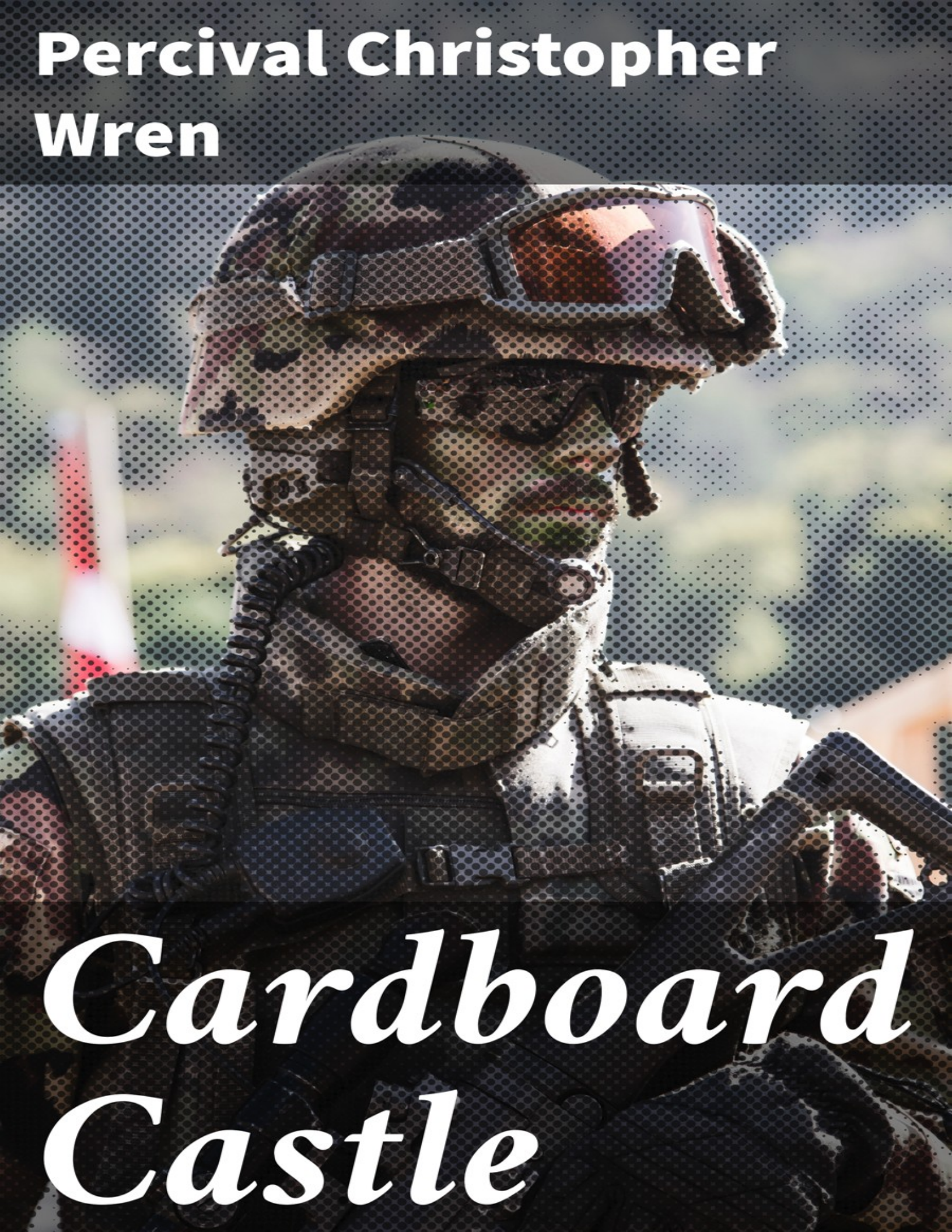
Percival Christopher Wren



Cardboard Castle

Percival Christopher Wren

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I

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I am going to tell this story in my own way, because I hold very firmly the belief that one's own way is the best way. And if further reason were needed, there is surely an excellent one in the fact that I know of no other. From which you will gather the undeniable fact that I am not a practised writer; not a trained and experienced novelist, equipped with a classical or even a recognized technique.

But I have a story to tell, and am competent to tell it. Moreover, there is no one else in a position to tell the story as completely and accurately as I can.

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No one, not even his parents, knew and understood young Anthony Calderton better than I did, and I very much doubt if anyone understood him nearly as well.

And yet, as will be seen, this may not be saying a very great deal. I knew him because, as his tutor, I spent practically the whole of every day with him for several years. For Anthony being what he was, and I taking the view of my duties and responsibilities that I did, I was not content merely to spend lesson-time with him. In point of fact, I regarded lesson-time as perhaps the least valuable part of the day. Certainly far less important than the leisure time we spent together—talking, walking, riding, reading, pursuing

our hobbies and, more particularly, young Anthony's amazing hobby of dramatization.

Doubtless you will at once think—a thing that was often actually said to me—that the boy would be only too glad to get away from his tutor as soon as lessons were over, and that if he worked with me from ten till one and again from five till six, he would see and hear as much of me as he wanted, or more, and be only too thankful to get away from me for the rest of the time.

This, however, was not the case, as it would have been with the normal boy.

But Anthony was not a normal boy.

He loathed my leaving him, as sometimes I was compelled to do, even for an hour, much less for a day or a week-end. He hated saying good night and going to bed; and he knocked at my bedroom door—a quaint little figure with tousled hair and big haunted eyes—in his pyjamas, dressing-gown and bedroom slippers, in the early morning, when the footman brought my tea.

Doubtless you will also think—a thing which, on more than one occasion, was also said to me—that I should have got sick, sorry and tired of the sight and sound of the boy, and been only too glad to leave him to his devices for the afternoon, and again as soon as his evening lesson was completed.

But neither was that the case; for on the rare occasions when Anthony was not with me, I missed him, found myself at a loose end, and much as a dog-lover feels who has to take his usual country walk without his dog.

Not that there was that sort of relationship between the boy and myself; no throwing of metaphorical sticks or stones for him to run after; no benevolent or condescending pats upon the head; no talking down; no sitting upon stiles while the less intelligent animal gambolled about my feet. Nothing of that sort. I merely mean that when he wasn't with me, I missed him so much that the walk was a lonely grind taken conscientiously for fresh air and exercise.

Not only did I miss his company but his conversation; his unusual, remarkable and most interesting thoughts, ideas and fancies—especially fancies—expressed in that somewhat old-fashioned but charming and delightful way that was the result of years of unguided browsing in his father's library, and the reading of books that rarely come the way of boys of his age.

He had had an admirable governess, of whom more anon, whose excellent influence upon his then baby mind had given it a noticeable twist and, in one minor direction, a strange little kink. I think that is the best word, for it would give a wrong impression if I said that she had warped his mind.

And what an amazing and hugely disproportionate effect, not only upon his own life, but upon those of others, was that strange little kink to have.

What she had done, in point of fact, was to give his perfectly sound mind a "King Charles's head"—more than figuratively. To the extent that she had done this, young Anthony departed from the normal, though when he came into my hands, at the age of fourteen years or so, it was some time before I discovered this curious idiosyncrasy

which was to have such dramatic and far-reaching consequences.

Now I have already, and before mentioning this peculiarity, admitted that Anthony was not normal.

How difficult it is to say exactly what one means. If there be a true word in the jest that speech is given us for the concealment of our thoughts, there is a far truer one in the statement that speech is a most inadequate vehicle for the exact conveyance of our meaning.

How shall I express the state and condition of Anthony's mentality? Sane but abnormal? Normal enough, but most unusual? A mind so unusual as to be remarkable; and therefore not a normal mind?

Anyhow, what I can say without danger of being misunderstood, is that Anthony had a beautiful, a lovely mind; that he was brilliantly clever, though I hate the word, for any fool can be "clever"; that he had an acute perceptive brain; that he had a most charming, delightful and engaging nature; that he was infinitely attractive, amusing and intriguing; that he was, with one exception, altogether the nicest, the most lovable personality I have ever known.

Though I am slow in the matter of liking and disliking, cautious in summing up and deciding about a person, I liked him the first time I saw him; liked him very much within a month; soon became exceedingly fond of him; and within the first year of our association, freely and fully admitted that I loved him.

And that was the first time in my life I had admitted such a thing, save for one or two members of my own family.

It is a thing for which I thank God, that Anthony Calderton had wise parents; that his father, albeit a fine flower of the Public School, Sandhurst and Army system, was sufficiently intelligent, broad-minded and perceptive to realize that there are certain rare spirits for whom that system is not suitable; also that his mother had sufficient love, understanding and unselfishness to realize and accept the fact that, greatly as she desired it, Anthony could not and would not go to school.

It must have been a real grief to her, as well as to her husband, that the boy should not follow in the footsteps of his ancestors, sit literally in the seats they had occupied, and emulate their successes or failures in class-room and playing-field.

It was breaking a tradition very dear to them both.

What would have happened to Anthony had his father taken the line that so many soldiers would have taken, and shouted,

“What the Devil! Of course the boy’ll go to Eton. Never heard such damn’ rubbish in my life. They’ll soon knock the nonsense out of him,” I shudder to think, especially had such an attitude been encouraged by a high-spirited, never-heard-such-bosh type of mother, with a yelp of,

“*My* son? Of course he’ll go; and I shall tell his House Master to stand no nonsense. Put him through it. Make a man of him.”

Had such a line been taken with Anthony, it is much more likely that they’d have made a corpse or an idiot of him.

Anthony was fortunate; indeed, he was singularly blessed, in his parents.

Nor, I am glad to say, did he himself, ever, in later life, inveigh against the Public School system simply because it was not the right system for him. He did not proclaim to the world that his was a rotten Public School because it didn't amend and adapt its system to his peculiar requirements; he didn't proclaim, for example, that because he was taught French by an Englishman whose accent was not pure Parisian, the Public School system is an abominable one and stands thereby self-condemned; he did not declare that it is a soul-destroying, character-crushing machine that casts all those unfortunates committed to its care into one uniform mould and, while they are malleable, stamps them with one uniform pattern.

Incidentally I might mention that I heard this view expressed by a visitor on learning that Anthony had been educated by a governess and then by a tutor; and that Anthony thereupon promptly observed that, so long as the mould and the pattern were excellent, admirable and serviceable to their purpose, it did not seem to matter how many people were stamped by it. In fact, the more the merrier.

Such was Anthony's considered opinion; and upon every conceivable subject mentioned by me and other ordinary people in ordinary conversation, he seemed to have a considered opinion, so widely had he read and so incorrigibly was he given to the habit of forming opinions.

At the risk of displaying myself as completely obsessed by the subject of Anthony, I wish to give you a very clear and accurate picture of him, before telling the story in which he played a part so strange, so decisive, so final.

I am describing him at such length because it is important that you should realize not only the fact but the degree, the extent, and the nature of his abnormality.

What is a lunatic, a person who is permanently so “queer” as to be described as insane?

Speaking succinctly and accurately, it is a person who is incapable of distinguishing between fact and fancy.

Personally, I think we sane people are all a little mad; or, to express it otherwise and better, there is some subject on which everyone is more or less mad, generally very much less; and the extent to which we are mad is the extent to which we are unable to differentiate between the facts and our fancies on that particular subject.

Now, how far was Anthony unable to distinguish between reality and make-believe? That was one of the first questions that I asked myself about him; for quite early, indeed by the day after my coming to Calderton, I was struck by his ability to lose himself in the part that he was playing. And Anthony, in spite of all I have said about him, was almost always playing a part and dramatizing himself or the situation.

Doubtless this tendency had been strengthened and increased by the methods followed by his excellent governess who was, very rightly, a great believer in the encouragement of self-expression, and in the use of a child’s natural bent and tastes for the furtherance and encouragement of its activities and the development of its abilities. He loved charades, plays, and make-believe, and she encouraged him to act. He had more than the average child’s love of dressing-up, impersonation, dramatization—

acting, in short—and this had been, as I say, definitely encouraged.

One had to know Anthony well before one knew what he was up to, in what rôle he was behaving; whom he was impersonating, in fact. And one always had a sense of having failed him, of having fallen short of his high expectation and, indeed, trust, if one were stupid, missed one's cue, and responded wrongly, or not at all.

Nor am I in the slightest degree praising myself—indeed I am probably laying myself open to the accusation of being queer and abnormal myself—when I say that Anthony's luck held, at any rate to a small degree, when his parents selected me as his tutor. He would have been nearly as badly off with a bluff, blunt, bulldog-pipe-and-no-nonsense fellow who completely failed to understand him, as he would have been at a Public School with young barbarians at play, and harassed pre-occupied form-masters at work.

The ministrations of the cold-bath-every-morning, sweat-run-every-afternoon, come-off-that-imagination-tripe young man, whether Muscular Christian curate or Rugger Blue and recent graduate, would have reduced Anthony to sullenness—no, never that—but to a withdrawn aloofness and a polite, easy, yet incredibly stubborn refusal to conform.

For, though I never found him so myself, I do not deny that Anthony could be very difficult, nor that, quite frequently, he actually was extremely difficult with people who did not understand him, and whom he did not like.

This naturally led to there being two opinions about him, the opinions of those who really knew him, and of those who thought they did; and from this fact arises the implicit

commendation that those who knew him best loved him most. Inevitably, the better one knew young Anthony Calderton, the more one loved him—loved his very faults.

For he was no angel-child, no adolescent saint. He had a temper; and, personally, I have no use for anybody who hasn't one somewhere concealed about him or her.

He was impish, and could be exceedingly annoying to people who were fools enough to be annoyed by his little jokes at their expense. These amusingly mischievous tricks were often very carefully thought out and most ingenious; and, in conversation, he would often lead one on to commit oneself to some untenable and indefensible statement or theory. I always found these verbal fencing-matches very diverting, and encouraged them, both for Anthony's amusement and my own. At first I was a little puzzled, but soon came to understand that a series of Socratic questions was leading up to some absurd, whimsical, or fantastic conclusion.

And undeniably Anthony was sly; sly in the way that an elf, a gnome, a fairy, is sly, partly self-protectively and partly for secret and inward amusement, the gratification of a love of subtlety and trickery, a baffling but innocent and harmless deviousness.

And now, perhaps, I have given you a pretty fair idea of the complex character of Anthony Calderton, and equally perhaps, I have completely failed to do so; failed to give you an adequate and faithful portrait of a most delightful and charming boy, attractive, original and engaging beyond the ordinary.

I hope I have not quite failed, for I should like you to be in a position to form your own opinion as to the answer to the question concerning him that even now obsesses, intrigues and troubles me.

§ 3

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I find it less easy to tell you about Lady Calderton; not because she was, like her son, a complex personality—in fact, she was a woman of great simplicity of mind and lucidity of soul—but because I cannot profess to be an unbiased chronicler where she is concerned. Difficult as I find it to speak with impartial just accuracy concerning Anthony, it seems impossible for me to do so with regard to his mother.

I loved Anthony long before I really knew his mother, for Anthony had become the absorbing interest of my life before I saw her daily and came to understand her and know her well.

As with the boy, I liked her from the first, and liked her very much before she again went abroad with her husband, leaving Anthony, and virtually Calderton as well, in my charge.

To obtrude here my purely personal and private affairs for a moment, I was, at the time of my going to Calderton, a somewhat idle, somewhat philosophical young man, blessed or cursed with a modest competence; a dilettante dabbler in the Arts, painting a little, composing a little, writing a little;

and an ardent admirer of other arts, in the practice of which I had no ability and in the pursuit of which I had no desire to engage—the dramatic; the poetic; that of sculpture; and so forth.

I had done well on the scholastic side at School and College, leaving the former with a useful scholarship and the latter with a good degree. But at games I was hopeless, and could do nothing at all with a ball, large or small, save despise it heartily. I hated cricket, disliked both forms of football, intensely detested golf and tennis, and refused to learn to play hockey.

In a vain endeavour to mitigate the contempt which this confession will rightly bring upon me, I claim that a long and successful fight at Prep School, Public School, and College, against the tyranny of the Ball, connotes a certain tenacity and stubbornness of character. In point of fact, a humorous or facetious schoolmaster, in writing one of his annual reports, stated concerning me,

“He is a boy of much character, chiefly bad; a boy of great promise—and small performance; a trying boy who never tries.”

But he was one of those excellent fellows who, doubtless rightly, judge a boy by his prowess and performance on the playing-fields, and the value of his contribution to the winning of those cups and pots that so justly are the honour and glory of his House.

Lest you get an even lower estimate of me than I deserve, I would fain add that, in spite of my congenital inability with the Ball, I take a great deal of walking exercise, and think nothing of doing my hundred and fifty miles a

week when on one of my frequent walking tours. Also that I am a pretty fair performer with the foil and *épée*, a star pupil of Bertrand's, and more than once a finalist in those interesting early morning encounters in Lincoln's Inn Fields.

Also, I am blessed with an uncle who, on the tacit assumption that I am his heir, sees to it that I do not go to utter moral rack and ruin through my penchant for the idle and contemplative life, my preference for the library rather than the dusty arena, and my inclination to be what he sometimes calls a loafer, sometimes a wretched book-worm, and again, a worthless young man-about-town, according to the severity of his rheumatism.

I visit Uncle in the swiftly dissolving privacies and fastnesses of the Albany for the good of my soul and my pocket; and because, in spite of his insulting tirades, I am very fond of him.

To him I owe it—and for this I am more deeply in his debt than for anything else—that I came to Calderton as Anthony's tutor. In spite of the trite banality of its truism, how endlessly intrusive and attractive is speculation on the immensity of the results that ensue from the smallest acts, events and deeds, the tremendous effects of what are apparently the tiniest causes; as though the dropping of a pin caused thunderous reverberations that echo round the world.

Had not my uncle's man Judd mentioned that the stock of private writing-paper was running low, and had it not been a fine morning, he would not have gone shopping and done what he rarely did—lunched at his Club, the Marlborough, and there encountered General Sir Arthur Calderton, an

Eton contemporary and old friend of his; and had not the General mentioned the business that brought him to town, that of visiting a scholastic agency, who might be able to recommend a suitable tutor for his son, I should never have known Anthony Calderton, nor had the privilege and joy of knowing and perhaps helping his mother at a time of direst distress, fear and horror. So slight, so tiny, we may reflect, are the events, the accidents in fact, that change our whole lives and shape our ends.

Wiser, doubtless, is the conclusion that whatever happens was ordained, and was written in the Book of Fate since Time began. (Item, and further reflection for the weak-minded, or such as desire to become so: When *did* Time begin?)

Anyhow, it was ‘written on my forehead.’

Uncle rang me up at my tiny though extremely comfortable flat, and bade me dine in Albany with him on the morrow. At dinner he informed me that I was to proceed at my, or his, earliest convenience, by train, to a place called Calderton, where I should be met and driven to Calderton House, the residence of General Sir Arthur Calderton; and should there take up my residence as tutor to his son Anthony.

“High time you had another job, young man,” growled my uncle, “and a job in the country, too. Do you all the good in the world. Lucky to get the chance. Lovely place. Incidentally, I told Calderton that he’d be lucky too, so don’t let me down.”

I agreed at once, for I love swift unexpected ventures and adventures such as this ‘leaping-up,’ as my beloved sister

and I used to call it at home, and doing something unpremeditated and, preferably, silly.

And so, some two or three days later, at four o'clock on a beautiful afternoon, I got out of the train at a little wayside station that bore the name that was to become to me the most important in the world, Calderton, and saw, standing on the tiny platform, an elegant and most attractive female figure.

A primrose by a river's brim, a yellow primrose was to me at that moment. But soon it was something more, for as I languidly superintended the extraction of minor baggage from my compartment and major impedimenta from the luggage-van, I saw from the tail of my eye that she was taking note of me and my mild activities. Evidently she was not proceeding by this train; apparently she was waiting for someone and ... yes ... obviously and positively, she was waiting for me. I was almost as surprised as delighted when, approaching and extending a tiny gloved hand, she gave me a smile that immediately won my heart as the writers of books have it.

"Do say you are Mr. Waring," she begged beseechingly, gazing at my face with eyes as clear, confiding and beautiful as human eyes have any need to be.

"I would, in any case," I replied, raising my hat. "I will. I do."

"You am, in fact," she laughed.

"I are," I agreed.

"I'm so glad," said Lady Calderton, and somehow I was then and there, in that moment of our first meeting, more than glad.

How amazing, and how charmingly delightful, that she should have taken the trouble herself to come to the station to meet so insignificant a person as a prospective tutor of her small boy. A mere male governess—though, on the other hand, surely a person of considerable importance, if the physical, mental and moral welfare of the son and heir of an ancient house were to be placed unreservedly in his sole charge.

“I thought I would like to come down and meet you,” she said, as we made our way to the big limousine, followed by a chauffeur and a porter, the one not overburdened with my despatch-case and rug, the other bearing kit-bag and suit-case, “so that we can have a talk on the way back. Time is so short and there’s so much to tell you about Anthony. He’s the dearest boy, but he’s … different.”

Not having met him, I mentally admitted that I was quite certain he was the dearest boy, and that, like every other mother’s son, he was different.

And then, glancing at the charming and piquant face beside me, gentle, kindly, beautiful, I softened my heart, and realized that her son might indeed be different. He might well be very different from the average young savage who had so often been my cruel critic and harsh oppressor in my own diffident and difficult school-days.

“Not very strong?” I ventured.

“Oh, healthy enough, but what his father calls ‘over-engined for his beam.’ He’s a queer boy. Simply won’t go to school.”

“Refuses?” I asked, between admiration of such stoutness and dismay at such defiance. This must either be

a young gentleman of remarkable character or else a spoilt brat with whom no one could do anything.

It began to look as though my new job might be no sinecure.

“No, he doesn’t refuse. He comes back. Gives it a fair trial and then comes home again.”

Runs away from school, in short, thought I. Character again? Or incorrigible disobedience? Or was this one of those examples of the freak education by cranky parents, which is not education at all? No repressions; no coercion; no interference; no—anything. So that, instead of the child growing as some sort of flower, plant, shrub or tree in the Garden of Life, the result is a poor and worthless weed. But obviously there was nothing of the freak, the crank, the doctrinaire fanatic about this particular parent.

“Just comes back,” she continued, “and says that it won’t do; that he simply can’t bear it, and relies on me to have sufficient understanding to refrain from trying to make him return. I know it sounds like a weak indulgent parent, feeble and foolish, on the one hand, and the spoilt head-strong and uncontrolled child on the other; but Anthony’s not that, and whatever I may be, I can assure you that his father is not weak and indulgent; neither feeble nor foolish … Anyhow, you’ll see.”

Yes, thought I, in my wisdom, I shall see. The spoilt brat who’ll give endless trouble and completely ruin my enjoyment of what should be a delightful job.

And for the rest of the drive from Calderton Station to Calderton House, Anthony’s mother did her best to place me *au courant* with the unusual state of affairs, and the ways

and nature of what was evidently going to prove a very unusual pupil.

I smile as I look back upon my preconceived ideas.

My first view of Calderton House, in its glorious and almost unique setting, was breath-taking.

Well, thought I, if I couldn’t be happy here, were there half a dozen spoilt children to contend with, it would be a pity.

A lovely and historic house; gardens that had been tended with skilful care for centuries; the loveliest part of the most beautiful county in England; a house noted for its library and art treasures, its historical features and—to consider the more mundane things of life, which I am far from despising—its cellar, its chef, its stables, its shooting, its fishing, all highly praised by my uncle, himself a recognized connoiseur.

And as we drove through the park, with its famous chestnut avenue leading from the great gates to the house, I was distinctly conscious, even while admiring the lovely effects of the sunlight slanting through the trees upon the short fine grass and deliberately posing deer, that I was sorry that the woman sitting beside me, her face and voice so filled with a lovely animation, was going away.

Before I had set foot in Calderton House, I realized how different the place would be when she was not in it. Moreover, before I had set eyes on Anthony Calderton, I registered a determination that if my tutorship were not a success, it would be through no fault of mine—and I was not at that time a person given to enthusiasms.

So little so, in point of fact, that I mentally shook myself, took myself to task, and wondered what was happening to me.

It must be my artistic spirit demonstrating, I decided, on sight of the truly lovely scene on which I gazed—Lady Calderton being part thereof.

Arrived at the foot of the great stone steps that swept in a double flight to left and right of the entrance, Lady Calderton remarked that, at the risk of boring me, she hoped to have a really long talk about Anthony after dinner, and meanwhile, if I would join them at tea on the terrace, I could make Anthony's acquaintance.

I was delighted with my quarters, to which the footman conducted me, a delightful sunny chintz-furnished sitting-room, looking out across the park over the lake to distant hills; and a smaller room, furnished as a bedroom, opening out of it.

Yes, this would do; would decidedly do. Most comfortable, both in summer and in winter, in fine weather and in foul; sun-bathed on fine days, with glass doors opening on to a sunny balcony; wonderfully cosy in bad weather, with curtains drawn and a blazing log-fire in the big fireplace.

Having washed, and given my keys to the rubicund young footman, I retraced my steps to the hall, the centre of the activities of the house, where Jenkins, who looked the Perfect Butler, took me through a big drawing-room to a sunny and sheltered corner of a terrace. Here, in the midst of a circle of deep and comfortable cane-chairs, an inviting tea-table was set.

A tall man, handsome and grey-haired, arose, a pleasant smile lighting up his clean-cut bronzed face. Coming towards me with extended hand, he said,

“Mr. Waring? Delighted you’ve come. Extraordinarily good luck that I met your uncle at the Club the other day. Known him all my life. Hope you’ll be comfortable here.”

I murmured my acknowledgments and, almost before I had accepted the cigarette and seated myself in the chair he indicated, I decided that I liked General Sir Arthur Calderton, and that here again my uncle was justified of his eulogy.

Inwardly I smiled to myself, and mentally I rubbed my hands, for all seemed well, and very well. This man and I talked the same language.

He fitted his setting, and went with Lady Calderton, æsthetically, as well as along the Vale of Life. Not that he had gone far down it, for he didn’t look a day more than fifty, though he may have been several days more. Some fifteen years older than his wife, I thought.

If only Anthony were as amenable and attractive as his mother thought him, my lines were indeed now cast in pleasant places.

Pleasant! Could one but have foreseen….

“His mother will tell you all about Anthony,” continued the General. “I can sum up all I’ve got to say, by asking you to do the impossible. Anyway, you’ll try, I’m sure. What I want is for him to get, here at home, all that he is missing by not going to School, if you see what I mean.”

I murmured that I did understand, and would do my best.

“I don’t for one moment suppose he will go into the Army, and I certainly shan’t put any pressure on him, but I’d like him to go to the Varsity; and I am hoping that, by that time, he’ll be sufficiently normal and ordinary to pass in a crowd. Being what he is, he’d have a bad time at a Public School. He has, in point of fact, though a brief one. But at Oxford—at Magdalen or Christ Church, say—I don’t see why he should be very different from the average undergraduate, having been in the right kind of tutor’s hands for four or five years.”

“Nor do I,” I agreed. “Nor, moreover, do I see why he shouldn’t have an excellent good time, if he *is* a bit different. The Varsity isn’t like school, of course, and the chief difference between the two is that, whereas individuality is discouraged at school, individuality and idiosyncrasy are permitted—indeed encouraged—at College.”

“Yes, quite so. Quite so. And there again differing from Sandhurst or Woolwich.”

“Yes, a man can go his own way, do what he likes, and, indeed, be what he likes, without interference from anybody. Athlete or æsthete, party-thrower or hermit.”

“Yes,” agreed the General. “Well, I want him to go up, and I want him to lead the ordinary Varsity life among his fellows.”

“I understand,” I assured the General. “And if he comes back home in the middle of his first term, I shall decide that I have failed.”

“Failed?” said the voice of Lady Calderton behind. “Already?”

“No, Lady Calderton,” I said, rising and turning to meet her delightful smile. “I was just saying that unless Anthony stays at the Varsity for three years and asks for a fourth, I shall feel that I have failed.

“Failed in life completely,” I added, as she laughed.

The smile died from her face and a faintly anxious, deeply solicitous look took its place as, turning, she said quietly,

“Here he is.”

A tall slender boy, looking more than his fourteen years, came out on to the terrace, staring hard at me as he approached.

Yes, thought I, definitely different; very highly strung. A fine forehead and not so fine a chin; too small and pointed. Aristocrat; inbred; balanced on a very fine edge. Fine nervous hands. Very good mouth indeed; nothing petulant, greedy, weak or peevish there. Beautiful eyes; too big. Ought to have been a girl. Dressed in a girl’s clothes, nobody would use the word ‘boyish’ about her, him, it.

“This is Anthony,” said Lady Calderton, “and I do so hope he will be a credit to you … This is Mr. Waring, Anthony, who has so kindly come to look after you and help you while we are away.”

The boy shook hands gravely.

“How d’you do,” said he. “Do you fence?”

“Yes,” said I. “I do.”

“Oh, good,” he observed. And leaving it at that, turned to the tea-table, and with complete self-possession, became one of the circle, an equal.

As we talked, I eyed him from time to time, always finding, when I did so, that he was watching me with a long considering look, thoughtful, judgmatic. He was not staring rudely, or in the childish manner that is rightly prohibited, but studying me; and, although his eyes left my face directly I looked towards him, I knew that they returned instantly.

I was conscious of a foolish and most unwarranted desire to be approved by this queer boy, and I pondered the problem of what was to happen if I failed to give satisfaction. He might leave school and return home when he decided so to do, but he couldn’t very well leave home and the tutor installed there. Or would he, perchance, announce one day that he proposed to join his parents in Montiga, as a tutor-infested home was no longer acceptable?

But behind these idle speculations was a growing belief and assurance that nothing of the sort would happen; that he and I would get on excellently.

Nor should it be for want of the utmost endeavour on my part if I failed to interest, to inspire, and somewhat to mould the young Anthony Calderton.

After tea I returned to my quarters, found that my things had been unpacked, the trunk and suit-cases removed, a large bowl of roses installed, and the rooms looking as though I had inhabited them for years.

What should I do? Seek out Anthony, suggest a walk, and make his better acquaintance; or, treading warily, leave him alone for the present?

There was a knock at my door, and in answer to my call, Anthony entered.

“Hullo,” said I, refraining from adding ‘old chap’ or adopting any sort of avuncular or heavy-father line.

“Hullo,” was the reply. “You didn’t bring any foils with you, I suppose?”

“No. But I’ll soon get them.”

This was excellent.

“Had any fencing lessons?” I asked.

“Only from a gym-instructor at school,” replied Anthony.

And in cool and quiet comment, added,

“A clumsy lout.”

“H’m!” thought I.

“You’ll give me lessons, won’t you?” he asked.

“Rather!” said I. “More than you’ll like, perhaps.”

“No, I don’t think you’ll do that.

“What I really want,” he continued, “is to learn to fence very well indeed, and then to have a duel, with real rapiers and sharp points. Father has one, you know. My ancestors’. Charles the First’s time. I want to use it in a fight.”

This was interesting. Blood-thirsty? Homicidal destruction-complex? No, not with that face.

“Whom do you want to kill?” I asked, and at once saw that I had said the wrong thing.

“Kill? What a horrible idea. I don’t want to kill anybody, nor hurt anybody either. I just want to have a real fencing-match; a proper fight; a duel. I shall dress up as a cavalier and we’d fence by moonlight. Full moon, you know, on a lawn, and I’d throw off my plumed hat and velvet cloak and take off my doublet. Fight in a silk shirt and slashed velvet breeches of the Stuart period. Silk hose and buckled shoes. Take the shoes off, perhaps.

“And you’d do the same, wouldn’t you? Only would you mind being a Roundhead?” he asked.

I forbore to simulate tremendous enthusiasm. Only a fool, or rather, a bigger fool than I, perhaps, would ‘act’ under the steady gaze of those large and level eyes.

I considered the matter.

“Yes, rather fun,” I admitted. “Bit dangerous, though, with sharp points.”

“Dangerous!” observed Anthony, and the fine lip curled slightly.

After staring out of the window for a few moments, he observed,

“Oh, by the way, Mother sent me to ask if you’d care to go for a stroll with her. She always walks after tea.

“If it’s not raining,” he added.

Most definitely I would care to do so. I had an idea that it would take me a very long time to see and hear more of Lady Calderton than I wanted to do.

I have never forgotten that walk across the park; the evening; the scene, and the company approaching perfection. And by the time we returned to the house, more than an hour later, I had pretty well made up my mind about her.

I summed her up then as being competent without being clever, well-read without being learned, charming without being insincere, and, as a mother, loving without being foolish.

I gathered the impression that without being weak, vacillating, and over-suggestible, she was anything but strong-minded, firm and determined; not the type of woman

of which the best martyrs are made; not the sort that would shine as a militant suffragette or in a crisis; nor one who would suffer in silence, take a strong line and ensue it to the bitter end; or die for an idea.

How far I was right in my assumption as to her probable conduct at a time of crisis, under great suffering, in imminent danger to herself and those she loved, I was to learn.

It is not for one moment to be supposed that I admired her or liked her the less for these reservations. I like a woman to be feminine, and she was, I judged, of the essence of femininity. That Anthony should, to some extent, dominate her, and to any extent get his own way against her better judgment, seemed to me, then, creditable to them both; an attribute to Anthony's clear knowledge of what he wanted, and to her wisdom in compromise.

Wisdom! Had she been a plain, unpleasant, and objectionable woman, I should probably, in the same circumstances, have preferred the phrase "weakness in compromise."

It is axiomatic that whether we realize it or not, we like, and indeed love, people far more for their little human imperfections and weaknesses than we do for their high moral virtues, strength, wisdom and persistence in well-doing.

Anyhow, even on that first evening, I liked this woman exceedingly; and where, perhaps, in the matter of her attitude to her son I might have judged, I forbore—and sympathized instead.

Well, I hope I have now given you some idea of the character and personality of Lady Calderton.

And again, perhaps, I have failed to do so; failed to do her justice; to give you anything approaching a true picture of her wonderful charm, sweetness and true kindliness of nature; of her easy friendliness and the fascination of her simplicity and sincerity.

I never met anyone, whether aristocrat, *nouveau riche*, bourgeois, or of the working-class, less afflicted with conceit, self-importance, aloofness, or air and manner of that stultifying exclusiveness that spoils so many otherwise likeable people.

In short, Lady Calderton was a gentlewoman who was truly gentle, and possessed a face and form that were truly beautiful.

§ 4

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Of General Sir Arthur Calderton, I need not say very much, as, although a most important figure in the drama, he played a small part on the stage.

He was—I fear I must say the words—a great gentleman; a genuine aristocrat; and an ornament of county, military and political society; one of a vanishing race, who served his country without need, or desire, of profit; and though possessed of a magnificent home, more than ample wealth, and all the instincts of a country gentleman and sportsman, he laboured hard and successfully in alien lands and tropic climes *ad majorem patriæ gloriam*, and to the benefit of those he governed.