! I suppose all dogs have!” said Little Billee; and then, in a very tender voice, he exclaimed,

“Alice, Alice, Alice!”

And Tray uttered a soft, cooing, nasal croon in his head register, though he was a barytone dog by nature, with portentous, warlike chest-notes of the jingo order.

“Tray, your mistress is a parson’s daughter, and therefore twice as much of a mystery as any other woman in this puzzling world!

“Tray, if my heart weren’t stopped with wax, like the ears of the companions of Ulysses when they rowed past the sirens—you’ve heard of Ulysses, Tray? he loved a dog—if my heart weren’t stopped with wax, I should be deeply in love with your mistress; perhaps she would marry me if I asked her—there’s no accounting for tastes!—and I know enough of myself to know that I should make her a good husband—that I should make her happy—and I should make two other women happy besides.

“As for myself personally, Tray, it doesn’t very much matter. One good woman would do as well as another, if she’s equally good-looking. You doubt it? Wait till you get a pimple inside your bump—your bump of—wherever you keep your fondnesses, Tray.

“For that’s what’s the matter with me—a pimple—just a little clot of blood at the root of a nerve, and no bigger than a pin’s point!

“That’s a small thing to cause such a lot of wretchedness, and wreck a fellow’s life, isn’t it? Oh, curse it, curse it, curse it—every day and all day long!

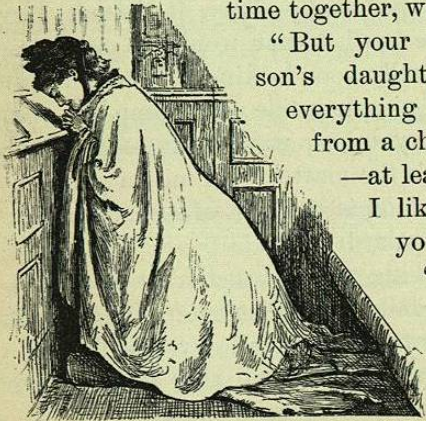
“And just as small a thing will take it away, I’m told!

“Ah! grains of sand are small things—and so are

diamonds! But diamond or grain of sand, only Alice has got that small thing! Alice alone, in all the world, has got the healing touch for me now; the hands, the lips, the eyes! I know it—I feel it! I dreamed it last night! She looked me well in the face, and took my hand—both hands—and kissed me, eyes and mouth, and told me how she loved me. Ah! what a dream it was! And my little clot melted away like a snowflake on the lips, and I was my old self again, after many years—and all through that kiss of a pure woman.

“I’ve never been kissed by a pure woman in my life—never! except by my dear mother and sister; and mothers and sisters don’t count, when it comes to kissing.

“Ah! sweet physician that she is, and better than all! It will all come back again with a rush, just as I dreamed, and we will have a good time together, we three! . . .



“MAY HEAVEN GO WITH HER!”

“But your mistress is a parson’s daughter, and believes everything she’s been taught from a child, just as you do—at least, I hope so. And I like her for it—and you too.

“She has believed her father—will she ever believe me, who think so differently? And if she does,

will it be good for her?—and then, where will her father come in?

“Oh! it’s a bad thing to live, and no longer believe and trust in your father, Tray! to doubt either his honesty or his intelligence. For he (with your mother to help) has taught you all the best he knows, if he has been a good father—till some one else comes and teaches you better—or worse!

“And then, what are you to believe of what good still remains of all that early teaching—and how are you to sift the wheat from the chaff? . . .

“Kneel undisturbed, fair saint! I, for one, will never seek to undermine thy faith in any father, on earth or above it!

“Yes, there she kneels in her father’s church, her pretty head bowed over her clasped hands, her cloak and skirts falling in happy folds about her: I see it all!

“And underneath, that poor, sweet, soft, pathetic thing of flesh and blood, the eternal woman—great heart and slender brain—forever enslaved or enslaving, never self-sufficing, never free . . . that dear, weak, delicate shape, so cherishable, so perishable, that I’ve had to paint so often, and know so well by heart! and love . . . ah, how I love it! Only painter-fellows and sculptor-fellows can ever quite know the fulness of that pure love.

“There she kneels and pours forth her praise or plaint, meekly and duly. Perhaps it’s for me she’s praying!

“‘Leave thou thy sister when she prays.’

“She believes her poor little prayer will be heard

and answered somewhere up aloft. The impossible will be done. She wants what she wants so badly, and prays for it so hard.

"She believes—she believes—what *doesn't* she believe, Tray?

"The world was made in six days. It is just six thousand years old. Once it all lay smothered under rain-water for many weeks, miles deep, because there were so many wicked people about somewhere down in Judee, where they didn't know everything! A costly kind of clearance! And then there was Noah, who *wasn't* wicked, and his most respectable family, and his ark—and Jonah and his whale—and Joshua and the sun, and what not. I remember it all, you see, and, oh! such wonderful things that have happened since! And there's everlasting agony for those who don't believe as she does; and yet she is happy; and good, and very kind; for the mere thought of any live creature in pain makes her wretched!

"After all, if she believes in me, she'll believe in anything; let her!

"Indeed, I'm not sure that it's not rather ungainly for a pretty woman *not* to believe in all these good old cosmic taradiddles, as it is for a pretty child not to believe in Little Red Riding-hood, and Jack and the Beanstalk, and Morgiana and the Forty Thieves; we learn them at our mother's knee, and how nice they are! Let us go on believing them as long as we can, till the child grows up and the woman dies and it's all found out.

"Yes, Tray, I will be dishonest for her dear sake. I will kneel by her side, if ever I have the happy chance,

and ever after, night and morning, and all day long on Sundays if she wants me to! What will I *not* do for that one pretty woman who believes in *me*? I will respect even *that* belief, and do my little best to keep it alive forever. It is much too precious an earthly boon for *me* to play ducks and drakes with. . . .

"So much for Alice, Tray—your sweet mistress and mine.

"But then, there's Alice's papa—and that's another pair of sleeves, as we say in France.

"Ought one ever to play at make-believe with a full-grown man for any consideration whatever—even though he be a parson, and a possible father-in-law? *There's* a case of conscience for you!

"When I ask him for his daughter, as I must, and he asks me for my profession of faith, as he will, what can I tell him? The truth?

"But then, what will *he* say? What allowances will *he* make for a poor little weak-kneed, well-meaning waif of a painter-fellow like me, whose only choice lay between Mr. Darwin and the Pope of Rome, and who has chosen once and forever—and that long ago—before he'd ever even heard of Mr. Darwin's name.

"Besides, why should he make allowances for me? I don't for him. I think no more of a parson than he does of a painter-fellow—and that's precious little, I'm afraid.

"What will he think of a man who says:

"'Look here! the God of your belief isn't mine and never will be—but I love your daughter, and she loves me, and I'm the only man to make her happy!'

"He's no Jephthah; he's made of flesh and blood,

although he's a parson — and loves his daughter as much as Shylock loved his.

“Tell me, Tray—thou that livest among parsons—what man, not being a parson himself, can guess how a parson would think, an average parson, confronted by such a poser as that?”

“Does he, dare he, *can* he ever think straight or simply on any subject as any other man thinks, hedged in as he is by so many limitations?”

“He is as shrewd, vain, worldly, self-seeking, ambitious, jealous, censorious, and all the rest, as you or I, Tray—for all his Christian profession—and just as fond of his kith and kin!”

“He is considered a gentleman—which perhaps you and I are not—unless we happen to behave as such; it is a condition of his noble calling. Perhaps it's in order to become a gentleman that he's become a parson! It's about as short a royal road as any to that enviable distinction—as short almost as her Majesty's commission, and much safer, and much less expensive—within reach of the sons of most fairly successful butchers and bakers and candlestick-makers.

“While still a boy he has bound himself irrevocably to certain beliefs, which he will be paid to preserve and preach and enforce through life, and act up to through thick and thin—at all events, in the eyes of others—even his nearest and dearest—even the wife of his bosom.

“They are his bread and butter, these beliefs—and a man mustn't quarrel with his bread and butter. But a parson must quarrel with those who don't believe as he tells them!”



“‘SO MUCH FOR ALICE, TRAY’”

“Yet a few years' thinking and reading and experience of life, one would suppose, might possibly just shake his faith a little (just as though, instead of being parson, he had been tinker, tailor, soldier, sailor, gentleman, apothecary, ploughboy, thief), and teach him that many of these beliefs are simply childish—and some of them very wicked indeed—and most immoral.

“It is very wicked and most immoral to believe, or affect to believe, and tell others to believe, that the unseen, unspeakable, unthinkable Immensity we're all part and parcel of, source of eternal, infinite, inde-

structible life and light and might, is a kind of wrathful, glorified, and self-glorifying ogre in human shape, with human passions, and most inhuman hates—who suddenly made us out of nothing, one fine day—just for a freak—and made us so badly that we fell the next—and turned us adrift the day after—damned us from the very beginning—*ab ovo—ab ovo usque ad malum*—ha, ha!—and ever since! never gave us a chance!

“All-merciful Father, indeed! Why, the Prince of Darkness was an angel in comparison (and a gentleman into the bargain).

“Just think of it, Tray—a finger in every little paltry pie—an eye and an ear at every key-hole, even that of the larder, to catch us tripping, and find out if we’re praising loud enough, or grovelling low enough, or fasting hard enough—poor god-forsaken worms!

“And if we’re naughty and disobedient, everlasting torment for us; torture of so hideous a kind that *we* wouldn’t inflict it on the basest criminal, not for one single moment!

“Or else, if we’re good and do as we are bid, an eternity of bliss so futile, so idle, and so tame that we couldn’t stand it for a week, but for thinking of its one horrible alternative, and of our poor brother for ever and ever roasting away, and howling for the drop of water he never gets.

“Everlasting flame, or everlasting dishonor—nothing between!

“Isn’t it ludicrous as well as pitiful—a thing to make one snigger through one’s tears? Isn’t it a grievous sin to believe in such things as these, and go

about teaching and preaching them, and being paid for it—a sin to be heavily chastised, and a shame? What a legacy!

“They were shocking bad artists, those conceited, narrow-minded Jews, those poor old doting monks and priests and bigots of the grewsome, dark age of faith! They couldn’t draw a bit—no perspective, no *chiaro-oscuro*; and it’s a woful image they managed to evolve for us out of the depths of their fathomless ignorance, in their zeal to keep us off all the forbidden fruit we’re all so fond of, because we were built like that! And by whom? By our Maker, I suppose (who also made the forbidden fruit, and made it very nice—and put it so conveniently for you and me to see and smell and reach, Tray—and sometimes even pick, alas!).

“And even at that it’s a failure. Only the very foolish little birds are frightened into good behavior. The naughty ones laugh and wink at each other, and pull out its hair and beard when nobody’s looking, and build their nests out of the straw it’s stuffed with (the naughty little birds in black, especially), and pick up what they want under its very nose, and thrive uncommonly well; and the good ones fly away out of sight; and some day, perhaps, find a home in some happy, useful father-land far away, where the Father isn’t a bit like this. Who knows?

“And I’m one of the good little birds, Tray—at least, I hope so. And that unknown Father lives in me whether I will or no, and I love Him whether He be or not, just because I can’t help it, and with the best and bravest love that can be—the perfect love

that believeth no evil, and seeketh no reward, and casteth out fear. For I'm His father as much as He's mine, since I've conceived the thought of Him after my own fashion!

"And He lives in you too, Tray—you and all your kind. Yes, good dog, you king of beasts, I see it in your eyes. . . .

"Ah, bon Dieu Père, le Dieu des bonnes gens! Oh! if we only knew for *certain*, Tray! what martyrdom would we not endure, you and I, with a happy smile and a grateful heart—for sheer *love* of such a father! How little should *we* care for the things of this earth!

"But the poor parson?

"He must willy-nilly go on believing, or affecting to believe, just as he is told, *word for word*, or else good-bye to his wife and children's bread and butter, his own preferment, perhaps even his very gentility—that gentility of which his Master thought so little, and he and his are apt to think so much—with possibly the Archbishopric of Canterbury at the end of it, the bâton de maréchal that lies in every clerical knapsack.

"What a temptation! one is but human!

"So how can he be honest without believing certain things, to believe which (without shame) one must be as simple as a little child; as, by-the-way, he is so cleverly told to be in these matters, and so cleverly tells us—and so seldom is himself on any other matter whatever—his own interests, other people's affairs, the world, the flesh, and the devil! And that's clever of him too. . . .

"And if he chooses to be as simple as a little child,

why shouldn't I treat him as a little child, for his own good, and fool him to the top of his little bent for his dear daughter's sake, that I may make her happy, and thereby him too?

"And if he's *not* quite so simple as all that, and makes artful little compromises with his conscience—for a good purpose, of course—why shouldn't I make artful little compromises with mine, and for a better purpose still, and try to get what I want in the way *he* does? I want to marry his daughter far worse than he can ever want to live in a palace, and ride in a carriage and pair with a mitre on the panels.

"If he *cheats*, why shouldn't I cheat too?

"If *he* cheats, he cheats everybody all round—the wide, wide world, and something wider and higher still that can't be measured, something in himself. *I* only cheat *him*!

"*If* he cheats, he cheats for the sake of very worldly things indeed—tithes, honors, influence, power, authority, social consideration, and respect—not to speak of bread and butter! *I* only cheat for the love of a lady fair—and cheating for cheating, I like my cheating best.

"So, whether he cheats or not, I'll—

"Confound it! what would old Taffy do in such a case, I wonder? . . .

"Oh, bother! it's no good wondering what old Taffy would do.

"Taffy never wants to marry *anybody's* daughter; he doesn't even want to paint her! He only wants to paint his beastly ragamuffins and thieves and drunkards, and be left alone.