

Forrest Reid



***The Retreat,
or The Machinations
of Henry***

Forrest Reid

The Retreat, or The Machinations of Henry



Published by Good Press, 2022

goodpress@okpublishing.info

EAN 4064066354985

TABLE OF CONTENTS

PART ONE

CHAPTER I

CHAPTER II

CHAPTER III

CHAPTER IV

CHAPTER V

CHAPTER VI

CHAPTER VII

CHAPTER VIII

CHAPTER IX

CHAPTER X

PART TWO

CHAPTER XI

CHAPTER XII

CHAPTER XIII

CHAPTER XIV

CHAPTER XV

CHAPTER XVI

CHAPTER XVII

PART THREE

CHAPTER XVIII

CHAPTER XIX

CHAPTER XX

CHAPTER XXI

CHAPTER XXII

PART ONE

[Table of Contents](#)

CHAPTER I

[Table of Contents](#)

An old man, clad from throat to silver-buckled shoes in a wide loose-sleeved black robe, stood at a window peering out into the darkness. His silken silver hair fell in one long smooth lock over a high narrow forehead; his face, minutely lined, was fine as a cameo, and his skin the colour of an ancient parchment. The ears were very slightly pointed, the nose strong and straight, the mouth small. The hand that grasped and held aside the black curtain was fine too, and though time had wrinkled it and revealed the blue veins running up into the wrist, it had not spoiled its shapeliness.

The old man looked frail and wasted, as if his body were no more than a dry transparent husk through which the flame of life shone bright but heatless. He was like one of those delicate skeleton leaves one finds in some sheltered hollow in the woods—desiccated, perfect in form, yet so fragile that when one holds it up against the sun the light shines through. His dark still eyes had a tranquillity of detached contemplation rather than of amiability, for beneath their abstraction glittered the latent energy of a cold and formidable will. “Tib—Tib——” he called. “Tibby—Tibby.” But the world outside was dark and frozen, the latticed window shut, and he called so softly that it was little more than a murmur. Then he let the curtain drop back

soundlessly into its heavy folds, and returned to a carved high-backed chair by the hearth....

It was late—very late—some hour between midnight and dawn—and a strange, precarious silence filled the room. On a stool, blotted in the shadow of the chimney corner, with eyes that a moment ago had been closed in slumber, but were now glinting and watchful, sat a slim boy of twelve or thirteen, also dressed in black. He had fallen asleep there, he did not quite know when, but it must have been several hours ago, and he guessed that his master either thought he was asleep still, or more likely had forgotten him.

He was a peculiar old man: the boy had begun to fear him. What was he doing now for instance, and for what or whom was he waiting? Did he sit up every night like this, in that straight-backed chair, with its green threadbare velvet cushion? It would be better for him if he were to say his prayers and go to bed, for though by no means exceptionally pious himself, the boy had been brought up in the Catholic faith, and he remembered uneasily that since he had entered the old man's service they had never once been to mass nor had a priest crossed their door. At first he had fancied that his master himself must be a kind of priest, but now he held another view. He was no priest—of the true church at any rate—nor was that mysterious sign of two interlocked triangles, drawn in gold on the white marble table, a Christian symbol. The boy comforted himself with the reflection that Tibby at least was gone, and the hope that he would never come back....

He wished he had not fallen asleep, but that nearly always happened after he had been looking at the pictures

in the black polished stone. He tried to remember the pictures, but he could not—he never could—and the stone itself was gone, locked up once more, he supposed, in the cabinet where his master kept it. He wished he had gone to bed, wished he could summon up energy to go now; but a kind of languor held him, mingled with curiosity and a vague expectancy, for surely his master was not sitting there in mere idleness, though what his purpose could be was hard to imagine. If it were not that no visitors ever came, the boy would have thought he was expecting a visitor now. And it *might* be that: it was just possible that the old man was not so solitary as he seemed to be. The boy slept soundly in a little room in the other wing of the house: if someone were to come in the night he would know nothing of it. Only, to crouch here forgotten was almost like hiding, almost like spying; perhaps he should make a movement, a sound. Yet he did neither....

In the great bare room three of the four walls were hung with moth-riddled, perishing tapestries, at present only dimly visible even to the boy's keen young eyes. The lamplight, he thought, must have grown weaker while he slept. It floated towards, but no longer quite reached, the outer edges of the room, so that the walls remained in an equivocal shadow that was neither light nor darkness. And next moment it seemed to him that the light was not so much failing as being thrust back by this shadow, which was condensing in certain places, and very slowly gaining ground. At the same time he became conscious that the temperature of the room had sunk, as if the windows had been stealthily opened to admit the icy air from outside. But

he knew this could not be so—knew the windows were fast. Besides, the black velvet curtains which hung before them had never once stirred.

The old man's head had begun to nod forward on his breast, but now abruptly he sat up. None too soon, it seemed, for the flame of the lamp had begun to wink ominously. Yet it must have been the cold which had aroused him, for his eyes had been shut. As he stood up his face was angry and impatient. He went to attend to the lamp, though what he did to it the boy could not see, because the old man's back was turned to him. He could only see that his hands hovered about it and that when they lifted the flame lifted also. Then, still with his hands outstretched, he stepped forward slowly, muttering incomprehensible words, and the shadow retreated before him, and the darker cloudy patches melted away.

The boy was less surprised than he would have been some months ago, but he hurriedly drew a cross upon his breast and whispered a Latin prayer he had been taught. Once more the lamp burned brightly, and now, in the increased light, all the objects the room contained were clearly visible. They were not numerous—a few chairs, a cabinet whose tall black doors somehow suggested the wings of a sleeping bat, a tripod surmounted by an empty brazier, two tables, and some shelves of books. The floor was bare and at one side of the immense open hearth stood what appeared to be a kind of furnace built of brick and surmounted by a cone. The larger of the tables was drawn between the windows. It was square and massive and littered with oddly shaped vessels of copper and crystal. On

the smaller table, the white marble table in the centre of the room, there was nothing but the burning lamp.

The old man returned to the hearth and cast on more wood. As he did so the boy could see his lips moving, though they made no sound. The wood was dry and soon broke into a flame. Golden jets of light spurted beyond the radius of the lamplight, licking up against the tapestried walls, flickering and darting, like the tongues of serpents. They had a curious effect, beautiful and fantastic, for at one moment there was only a veil of trembling shadow, and at the next a stiff and formal landscape peopled with ghostly figures leapt into view—all the more lifelike because the figures and the trees visibly moved. The boy, however, knew the origin of this movement, and that it was not of his master's making. It was natural: he had seen it happening in the daytime. Every room in this crumbling half-dilapidated house was full of draughts, and it must be only such a draught now, passing between the wall and the hangings, which caused them to ripple and to swell.

Again he began to feel drowsy, and again he closed his eyes. Suddenly he opened them to find that he was alone. At once his sleepiness vanished. The lamp was still burning, but the fire had ceased to blaze and was sunk to a hot red glow. The boy had never been alone in this room before, and he glanced nervously about him with quick yet stealthy movements of his head. It was here that his master carried on his secret labours, and always when he left the room he locked the door behind him. The boy stepped swiftly across the floor, for the thought of being shut in was not pleasant, but the key was in the lock, so his master must be coming

back. With that a spirit of inquisitiveness seized him: it was his chance to examine and explore, and he might never have another. The alchemical apparatus he did not dare to touch, but might there not be simpler instruments of magic—cloaks of darkness, flying broomsticks, wishing-caps—he knew not what? He had never seen the doors of the cabinet opened for more than a moment or two, when his master had opened them to get out the shining black stone. But in those moments his quick eyes had caught glimpses of the interior—of dried herbs and chafing dishes, of crystal phials and a rod of hazelwood that was perhaps a wand, of a sickle-shaped dagger and a sword. He knew the exact uses of none of these objects except the stone, but the cabinet was large and deep, its interior dusky enough to hide many secrets, there must be other things, and perhaps the purposes of some of them could be grasped. He resolved at any rate to take a peep, for this key too was in the lock. Nevertheless, when he tried the door, it would not open.

And all at once the boy was afraid. Why had he been left alone like this? Was it a trap? A minute ago he had felt bold, excited, adventurous; now he was abruptly transformed into a coward. He had heard no sound, nothing appeared to have happened, nothing was changed except himself. He still stood by the door of the cabinet, but he no longer thought of opening it. An icy presentiment of horror gripped coldly and woefully at his heart, his blood chilled, his breath stopped, for he knew with every nerve of his body that the visitor his master was expecting had arrived—had at that very moment entered the house. Only what visitor? He had no name, no identity, and he had given no warning of his

approach. The boy stood paralyzed, listening intently. He listened, and presently it was as if every part of him had become merely one wide quivering ear. He heard now many faint sounds—sounds in remote closed rooms—sounds, in this room, that had hitherto been inaudible—the frost drawing patterns on the window pane, a spider weaving its web....

And then he heard a louder sound—clear though still distant—knock—knock—knock—in the lower part of the house. Knock—knock—knock—it was drawing nearer, it was mounting the stairs, it was at the end of the passage. The boy's wide eyes were fixed in terror on the door. He might still have time to lock himself in, only he knew this would be useless: when the knocking reached it, the door would open slowly and inevitably, as to the Hand of Glory.

That last dreadful summons on the door itself would be worst of all. Better to avert it, better to go to meet it, and he sprang across the room and flung the door wide.

Instantly his fear was gone. He half laughed, half cried, in the sudden wonderful uprush of relief, as there stepped across the threshold no hideous phantom, but the loveliest little creature he had ever beheld. It was a deer—still far too young to have horns—with dark soft eyes and smooth dappled coat. And those four small delicate hoofs it must have been that had made the knocking which had so frightened him. It had sought him out, was actually in the room, bringing with it a kind of wild fragrance of the woods. It had come to look for him, this little messenger without a message, for as he put his arm round it and began to stroke it, it turned and they walked together down the dark

passage and the darker stairs, and along another passage leading to a side door which stood ajar.

The boy pushed open the door; but the winter and the night were gone. Gone like a dream—gone and, almost before he had taken two steps, forgotten. The old man was forgotten, the room forgotten, the house forgotten. There was nothing—nothing but a world of gleaming sunshine—a world of cool green leaves and running water....

Tom opened his eyes in the darkness. His heart was still thumping, but he had a feeling of gladness. It must be the middle of the night, he realized, or very early morning, for the tree whose leaves were brushing softly against the window pane was hardly distinguishable. As usual before getting into bed he had pulled up the blinds, always carefully drawn down by Mary, and now as he grew wider awake he stared out through the dim square of glass into a penumbral world. Not a sound could he hear except when the branches stooped to stroke the window. And then, soft and far, a rounded melodious note was repeated twice. It was the old grandfather's clock in the hall conscientiously striking the hour, but Tom liked to fancy that it was calling to him, for it was a nice old clock, and he had persuaded himself that there was, if not an actual friendship, at least a sort of secret understanding between them....

He had been dreaming, and he perfectly remembered his dream; but the strange thing was that though it had been pleasant and happy it seemed to have left a shadow on his mind. Had there been an earlier dream which he could not recall? He remembered trees, and sunlight dancing on a stream, and a deer. He had been in a kind of narrow valley

with a stream flowing through it; and it was spring. But what had happened earlier? Or had anything happened? If not, why was he in a perspiration, and why had he kicked off the bedclothes as if he had been struggling against a nightmare? There had been *something*—something frightening—though it seemed silly to say so when it had left not a trace behind it. Unless this in itself were a trace! For there had been a series of similar awakenings—three at least he could remember in the past fortnight—and always that feeling of having escaped only just in time. But escaped from what? The merest hint, Tom thought, and the entire thing would come back to him; but that hint was withheld. When he tried to break through the intervening blank he could not, and the struggle was even physically painful, as though a band were being pressed tighter and tighter round his brain. It was as if he were pushing against a void, and the strain grew so acute that he felt as if a spring in his mind were on the point of snapping. The instant he relaxed his efforts he had a feeling of relief. He would not try to remember, and to dismiss the whole thing still further from his mind he sat up in bed and sang in imagination the tune of “Who is Sylvia?”

When he lay down again he still felt a little shaken and exhausted, but he turned on his side and shut his eyes. This was the right treatment, for very soon he felt comfortable and drowsy. Perhaps some day an instrument would be invented for recording people’s dreams. It did not seem to Tom at all impossible, nor even much more wonderful than when Mr. Holbrook put a black shining disc into a wooden box and presently Caruso, who was actually dead, began to

sing to you. That, again, wasn't very different from the *Arabian Nights* story of the fisherman who unsealed the stopper of a brass jar and released a genie who had been shut up in the jar ages ago by King Solomon....

Tom must by now have been very drowsy indeed, for through his closed eyelids he saw a great dark camera, shrouded with mysterious black curtains or doors that were somehow like the wings of a sleeping bat, set there beside his pillow, waiting to photograph his dreams. He was just wondering if bats really could see dreams, and in that case if owls and cats could, when he heard a light scratching on the panel of the door. He knew what *that* was in a moment, and after waiting till it came again slid out of bed. He opened the door and stopped on the threshold to tie the cord of his pyjamas, while faint little mews, scattered like grace notes through a rich purring, rose out of the darkness, and the black plump body of Henry rubbed and pressed against his legs.

Henry must have come to watch his dreams; but since he wouldn't be able to talk about them afterwards, that really wasn't much use. It would have to be a person—a person with second sight, Tom decided, though he didn't quite know what it was you actually saw when you had second sight. He knew that there *was* such a thing, however, because Mother's grandfather had been "gifted" with it. It had always run in the Collet family, Mother said, and she ought to know, because she was a Collet herself. In fact, though when she had married Daddy she had been obliged to take his name, which was Barber, she still seemed to prefer being a Collet. Tom made these reflections standing

spellbound like Apollonius of Tyana, though for a less protracted period; then, the meditation completed, he shut the door and hopped back into bed.

Next moment Henry was on the bed too, plucking with his front paws at the counterpane, and continuing to purr.

“Stop!” said Tom, for he knew Henry was pulling out threads—indeed he could hear him doing it—giving little picks that made a noise nearly as loud as raindrops. He was the most frightfully destructive cat, and had ruined Daddy’s leather arm-chair by stropping his claws on the back of it.

Henry stopped picking, but he continued to move about the bed until he had found a hollow that suited him. Then he curled himself up and began to purr again, but now much more softly. Tom lay listening to him. It was a queer sound, he thought, and Henry must make it somewhere at the back of his nose. Tom puckered up his own nose and tried, but it wasn’t very good. He could make a noise, but not that kind of warm, broken, comfortable noise. It was easier to mew, and indeed he could mew quite well, though Henry pretended not to recognize it. He mewed now, while from the garden outside came the first chirps and twitterings of early birds. The early worms, Tom supposed, would now be burrowing in all haste back into the tennis lawn. He mewed again, and there was no twittering. “I’ve frightened them,” he said for Henry’s benefit, but Henry did not reply.

CHAPTER II

[Table of Contents](#)

When Tom next opened his eyes it was broad daylight and the sun was shining. But after listening for a minute or

two he knew it must still be pretty early, for he could hear none of the domestic sounds which usually began about seven. He rather liked those early morning sounds—Phemie’s violent assault upon the kitchen range—which always seemed to be resisting tooth and nail—and Mary’s more circumspect movements in the dining-room and study. Phemie, Mary, and William composed the indoor and outdoor staff, and Phemie and Mary were sisters though you never would have guessed this to look at them. Phemie—whose full name was Euphemia—was several years older than Mary, and bossed her like anything. Both were Roman Catholics, while William was a Protestant and an Orangeman, and marched with an orange-and-purple sash over his shoulder on the twelfth of July. Phemie had been crossed in love many years ago, and now hated men though she didn’t mind boys. She had a loud voice, muscles of iron, and a temper which Mother said all cooks inherited from the cook in *Alice in Wonderland*. Nevertheless, Tom preferred her to Mary, though he preferred Mary to William, who was the gardener, and lived with his wife and family in a cottage not far from the old Ballysheen graveyard, about a mile away.

All this district was Ballysheen, and Doctor Macrory said there had once been a church near the graveyard, though nothing was left of it at present except a few stones. And even the loose stones had nearly all been carted away at one time and another to build walls and byres and cottages. For that matter, Doctor Macrory said there must long ago have been another house—a big house—where Tom’s own house now stood. It had disappeared completely, and was

not mentioned in any local history, but the builders had discovered traces of it when they were laying the foundations, and Doctor Macrory himself had poked about while the digging was going on. Doctor Macrory was very much interested in things of that sort. By profession he was a physician, but his hobby was archæology and he had written several pamphlets on the subject. Tom hadn't read the pamphlets, but he had seen them, Daddy possessed them, and they were bound in green paper, with Celtic designs.

All Daddy's friends were scientific, which, according to Mother, accounted for the narrowness of their views, their lack of imagination, and the irritating way in which they pooh-poohed anything they couldn't understand. It was queer that Tom's friend Pascoe should be scientific too, because Tom, Mother said, took after *her* family, and was a Collet.

On the other hand, she had one day told him that he got his brains from Daddy, though they were a different kind of brains. This seemed a little complicated, and became still more so when in answer to his question as to *how* they were different, she discovered that the person he really took after must be Uncle Stephen, of whose existence Tom had not till that moment heard. So sometimes he was a Collet and sometimes he wasn't; it depended a good deal on the humour Mother happened to be in and whether she was pleased with him or not.

In one particular, however, she rarely varied her opinion, and this was that neither he nor Daddy possessed as much practical sense as a child of six. Six was Mother's favourite

age; it was always a child of six who would have known better than to say or do whatever it was that Tom or Daddy might have said or done; and when Tom pointed out that you can't remain six for ever, she laughed, and replied that if he and Daddy hadn't it was only because they were five. This appeared to worry her more about Tom than about Daddy, though there were occasions when it had the contrary effect, and then she would kiss him. But Tom himself knew that he was different from Daddy, who was never in a hurry to do things, and never got heated or excited no matter what happened, whereas both Tom and Mother did. He wondered if Uncle Stephen did: it was natural to wonder about a person you resembled and who was so mysterious as Uncle Stephen. He couldn't make out what Mother thought of him. He didn't believe she *knew* much about him. Yet he hovered there somehow in the background, a distinctly romantic figure. Once, ages ago, he had asked her if she would rather have Uncle Stephen than Daddy, which had annoyed her a little, though afterwards she had repeated it as a joke....

Henry some time during the night must have moved down to the foot of the bed, where he now lay asleep, curled up in a black circle. Tom felt a lazy inclination to pet him, and called "Puss, puss", but it produced no effect. So he raised his feet under the bedclothes, making an uncomfortable hill. Still Henry did not budge; only he gave Tom a long secret look out of green slits of eyes before closing them again. That was like him: he never did anything unless he wanted to do it himself. It had been a most peculiar look, too, Tom presently thought; just as if

Henry knew something about him—something faintly discreditable. Tom believed he did know things. Only why had he looked like that? It wasn't on the whole a friendly look—rather the reverse—though it certainly suggested that there was some kind of understanding between them. The more Tom considered it the less he liked it. There wasn't *any* understanding between them. Henry knew nothing about him except what everybody else knew, so he had no right to pretend that he did. Tom raised his feet again, this time higher, lifting Henry up in a kind of loose, sprawling crescent, so that he looked as if he had either no bones or else were dead. Yet even then he wouldn't move. He merely opened his mouth, showing a tiny scrap of pink, and emitted a faintly irritated mew. He had suddenly become an ordinary cat again.

He had no business to keep changing about like this. Ordinary cats didn't. Therefore, by the rules of logic, Henry couldn't be an ordinary cat, whatever he might pretend. Pascoe had produced electric sparks from him, though of course that didn't prove much, except that he was crammed with electricity. But Henry did things on his own account—queer, very nearly magical things—when he and Tom were alone together in the house. Before the others, even before Pascoe, he put on an innocent expression, as if he had never done anything more thrilling than to lap up a saucer of milk. But when only Tom was there it was a different story. Then he no longer troubled to look innocent. It seemed to be Henry's opinion that Tom didn't matter, and just to show this he would start off by making the whole house queer. He had done it yesterday evening when they were alone and Tom

was at his lessons. Henry had walked to the study door and scratched on it—his usual sign that he wanted to be let out. Then, when the door was opened, he had strolled slowly on down the passage as if he were going to the kitchen, while Tom, pondering, had stood watching him as far as the corner. Yet when he had turned back into the study again and shut the door, there Henry was—on the hearthrug, washing his face, just as if he had never left the room at all. Meanwhile, the things in the study had changed their places: Tom's *Latin Grammar*, which he had left open on the sofa, was now on the floor, closed, and the frame with his photograph in it had been moved forward from the other photographs—he was sure that if it had been like that before he must have noticed it. It was strange—very strange. And if it came to that, who *was* Henry, and where had he come from? Nobody knew. He had simply walked through the open back door into the kitchen one afternoon about a month ago, and Phemie had immediately decided that he had come to bring her luck and mustn't be turned away. That was all nonsense, of course, as even Phemie soon knew. The very next day she had upset a pot of boiling water and scalded her foot. But *why* had Henry come? He was a full-grown cat, sleek and lithe, with a coat like black satin: anybody could see he had never been hungry or homeless in his life.

And certainly he hadn't troubled himself to bring much luck to poor Phemie! She had broken a teapot and a vegetable dish on the day after the scalding, and Henry had ceased to be a kitchen cat. His next move had been to wile himself into the good graces of Daddy. This had been

accomplished easily—merely by following Daddy about the garden and jumping up on the arm of his chair. Daddy tried not to look flattered, and said nothing; but every time Mother said—and she said it about five times a day —“Henry’s *devoted* to Daddy!” it was easy to see he was as pleased as Punch.

Tom knew better. The devotion was mere policy. He could prove it. Henry wasn’t in the least interested in games with string, for example. They bored him. Tom had tried him again and again, and he had simply yawned or turned his back. Yet if Daddy dangled a piece of string or waved his handkerchief, Henry immediately crouched and quivered and pounced.

That wasn’t how he behaved with Tom. Once, when he was sitting alone in the drawing-room at dusk, tired of reading and too lazy to get up and turn on the light, Henry had actually begun to play the piano to him. Only a note or two—very, very softly, and really rather beautifully—for it had sounded more as if the piano were singing in its sleep than being played. Tom had liked it, and so most surely had Henry; but did ordinary cats play the piano?

Then there was the matter of the tennis balls, more mysterious still, because this time Henry hadn’t been there. And mind you, Tom himself had put the tennis balls away in their cardboard box, and put the box on the oak chest which stood beside the cloakroom door. Yet he had hardly been in the cloakroom a minute before he heard a bouncing noise in the hall, and running out, found the tennis balls, all six of them, rolling over the carpet in different directions, with nobody to roll them, nobody near them.

When things like this happened, you couldn't help beginning to wonder why. And they had happened pretty often of late, usually in the evening. They didn't frighten you, perhaps—in fact they were rather exciting—but they did give you a queer feeling of uncertainty, as if nothing was quite what it seemed, and things like tennis balls, or photograph frames, or pianos for that matter, were a good deal more alive than they had any right to be. It was Henry's doing, of course, and he knew that Tom knew it was. He knew and didn't care—which was probably the meaning of the strange look he had given him just now. What Henry's green eyes had said was: “I know, and *you* know that there's something most unusual going on in this house; but the others don't know, and if you tell them they won't believe you. That's why it doesn't matter about you, and why it wouldn't matter if you did tell. They'd only make fun of you—especially that daddy of yours, who thinks you're queer enough as it is.”

“He doesn't think me queer,” Tom contradicted, but without much conviction; and Henry didn't even bother to open his eyes. This annoyed Tom, so he continued with more spirit: “Anyway, you'll get down off the bed.” And he jumped out himself and pushed Henry on to the floor.

It was a poor argument, and he felt a little ashamed, so he picked Henry up again and set him once more where he had been. “You needn't start purring,” he told him. “I only did that because I don't approve of bullying: I still think you're pretty awful.”

Saying which, he took off his pyjamas, and stood in a patch of sunlight, letting the sun stroke his naked body with

its warm breath. He liked it, and liked the feeling of the carpet under his bare feet. Henry, seeing him up, jumped down from the bed and began scratching at the door, but Tom watched him unsympathetically. "Why don't you go?" he asked in a cold voice. "It's too much trouble to do a magic, I suppose. Go on—vanish! I won't be surprised."

In spite of this sarcasm, Henry merely lifted his voice in a very unmagical mew, so Tom had to open the door for him. Then he went to the window and looked out into the garden. The garden was bright with its first dewy freshness, and as usual there was a squabble going on among the birds. Of all the quarrelsome creatures! And they were supposed to be so angelic. Probably it was the row they were kicking up which had attracted Henry, who, as Tom was well aware, could get out by jumping from the bathroom window-sill to the roof of the coalhouse. Yes, there he was, gliding between the bushes like a black panther. But the birds saw him also and with a sudden whir of wings rose in a cloud. The birds detested Henry, and had every reason to do so, for he hunted them from morning till night. Often he got one too; an absent-minded bird had no chance whatever with Henry: Tom could quite understand their feelings....

A flat lawn with a sagging tennis net in the middle of it stretched in front of the house. All round this lawn were flower-beds and trellises festooned with rambler roses. On the left was a line of trees and on the right a border of flowering shrubs—syringas, azaleas, rhododendrons—just now a splash of brilliant colour. Tom could smell the perfumes that drifted from them, and he could smell the roses and the grass. Suddenly he wanted to be out there.

He put on a shirt, a pair of grey flannel shorts, stockings, slippers, a jacket. He knew he should have taken a bath, or at least washed properly, but all he did was to pour a little water into a basin and give a perfunctory dab or two at his face with a sponge. He was on the point of leaving the room when he remembered his prayers and knelt down by the bed. He had two prayers—one in prose and one in verse. The poetry prayer he always said last. Both were short, but they included, Mother told him, everything he really needed. They left out of account, none the less, a lot of things he really *wanted*—a bulldog, a donkey, long trousers, hairs on his legs, a bicycle, not to miss catches at cricket, and not to be called “Skinny”. Sometimes Tom added these items, sometimes he omitted them. In spite of past failures he put them all in to-day, like a Christmas or a birthday list, where one leaves the final choice to the giver.

He ran downstairs, put on his shoes in the kitchen, emptied the biscuit jar in the dining-room (it was nearly empty, anyway), and went out through the side door into the garden.

It was a fairly large garden, walled all round to the height of some five feet, but not too large to be looked after by one man. Tom thought at first of marking the tennis court, the lines of which were rather faint, till he remembered that it was William’s day for cutting the grass. That altered matters. If William found the court freshly marked he would make this an excuse for leaving it alone—not liking to interfere with Master Tom’s work. William was splendid at excuses and, like Henry, so plausible that though actually the most frightful slacker he was regarded by everybody as

a model of industry. “Slow but sure,” Daddy would say of him; or “Hurried work’s usually scamped”—things like that, when it ought to have been: “William does as little as he can and never anything you ask him.” Only it wasn’t easy to tell exactly *how* slow William was, because through long association with the garden he had acquired a kind of protective colouring and his movements were veiled. If you merely glanced at him as he stood with a hoe or a spade in his hand between two bean-rows or stooping over the cabbages, he produced an illusion of activity, but if you watched him closely, as Tom had done, this illusion vanished and a curious affinity between William and the sundial emerged. Not that Tom would have cared, if he hadn’t been such a grumbler. But he bemoaned his lot every time you spoke to him, so that you’d have thought he was a slave driven by Egyptian taskmasters. He wouldn’t, for instance, be in the least grateful if Tom were to cut the grass for him now: he’d just accept it as a matter of course and point out how it might have been done better.

Tom had reached this point in his summing-up of William when the hall-door opened and Mary appeared, carrying a long-handled brush with which she began to sweep out the porch. The instant she caught sight of the figure on the lawn she stopped. “What are you doing there, Master Tom?” she asked in a tone of suspicion and disapproval.

Tom was amused. “Admiring the view,” he replied; at which Mary gave a sniff—in audible, but perfectly perceptible even from that distance. She took no further notice of him, however, from which he deduced that she regarded his remark as cheek.

As a matter of fact the old house *did* look rather nice, he thought. There was honeysuckle climbing up one side of the porch, and clematis climbing up the other, while ampelopsis spread over the walls. Also he liked the oriel windows and red-tiled roof and irregular chimney stacks. Not that the house was really old, having been built by the people from whom Daddy had bought it; but it had been designed from the beginning to have an old-fashioned appearance—warm, comfortable, and homely—and it really *had* been that kind of house until Henry had begun to play tricks with it.

Still, Tom couldn't stare at it for ever, even to impress the suspicious Mary, so he took a path through the shrubbery, which terminated in a small green postern door set in the angle where the south and west walls met. This door was locked at night, but the key was always left in the lock, and next moment Tom was outside the garden, on the high bank of a glen thickly carpeted with long green spiky bluebell leaves, and overgrown with larch, hazel, and birch trees. The glen was long and very narrow, as if at some remote volcanic period the earth had split asunder here. A stream ran through it, which never dried up even in the hottest summer, and Tom scrambled down to it, because the walking was easier there. He saw a squirrel and stopped to look at him; he disturbed a hare who had come down from the meadows and at Tom's approach fled up to them again. He followed the stream, jumping from side to side of it, and as he proceeded the steep banks of the glen gradually grew shallower, till at last the ground was level, and only a field of meadow grass bright with buttercups lay between him and the river. In wet weather the ground was soft and boggy

here, so that cows sometimes sank up above their knees and had to be hauled out by ropes, but just now it was firm enough. Anyhow, Tom knew every inch of it, and passing lightly between two beds of yellow irises reached the towpath.

“Shall I bathe or not?” he was asking himself, and the question was difficult to answer, for though he wanted to be able to remark at breakfast that he had had a bathe in the river he wasn’t really fond of cold water, nor even sure that it agreed with him. “I’m afraid a lot of things don’t agree with me,” Tom mused. “I’m quite easily made ill.” And he particularly wished not to be ill just before the exams, because he was rather a dab at exams, though not such a dab as Pascoe. But he really knew far more than Pascoe did, only the kinds of things he knew weren’t so useful. Besides, he was hopeless at mathematics.

He stood with his greyish, greenish eyes fixed doubtfully on the water, while the wind made little whisperings and songs as it swept over the rushes. Then he knelt down to try the temperature with his hand. This experiment elicited a sigh; nevertheless, after the briefest hesitation, he divested himself of his clothes and stepped cautiously into the shallow water at the edge. Why was it, he wondered, that he should think of leeches and eels at such a moment, instead of darting silver fish? But he did think of them, and dreaded at every step lest he should put his foot on something soft and fat and slimy which would move. He took only three or four steps and then stood still, not much more than knee-deep, among a patch of dark broad glossy leaves. He

splashed a little water over himself, wetting his dim brown hair, and this was the bathe.

Buzz! A large bumble-bee, after some preliminary fussing, alighted on Tom's shoulder and began to walk down his body, which looked very white among the dark leaves, though his hands and neck and freckled blunt-featured face were sunburned. The bee tickled him, but not unpleasantly. He was a very handsome bee, with an air of importance, and his black and orange velvet coat was rich and splendid. He looked so important, indeed, that Tom fancied he must be a Mayor or an Alderman at the very least. People like Daddy (who was a professor), and Doctor Macrory (who was an archæologist), and Mr. Holbrook (who taught music), hadn't at all such an important air. This was the kind of affluent, pompous bee who would be a Member of Parliament, or a City Councillor, and whose wife would open Sales of Work.

Tom poured more water over his head—to make sure that it would look sufficiently wet at breakfast—and while he was doing this an old grey horse came plodding along round the bend of the river. A rope was attached to the horse, a barge to the rope, and there was a man walking by the horse's head, and another man standing at the helm of the barge, steering it. The man who was walking was on the farther side of the horse, so that he did not notice Tom, but the steersman spied him at once and bawled out at the top of his voice: "Hi, Joe, here's a water-lily!" This caused Joe to lean a beery stubbly face over the horse's back, and it also drew a laugh from him. They were really very rude! Tom thought.