

Forrest Reid



*Young Tom,
or Very Mixed
Company*

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PART ONE

THE FRIENDS

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CHAPTER I

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“Take your hands out of your pockets and don’t stand there dreaming,” had been Daddy’s farewell words. Spoken in a distinctly impatient voice too, so that Tom, while he waved good-bye and watched the car receding down the drive, felt both surprised and annoyed. Yet these same words when pronounced by Mother (as they usually were about fifty times a day), never annoyed him in the least. Coming from Daddy—who didn’t even practise what he preached—and above all coming in that irritable tone, they were quite another thing; therefore, having withdrawn his hands in token of obedience, Tom felt justified, immediately afterwards, in putting them back again. True, this gesture of independence was largely directed at William, whose self-righteous and reproving gaze he perceived to be fixed upon him. William said nothing, but he shook his head pessimistically before proceeding with his work. William was clipping edges—and no doubt clipping them very neatly—yet Tom didn’t see why that need make him look so dourly conscious of possessing every virtue—all the less attractive ones at any rate. He ought to have looked like Adam (see *Paradise Lost*—Mother’s recollected version of it), and he didn’t. In fact, Tom could imagine some thoughtless young green shoot, filled with an ardent zest of life, wriggling excitedly up through the brown soil, catching one glimpse of William’s sour countenance, and hastily retreating underground again.

The strange thing was that nothing of the kind happened. If anywhere, it was in Tom's own private garden that plants exhibited signs of nervousness. The struggle for life there was bitter in the extreme, and not a few had given it up as hopeless, while the survivors hung limp and melancholy heads. Turning to this questionable oasis now, he could not help feeling that last night's attentions had only increased its resemblance to a violated grave, and he stooped to pull out a weed, and to press down the earth round a recently transplanted orange lily. The officious William was watching him, of course, and very soon came his grumpy counsel: "You let them alone, Master Tom, and don't be always worretin' and pokin' at them. Plants is like men; they can't abide naggin' and fussin'.... When I was a wee lad, no bigger'n what you are now, I'd have had that patch lovely."

"So *you* say!" Tom retorted, though a sense of justice presently compelled him to add; "Well, maybe you would."

For though William might be a cantankerous, disagreeable old man, for ever grouching and complaining, all his surroundings—flowers, shrubs, paths, and lawn—were undeniable and brilliant testimonials to his efficiency. On this morning of the last day of June the garden was looking its very best—a wonderful blaze of colour—and deliberately Tom inhaled its fragrance—the varied scents of stocks, roses, mignonette, and sweet-briar—all mixed together in one aromatic medley.

It was going to be very hot later, he thought; for even now, early as it was, he could feel the sun pleasantly warm on his bare head and neck and hands, and penetrating through his grey flannel jacket and tennis shirt. Two young

thrushes were swinging up and down on a slender prunus branch as if it were a see-saw. He tried to draw William's attention to them, but William, continuing his slow methodical progress with the edge-clippers, would not even look, merely grunted. That was because he thought birds received a great deal too much encouragement in this garden: if he had had his way he would have shot them, like Max Sabine, or else covered up everything eatable with nets.

The abundance of birds was partly due to the glen beside the house, and partly to the fact that Daddy took an interest in them, hung up coconuts for them, supplied them with baths, and fed them all through the winter. Tom liked birds too, but he very much preferred animals. Doctor Macrory, to be sure, had told him he would like penguins, because penguins were much the same as dogs, came when you called them, and allowed you to pat them on their broad solid backs—good substantial thumps, which they accepted in the proper spirit. But he had never seen a penguin, except a stuffed one in Queen's University Museum, and even Doctor Macrory thought they might be troublesome to keep as pets unless you happened to be a fishmonger....

Suddenly there was a tapping on the window behind him, which he knew, without turning round, to be a signal from Mother. The signal was to remind him that he was supposed to be on his way to the Rectory, where he did lessons with Althea Sabine, under the supervision of Miss Sabine, who was Althea's Aunt Rachel, and the Rector's sister.

But there was no hurry; in fact he didn't know why Miss Sabine wanted him at the Rectory at all this morning, for

she had set them no lessons. This meant that the long summer holidays had already begun; and whatever she had to say to him she might just as well have said yesterday. Anyhow, it would be for the last time; since he was going to school after the summer.

That had been decided at Miss Sabine's own suggestion. She had called specially to talk the matter over with Daddy and Mother, and apparently her report had pleased them, though what she had actually said he did not know, except that she regarded him as "quite a talented little boy". He would not have known even this had not Mother let it out inadvertently, for to himself Miss Sabine had always expressed her approval in a very brief and dry fashion. Yet somehow he liked her dryness, and liked doing lessons with her; and though she had never told him so, and never showed it openly, he knew she knew this and that it pleased her.

Miss Sabine kept house for her brother, there being no Mrs. Sabine. Poor Mrs. Sabine, indeed, was so much a thing of the past that Althea had once told him her mother had died before she was born. Tom had puzzled over this, having heard of a similar phenomenon in the case of a sheep who had been struck by lightning. But Althea had not mentioned a thunder-storm, and delicacy had prevented him from doing so either. Mother, when he repeated the story at home, declared it was all nonsense....

A second and more imperative tap on the window at this point interrupted his meditations; so he left William and the thrushes, and proceeded on down the short drive as far as

the gate, where he found Doctor Macrory's Barker waiting for him.

The gate was shut, but Roger or Pincher would easily have found a way in; it was just like lazy old Barker not to bother. "Take your hands out of your pockets and don't stand there dreaming!" Tom told him sharply, but Barker only wagged a stumpy tail.

It was largely his fashion of mooching along, never in a hurry, never excited, never demonstrative beyond a tail-wag—which he made as brief as possible—that gave Barker his sluggish and slouchy appearance. He was the most phlegmatic and independent dog Tom had ever met. Of course, he was old—older even than Roger, the collie from Denny's farm, though he too was well on the other side of middle-age—and much older than Pincher, the Sabines' rough-haired fox-terrier. Indeed, he was old enough to be Pincher's great-grandfather, Tom supposed. All three were his friends, and spent a considerable portion of their time with him. It was their sole point of union, however, for they never dreamed of associating together in his absence. Meeting them occasionally on his daily rounds, Doctor Macrory would stop to discuss the "Dogs' Club", as he called it, and question Tom as to their several breeds—a joke which had begun to pall slightly, though it was still received with invariable politeness. They might not be show dogs, Tom thought, but he couldn't see why it should be less aristocratic to be descended from a lot of ancient families than from only one. This view Doctor Macrory himself admitted to be reasonable. And after all, it was his own dog Barker who required most explanation, though you could

easily see he was an Old-English sheepdog from his face, his big clumsy paws, and his rough woolly coat of several shades of grey, both in colour and texture remarkably like the hearthrug Mother had made last winter for the study. The three were as different in temperament as they were in their coats. Pincher was restless, for ever getting into scrapes, excitable, and possessed of a sort of primitive, errand-boy sense of humour, vulgar and extremely knowing. Roger was emotional and demonstrative; swift, graceful, lithe; with a tail like a waving ostrich plume. Roger was Tom's darling, and they could sit side by side for a long time with their arms round each other, immersed in a warm bath of affection, while Barker regarded their sloppiness with indifference, and Pincher with impatience....

All the same, it was Barker who was at the gate now, and he wanted Tom to come down to the river. He nearly always did, for that matter, however busy you might be with more important things. "Can't you see I'm going to the Rectory?" Tom asked him; and Barker looked disappointed.

This, Tom felt, was understandable, for it was just the right kind of morning for the river, and certainly not one to be wasted indoors. The myriad voices of Nature were calling—whispering in the trees that overhung and cast deep pools of shadow on the sunlit road—calling more loudly and imperatively from bird and beast and insect. Everywhere was life and the eager joy of life. The very air seemed alive, and from the earth a living strength was pushing upwards and outwards—visible in each separate blade of grass and delicate meadow flower no less than in the great chestnut-tree standing at the corner where the road turned.

From the tangled hawthorn hedge, though its bloom had fallen, came a fresh, cool, green smell. Unfortunately Tom and Barker, tramping along the dusty highway, were on the wrong side of it. On the other side, as they both knew, far more was happening. On the other side was a ditch, where, in a jungle of nettles, vetches, and wild parsnips, young thrushes and blackbirds and sparrows would be hiding. A rook flying out of the chestnut-tree cawed a greeting as he passed over their heads. Two white cabbage butterflies, circling about each other in their strange fashion, flitted across the road and were lost to sight. Barker, pausing by a stile, again mentioned the river.

“No,” said Tom emphatically; and after a moment, as a somewhat feeble consolation: “Anyhow, what would we do?”

“Fish for stones,” Barker replied promptly.

But Tom had guessed he would say this, and remained unmoved. “Yes, *you’d* fish for them, and I’d sit on the bank and get splashed all over with mud and water.”

Barker said no more, not really being importunate. It was strange, all the same, that this fishing for stones should so appeal to him. It had no charm for the other dogs; they never even attempted it; yet Barker could spend happy hours merely dragging stone after stone from the river bed, and dropping each one carefully beside Tom for the latter to arrange in a heap. It was a dirty job, too, because the river bed was soft, and Barker would emerge from it, a large stone in his mouth, and his face so plastered with mud as to be unrecognizable. He must at the same time have swallowed quantities, besides getting it into his eyes and nostrils; yet this did not seem to trouble him, and he would

go on as long as Tom's patience lasted. What the latter couldn't understand was why he should have to be present at all. There was nothing to hinder Barker now, for instance, from going down to the river by himself, and spending the rest of the morning fishing for stones; yet Tom knew he wouldn't; and he was right; Barker accompanied him as far as the Rectory gate, and then turned and trotted off at his customary pace, unvarying as the wheels of a clock. But he went in the direction of his own home, not of the river.

CHAPTER II

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The Rectory hall door was open when Tom reached it, so he walked straight on in without ringing the bell. In the dining-room, where they did lessons, he found both Miss Sabine and Althea seated at the table, snipping off the tops and tails of gooseberries. Mother thought there must be foreign, probably Spanish, blood in the Sabines, which was what made them all so vivid-looking. At breakfast this morning she had said so, and also that there was something masculine about Miss Sabine's whole style and appearance, due partly, perhaps, to the way she dressed. Tom, however, could see nothing masculine about her, unless it was that Miss Sabine looked big and strong and had a tiny black moustache. In every way she suggested strength—strength of character, strength of mind, strength of purpose. Her skin was almost swarthy, her hair jet black, and when she was really angry, as he had seen her on one memorable occasion with Max, her eyes literally flashed.

“Good morning, Tom,” she now greeted him, in her firm deep voice; while Althea said “Hello!” and giggled.

Tom returned Miss Sabine's “good morning”, but took no notice of Althea, whose habit of giggling at nothing displeased him. Althea, at any rate, was vivid enough, with cheeks like apples, and her hair hanging down in sleek black pigtailed. At the moment, however, he was much less interested either in her, or in Mother's discoveries, than in a row of brand-new books, with brilliant bindings and gilt edges, spread out in the middle of the table. Having cast a

rapid glance at these, he determinedly looked away, and coloured when he saw Althea watching him with a kind of sly amusement. It was very like her, he thought: she was always amused when you found yourself in some delicate situation and didn't quite know what to do. Not that she was a bad kid on the whole. There was at least nothing mean or treacherous about her, as there was about Max....

"I expect you've been wondering, Tom, why I asked you to come back this morning," Miss Sabine said. "It was simply because those books didn't arrive till after you had gone yesterday, though the man in the shop promised faithfully to send them out in plenty of time. I want you to choose one as a small memento; or perhaps I should say a prize, for of course it is really that."

Tom's blush deepened, and Althea began to hum a little tune, so that he could have kicked her. Nevertheless he managed to jerk out: "Thanks awfully, Miss Sabine."

"Well, you'd better have a look at them," Miss Sabine observed, since his shyness seemed to have reduced him to immobility. "You mayn't like *any* of them, for I could only guess; so if there's some other book you'd prefer instead, I hope you'll tell me."

After this she tactfully resumed her gooseberry-snipping, nor did she once glance at him while he was making his choice.

The first book he took up was Macaulay's *Lays of Ancient Rome*, the only volume he had already rejected in his mind. But Althea, who had *no* tact, was still covertly watching him, and he turned his back upon her.

There were more than a dozen books to choose from, and Miss Sabine must have gone to some trouble in selecting them. Here were *The Talisman* and *David Copperfield*; *Huckleberry Finn*, and *The Golden Treasury* bound in leather; *Tom Brown's Schooldays*, *Westward Ho!*, *Grimm's Fairy Tales*, *King Solomon's Mines*, and *Treasure Island*. Each attracted him; but he already possessed a tattered copy of *Grimm*, and the attraction of *The Talisman* and *Westward Ho!* was somewhat faint. *The Golden Treasury*, moreover, was poetry, though if it had been Edgar Allan Poe's poetry he might have taken it. As it was, he lifted each book in turn, glanced through it, and looked at the pictures if there were any. But this was an act of politeness pure and simple, for very quickly he had made up his mind that the choice lay between two books only—*Nat the Naturalist*, by George Manville Fenn, and *Curiosities of Natural History*, by Frank Buckland. He would have decided on the latter at once had it not been in four volumes—First Series, Second Series, Third Series, and Fourth Series—therefore it might seem greedy to choose it when all the others were in one volume only. True, the *Curiosities* volumes were less sumptuously bound, and had neither gilt nor olivine edges. If you took them individually, they looked less expensive than the others, and it suddenly occurred to him that very likely they *were* to be regarded as separate books, so he lifted the first and said: "I'd like this, please."

"Well, I think you've made an excellent choice," Miss Sabine agreed, "though I haven't read it myself, and picked it out just because I thought from the title it might interest you."

“But—but—” Tom stammered, for Miss Sabine had drawn all four volumes towards her and was now preparing to write his name in them. Pen in hand she paused, glancing up at him.

“I meant—I thought—there’d be only one,” Tom mumbled in confusion.

Miss Sabine smiled: she understood perfectly. “Oh, that’s all right,” she assured him, looking at him very kindly, and dipping her pen. “They go together: they *are* only one.” And she began her inscription, quite a lengthy one, or so it seemed to Tom, for her writing was very large and black, and sprawled over the whole yellowish end-paper.

“And now,” she said, pressing down the blotting-paper, “there you are. You certainly deserve all four, and if you do as well at school as you have always done with me, I don’t think they’ll be the last prizes you’ll get.”

Tom thanked her once again, beaming all over with a pleasure that lit up like sunshine his plain, freckled, blunt-featured face, and greenish-grey eyes. At the same time he wondered what Althea had got, but did not like to ask since the others had not mentioned it.

Nor, though she accompanied him as far as the garden gate, did Althea mention it when they were alone. “Max is going to camp,” was all she told him. “He didn’t want to, but his form master or somebody wrote to Dad about it, so he won’t be coming home just yet.” Then, as Tom received this information in silence: “I suppose you’re not interested.... I forgot.... You don’t like him much, do you?”

“No,” Tom said.

The remarkable frankness of his agreement did not appear to trouble Althea. "Why?" she asked, without the slightest hint of resentment.

"Because I don't," Tom answered.

Althea was silent for a minute or two, as if mentally turning over this response. He could see, nevertheless, that what she was really searching for was an excuse for pursuing the subject. "I don't think you ought to dislike him," was the very feeble one she eventually found. "I mean—to keep it up in that way. It's wicked."

In spite of his annoyance, Tom laughed. "Do you think he likes *me*?" he said.

"I don't know. I never asked him. But that shouldn't prevent you from setting a good example."

"Yes ...?" He looked at her closely. "Why are you sticking on all this? You don't go in much yourself for setting good examples."

"I can't: I've nobody to set them to," Althea sighed. But curiosity once more prevailed, and she said: "I suppose it has something to do with the Fallon boy—James-Arthur."

Tom flushed hotly. "You can suppose what you like," he retorted, and would have left her abruptly had she not caught him by his jacket.

"Don't be so huffy! I only said I *supposed* it was that. And if you want to know why, it was because I heard Max talking to Dad about it, and telling him you oughtn't to be allowed to be friends with a farm boy.... So you needn't get in a temper as if it was *my* fault.... Aunt Rachel heard him too, and ticked him off for being such a snob."

But Tom by this time had shaken himself free, and with a brief "Good-bye," he made his escape, leaving Althea standing at the gate gazing after him.

CHAPTER III

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With the four precious red volumes under his arm he hurried down the road, eager to display them at home. But when he reached the church, a squat little grey stone building with a square tower, he paused. The door was wide open, and he remembered he had never been inside on a weekday, when it must be more interesting, or at any rate different. On Sundays he had to sit in a pew from which he could see little except the upper parts of the congregation, and the whole of Mr. Sabine in his white surplice. Even the stained-glass window was at the opposite side from where he and Daddy and Mother sat, so that he had never been able to examine it closely. This was his chance, for though somebody of course must be inside, it would only be Mrs. Fallon, James-Arthur's mother.

He swung himself over the low, moss-lined wall, and crossed the grass between green graves and dark cypress-trees. Sure enough, Mrs. Fallon emerged at that very moment, carrying a bucket of slops, which she emptied on to the grass. She was obviously not expecting visitors, for her petticoats were extremely tucked up, revealing quite a lot of grey woollen stocking above two stout black boots, large enough to have been James-Arthur's own. Also her head was tied up, like a dumpling, in a blue duster with white spots.

"Good morning, Mrs. Fallon," Tom said, approaching her from behind, so that Mrs. Fallon, who had neither heard nor seen him, jumped.

“Good gracious, Master Tom! You give me quite a turn!”

“Sorry,” he apologized. “I didn’t mean to. May I go in to the church, Mrs. Fallon—just for a few minutes—unless you’ve finished and want to lock up?”

But Mrs. Fallon hadn’t finished. “You’re welcome, dear,” she told him, “and if it’s the tower, the door’s not locked, you’ve only to push it.”

Tom thanked her. “It was really the window I was thinking of,” he explained, “but I’d like to go up the tower too.”

“You’ll not be fiddling with the bell-rope, then, will you, like a good boy?”

He promised, and went in, followed by Mrs. Fallon, who had refilled her bucket from a tap beside the porch.

He went straight to the stained-glass window, through which the sun was pouring, casting warm splashes of coloured light on the whitewashed pillars and on the floor and opposite wall. The window showed an old man wading across a river, carrying a small boy on his shoulders. The man, with his white beard and his staff, Tom knew to be Saint Christopher, and the small boy to be Christ. He also knew that Christ was growing heavier and heavier all the time, though of course the artist could not show this in his picture.

He admired the window for several minutes, trying to remember how the story had ended: then he drew closer that he might read the tablet below, which said that it had been put up by loving grandparents in memory of their grandson, Ralph Seaford, who had died at the age of ten years, and was buried with his parents and infant sister in the churchyard outside.

“It’s all very sad, isn’t it?” Mrs. Fallen called out cheerfully from the chancel steps, where she was on her knees scrubbing them. But it did not sadden Tom; he only wondered if Ralph Seaford had been fond of the story of Saint Christopher; which in turn led him to wonder what kind of boy he had been. At any rate the old people must have thought a lot of him....

Speculating as to whether Granny in similar circumstances would have put up a window to *him*, he crossed the church, and passing behind the pulpit opened the door leading to the tower. It was not a high tower, and a narrow, winding flight of stone steps soon brought him to a kind of loft, or small square room, in the middle of which the bell-rope hung down stiffly like a giant’s pigtail. There were little windows—or rather slits in the wall, for they had no glass—which let in a certain amount of light; and far above, in the dusk beneath the rafters, he could see the bell itself.

The tower and the bell reminded him of a poem which had got Althea into endless trouble while they had been learning it. This was because she could never say “bells, bells, bells, bells, bells, bells, bells,” without giggling; and that was only seven times, and once or twice it came oftener. Miss Sabine used to get furious, and Tom, too, had thought Althea very silly: for the repetitions were part of the tune, and the tune was part of the poem. He himself liked it, and had even tried to sing it. Unsuccessfully, it is true; because for some strange reason it wasn’t that kind of music. He could sing it a little in his mind, but he couldn’t sing either it or *The Raven* out aloud; though when nobody was listening he could and often did sing *Annabel Lee*. All

these poems, he was well aware, had been chosen to please *him*; but that was Althea's own fault, because she either never would, or never could, say what she liked....

He gazed up at the bell, hanging motionless and silent beneath the dark rafters framing the roof; and while he did so, slowly it began to take life—the life of a great sleeping, dreaming bat. Yet it was iron—an iron bell—

*Every sound that floats
From the rust within their throats
Is a groan.*

Tom felt a sudden desire to awaken just one of those groans, but he remembered his promise to Mrs. Fallon, so instead began to repeat the poem, at first into himself, but presently in a chant that grew louder and louder.

*And the people—ah, the people—
They that dwell up in the steeple,
All alone....
They are neither man nor woman—
They are neither brute nor human—
They are Ghouls:
And their king it is who tolls;
And he rolls, rolls, rolls, Rolls
A paeon from the bells!
And his merry bosom swells
With the paeon of the bells!
And he dances and he yells;
Keeping time, time, time,
In a sort of Runic rhyme,*