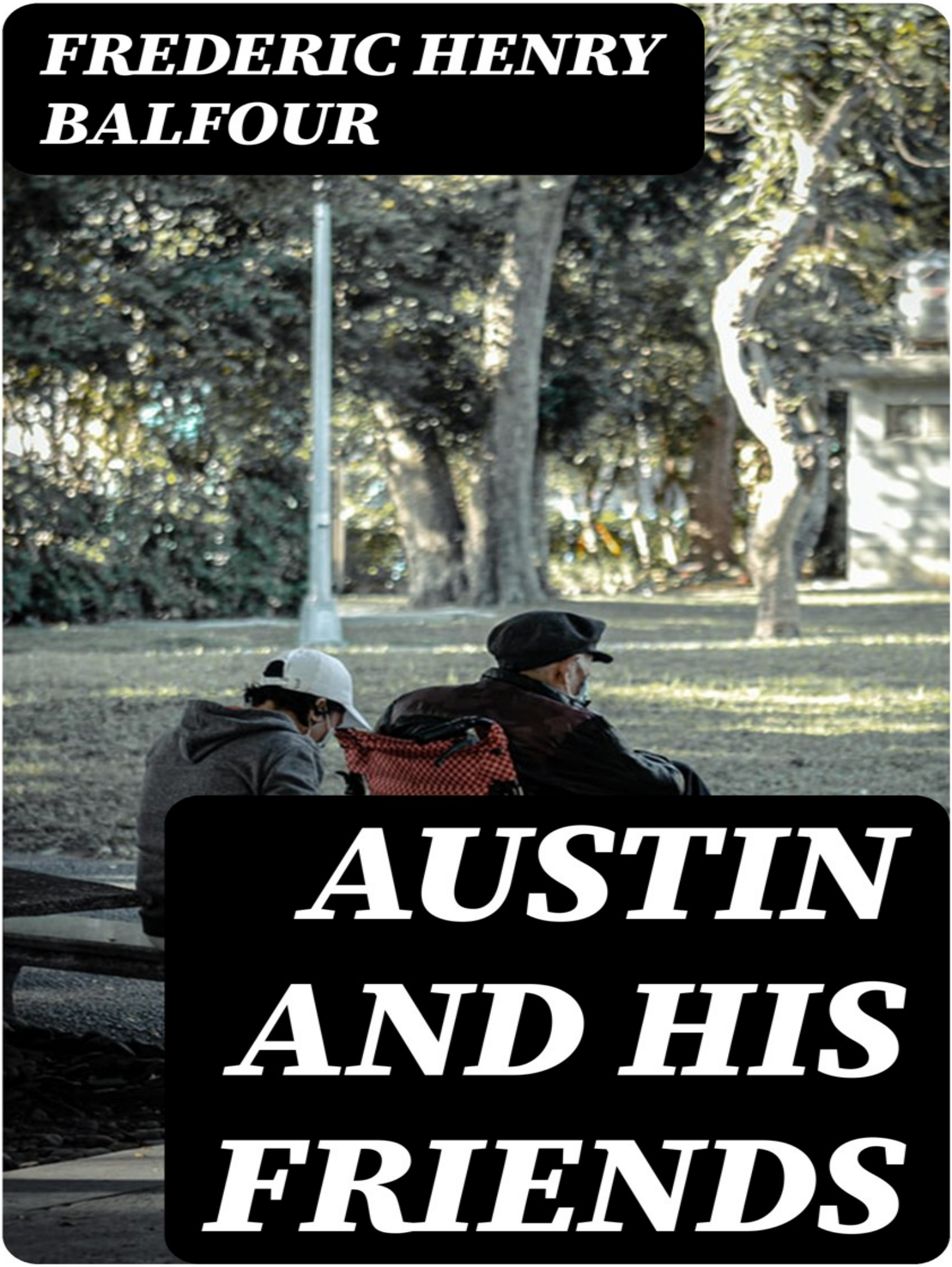
FREDERIC HENRY BALFOUR



AUSTIN AND HIS FRIENDS

Frederic Henry Balfour

Austin and His Friends

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The old-fashioned ghost-story was always terrifying and ghastly; something that made people afraid to go to bed, or to look over their shoulders, or to enter a room in the dark. It dealt with apparitions in a white sheet, and clanking chains, and dreadful faces that peered out from behind the window curtains in a haunted chamber. And the more blood-curdling it was, the more keenly people enjoyed it—until they were left alone, and then they were apt to wish that they had been reading Robinson Crusoe or Alison's History of Europe instead. Now the present book embodies an attempt to write a *cheerful* ghost-story; a story in which the ghostly element is of a friendly and pleasant character, and sheds a sense of happiness and sunshine over the entire life of the ghost-seer. Whether the author has succeeded in doing so will be for his readers to decide. It is only necessary to add that he has not introduced a single supernormal incident that has not occurred and been authenticated in the recorded experiences of persons lately or still alive.

Austin and His Friends

Chapter the FirstToC

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It was rather a beautiful old house—the house where Austin lived. That is, it was old-fashioned, low-browed, solid, and built of that peculiar sort of red brick which turns a rich rose-colour with age; and this warm rosy tint was set off to advantage by the thick mantle of dark green ivy in which it was partly encased, and by the row of tall white and purple irises which ran along the whole length of the sunniest side of the building. There was an ancient sun-dial just above the door, and all the windows were made of small, square panes—not a foot of plate-glass was there about the place; and if the rooms were nor particularly large or stately, they had that comfortable and settled look which tells of undisturbed occupancy by the same inmates for many years. But the principal charm of the place was the garden in which the house stood. In this case the frame was really more beautiful than the picture. On one side, the grounds were laid out in very formal style, with straight walks, clipped box hedges, an old stone fountain, and a perfect bowling-green of a lawn; while at right angles to this there was a plot of land in which all regularity was set at naught, and sweet-peas, tulips, hollyhocks, dahlias, gillyflowers, wall-flowers, sun-flowers, and a dozen others equally sweet and friendly shared the soil with gooseberry bushes and thriving apple-trees. Taking it all in all, it was a lovable and most reposeful home, and Austin, who had lived there ever since he could

remember, was quite unable to imagine any lot in life that could be compared to his.

Now this was curious, for Austin was a hopeless cripple. Up to the age of sixteen, he had been the most active, restless, healthy boy in all the countryside. He used to spend his days in boating, bicycling, climbing hills, and wandering at large through the woods and leafy lanes which stretched far and wide in all directions of the compass. One of his chief diversions had been sheep-chasing; nothing delighted him more than to start a whole flock of the astonished creatures careering madly round some broad green meadow, their fat woolly backs wobbling and jolting along in a compact mass of mild perplexity at this sudden interruption of their never-ending meal, while Austin scampered at their tails, as much excited with the sport as Don Quixote himself when he dispersed the legions of Alifanfaron. Let hare-coursers, otter-hunters, and pigeon-torturers blame him if they choose; the exercise probably did the sheep a vast amount of good, and Austin fully believed that they enjoyed it quite as much as he did. Then suddenly a great calamity befell him. A weakness made itself apparent in his right knee, accompanied by considerable pain. The family doctor looked anxious and puzzled; a great surgeon was called in, and the two shook their heads together in very portentous style. It was a case of caries, they said, and Austin mustn't hunt sheep any more. Soon he had to lie upon the sofa for several hours a day, and what made Aunt Charlotte more anxious than anything else was that he didn't seem to mind lying on the sofa, as he would have done if he had felt strong and well;

on the contrary, he grew thin and listless, and instead of always jumping up and trying to evade the doctor's orders, appeared quite content to lie there, quiet and resigned, from one week's end to another. That, thought shrewd Aunt Charlotte, betokened mischief. Another consultation followed, and then a very terrible sentence was pronounced. It was necessary, in order to save his life, that Austin should lose his leg.

What does a boy generally feel under such circumstances? What would you and I feel? Austin's first impulse was to burst into a passionate fit of weeping, and he yielded to it unreservedly. But, the fit once past, he smiled brilliantly through his tears. True, he would never again be able to enjoy those glorious ramps up hill and down dale that up till then had sent the warm life coursing through his veins. Never more would he go scorching along the level roads against the wind on his cherished bicycle. The open-air athletic days of stress and effort were gone, never to return. But there might be compensations; who could tell? Happiness, all said and done, need not depend upon a shin-bone more or less. He might lose a leg, but legs were, after all, a mere concomitant to life—life did not consist in legs. There would still be something left to live for, and who could tell whether that something might not be infinitely grander and nobler and more satisfying than even the rapture of flying ten miles an hour on his wheel, or chevying a flock of agitated sheep from one pasture to another?

Where this sudden inspiration came from, he then had no idea; but come it did, in the very nick of time, and helped

him to dry his tears. The day of destiny also came, and his courage was put to the test. He knew well enough, of course, that of the operation he would feel nothing. But the sight of the hard, white, narrow pallet on which he had to lie, the cold glint of the remorseless instruments, the neatly folded packages of lint and cotton-wool, and the faint, horrible smell of chloroform turned him rather sick for a minute. Then he glanced downwards, with a sense of almost affectionate yearning, at the limb he was about to lose. "Good-bye, dear old leg!" he murmured, with a little laugh which smothered a rising sob. "We've had some lovely ramps together, but the best of friends must part."

Afterwards, during the long days of dreary convalescence, he began to feel an interest in what remained of it; and then he found himself taking a sort of æsthetic pleasure in the smooth, beautifully-rounded stump, which really was in its way quite an artistic piece of work. At last, when the flesh was properly healed, and the white skin growing healthily again around his abbreviated member, he grew eager to make acquaintance with his new leg; for of course it was never intended that he should perform the rest of his earthly pilgrimage with only a leg and a half—let the added half be of what material it might. And his excitement may be better imagined than described when, one afternoon, the surgeon came in with a most wonderful object in his arms—a lovely prop of bright, black, burnished wood, set off with steel couplings and the most fascinating straps you ever saw. And the best of all was the socket, in which his soft white stump fitted as comfortably as though they had been made for one another—as, in fact, one of

them had been. It was a little difficult to walk just at first, for Austin was accustomed to begin by throwing out his foot, whereas now he had to begin by moving his thigh; this naturally made him stagger, and for some time he could only get along with the aid of a crutch. But to be able to walk again at all was a great achievement, and then, if you only looked at it in the proper light, it really was great fun.

There was, however, one person who, probably from a defective sense of humour, was unable to see any fun in it at all. Aunt Charlotte would have given her very ears for Austin, but her affection was of a somewhat irritable sort, and generally took the form of scolding. She was not a stupid woman by any means, but there was one thing in the world she never could understand, and that was Austin himself. He wasn't like other boys one bit, she always said. He had such a queer, topsy-turvy way of looking at things; would express the most outrageous opinions with an innocent unconsciousness that made her long to box his ears, and support the most arrant absurdities by arguments that conveyed not the smallest meaning to her intellect. Look at him now, for instance; a cripple for life, and pretending to see nothing in it but a joke, and expressing as much admiration for his horrible wooden leg as though it had been a king's sceptre! In Aunt Charlotte's view, Austin ought to have pitied himself immensely, and expressed a hope that God would help him to bear his burden with orthodox resignation to the Divine will; instead of which, he seemed totally unconscious of having any burden at all—a state of mind that was nothing less than impious. Austin was now seventeen, and it was high time that he took more

serious views of life. Ever since he was a baby he had been her special charge; for his mother had died in giving him birth, and his father had followed her about a twelvemonth later. She had always done her duty to the boy, and loved him as though he had been her own; but she reminded onlookers rather of a conscientious elderly cat with limited views of natural history condemned by circumstances to take care of a very irresponsible young eaglet. The eaglet, on his side, was entirely devoted to his protectress, but it was impossible for him not to feel a certain lenient and amused contempt for her very limited horizon.

"Auntie," he said to her one day, "you're just like a frog at the bottom of a well. You think the speck of blue you see above you is the entire sky, and the water you paddle up and down in is the ocean. Why can't you take a rather more cosmic view of things?"

This extraordinary remark occurred in the course of a wrangle between the two, because Austin insisted on his pet cat—a plump, white, matronly creature he had christened 'Gioconda,' because (so *he* said) she always smiled so sweetly—sitting up at the dinner-table and being fed with tit-bits off his own fork; and Aunt Charlotte objected to this proceeding on the ground that the proper place for cats was in the kitchen. Austin, on his side, averred that cats were in many ways much superior to human beings; that they had been worshipped as gods by the philosophical Egyptians because they were so scornful and mysterious; and that Gioconda herself was not only the divinest cat alive, but entitled to respect, if only as an embodiment and representative of cat-hood in the abstract, which was a most

important element in the economy of the universe. It was when Aunt Charlotte stigmatised these philosophical reflections as a pack of impertinent twaddle that Austin had had the audacity to say that she was like a frog.

And now her eaglet had been maimed for life, and whatever he might feel about it himself her own responsibilities were certainly much increased. At this very moment, for instance, after having practised stumping about the room for half-an-hour he insisted on going downstairs. Of course the idea was ridiculous. Even the doctor shook his head, while old Martha, who had tubbed Austin when he was two years old, joined in the general protest. But Austin, disdaining to argue the point with any one of them, had already hobbled out of the room, and before they were well aware of it had begun to essay the descent perilous. Ominous bumps were heard, and then a dull thud as of a body falling. But a bend in the wall had caught the body, and the explorer was none the worse. Then Aunt Charlotte, rushing back into the bedroom, flung open the window wide.

"Lubin!" she shouted lustily.

A young gardener boy, tall, round-faced and curly-haired, glanced up astonished from his work among the sweet-peas.

"Come up here directly and carry Master Austin downstairs. He's got a wooden leg and hasn't learnt how to use it."

The consequence of which was that two minutes later Austin, panting and enraged at the failure of his first attempt at independence, found himself firmly encircled by

a pair of strong young arms, lifted gently from the ground, and carried swiftly and safely downstairs and out at the garden door.

"Now you just keep quiet, Master Austin," murmured Lubin, chuckling as Austin began to kick. "No use your starting to run before you know how to walk. Wooden legs must be humoured a bit, Sir; 'twon't do to expect too much of 'em just at first, you see. This one o' yours is mighty handsome to look at, I don't deny, but it's not accustomed to staircases and maybe it'll take some time before it is. Hold tight, Sir; only a few yards more now. There! Here we are on the lawn at last. Now you can try your paces at your leisure."

"You're awfully nice to me, Lubin," gasped Austin, red with mortification, as he slipped from the lad's arms on to the grass, "but I felt just now as if I could have killed you, all the same."

"Lor', Sir, I don't mind," said Lubin. "I doubt that was no more'n natural. Can you stand steady? Here—lay hold o' my arm. Slow and sure's the word. Look out for that flower-bed. Now, then, round you go—that's it. Ah!"—as Austin fell sprawling on the grass. "Now how are you going to get up again, I should like to know? Seems to me the first thing you've got to learn is not to lose your balance, 'cause once you're down 'tain't the easiest thing in creation to scramble up again. You'll have to stick to the crutch at first, I reckon. Up we come! Now let's see how you can fare along a bit all by yourself."

Austin was thankful for the support of his crutch, with the aid of which he managed to stagger about for a few minutes

at quite a respectable speed. It reminded him almost of the far-off days when he was learning to ride his bicycle. At last he thought he would like to rest a bit, and was much surprised when, on flinging himself down upon a garden seat, his leg flew up in the air.

"Lively sort o' limb, this new leg o' yours, Sir," commented Lubin, as he bent it into a more decorous position. "You'll have to take care it don't carry you off with it one o' these fine days. Seems to me it wants taming, and learning how to behave itself in company. I heard tell of a cork leg once upon a time as was that nimble it started off running on its own account, and no earthly power could stop it. Wouldn't have mattered so much if it'd had nobody but itself to consider, but unluckily the gentleman it belonged to happened to be screwed on to the top end of it, and of course he had to follow. They do say as how he's following it still—poor beggar! Must be worn to a shadow by this time, I should think. But p'raps it ain't true after all. There are folks as'll say anything."

"I expect it's true enough," replied Austin cheerfully. "If you want a thing to be true, all you've got to do is to believe it—believe it as hard as you can. That makes it true, you see. At least, that's what the new psychology teaches. Thought creates things, you understand—though how it works I confess I can't explain. But never mind. Oh, dear, how drunk I am!"

"Drunk, Sir? No, no, only a bit giddy," said Lubin, as he stood watching Austin with his hands upon his hips. "You're not over strong yet, and that new leg of yours has been giving you too much exercise to begin with. You just keep

quiet a few minutes, and you'll soon be as right as ninepence."

Then Austin slid carefully off the seat, and stretched himself full length upon the grass. "I *am* drunk," he murmured, closing his eyes, "drunk with the scent of the flowers. Don't you smell them, Lubin? The air's heavy with it, and it has got into my brain. And how sweet the grass smells too. I love it—it's like breathing the breath of Nature. What do legs matter? It's much nicer to roll over the grass wherever you want to go than to have the bother of walking. Don't worry about me any more, nice Lubin. Go on tying up your sweet-peas. I'll come and help you when I'm tired of rolling about. Just now I don't want anything; I'm drunk—I'm happy—I'm satisfied—I'm happier than I ever was before. Be kind to the flowers, Lubin; don't tie them too tight. They're my friends and my lovers. Aren't you a little fond of them too?"

Then, left to his own reflections, he lay perfectly peaceful and content staring up into the sky. For months he had been fated to lead an entirely new life, and now it had actually begun. His entrance upon it was not bitter. He had flowers growing by his path, and books that he loved, and one or two friends who loved him. It was all right! And that was how he spent his first day of acknowledged cripplehood.

Chapter the SecondToC

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In a very short time Austin had overcome the initial difficulties of locomotion, and now began to take regular exercise out of doors. It would be too much to say that his gait was particularly elegant; but there really was something triumphal about the way in which he learnt to brandish his leg with every step he took, and the majestic swing with which he brought it round to its place in advance of the other. In fact, he soon found himself stumping along the highroads with wonderful speed and safety; though to clamber over stiles, and work a bicycle one-footed, of course took much more practice.

Hitherto I have said nothing about the neighbourhood of Austin's home. Now when I say neighbourhood, I don't mean the topographical surroundings—I use the word in its correcter sense of neighbours; and these it is necessary to refer to in passing. Of course there were several people living round about. There was the MacTavish family, for instance, consisting of Mr and Mrs MacTavish, five daughters and two sons. Mrs MacTavish had a brother who had been knighted, and on the strength of such near relationship to Sir Titus and Lady Clandougal, considered herself one of the county. But her claim was not endorsed, even by the humbler gentry with whom she was forced to associate, while as for the county proper it is not too much to say that that august community had never even heard of her. The Miss MacTavishes, ranging in age from fifteen to five-and-

twenty, were rather gawky young persons, with red hair and a perpetual giggle; in fact they could not speak without giggling, even if it was to tell you that somebody was dead. Every now and then Mrs MacTavish would proclaim, with portentous complacency, that Florrie, or Lizzie, or Aggie, was "out"—to the awe-struck admiration of her friends; which meant that the young person referred to had begun to do up her hair in a sort of bun at the back of her head, and had had her frock let down a couple of tucks. Austin couldn't bear them, though he was always scrupulously polite. And the boys were, if anything, less interesting than the girls. The elder of the two—a freckled young giant named Jock—was always asking him strange conundrums, such as whether he was going to put the pot on for the Metropolitan—which conveyed no more idea to Austin's mind than if he had said it in Chinese; while Sandy, the younger, used to terrify him out of his wits by shouting out that Yorkshire had got the hump, or that Jobson was 'not out' for a century, or that wickets were cheap at the Oval. In fact, the entire family bored him to extinction, though Aunt Charlotte, who had been an old school-friend of the mamma, sang their praises perseveringly, and said that the girls were dears.

Then there was the inevitable vicar, with a wife who piqued herself on her smart bonnets; a curate, who preached Socialism, wore knickerbockers, and belonged to the Fabian Society; a few unattached elderly ladies who had long outlived the reproach of their virginity; and just two or three other families with nothing particular to distinguish them one way or another. It may readily be inferred,

therefore, that Austin had not many associates. There was really no one in the place who interested him in the very least, and the consequence was that he was generally regarded as unsociable. And so he was—very unsociable. The companionship of his books, his bicycle, his flowers and his thoughts was far more precious to him than that of the silly people who bothered him to join in their vapid diversions and unseasonable talk, and he rightly acted upon his preference. His own resources were of such a nature that he never felt alone; and having but few comrades in the flesh, he wisely courted the society of those whom, though long since dead, he held in far higher esteem than all the elderly ladies and curates and MacTavishes who ever lived. His appetite in literature was keen, but fastidious. He devoured all the books he could procure about the Renaissance of art in Italy. The works of Mr Walter Pater were as a treasure-house of suggestion to him, and did much to form and guide his gradually developing mentality. He read Plato, being even more fascinated by the exquisite technique of the dialectic than by the ethical value of the teaching. And there was one small, slim book that he always carried about with him, and kept for special reading in the fields and woods. This was Virgil's Eclogues, the sylvan atmosphere of which penetrated the very depths of his being, and created in him a moral or spiritual atmosphere which was its counterpart. He seemed to live amid gracious pastoral scenes, where beautiful youths and maidens passed a perpetual springtime in a land of dewy lawns, and shady groves, and pools, and rippling streams. Daphnis and Mopsus, Corydon, Alexis, and Amyntas, were all to him real

personages, who peopled his solitude, inspired his poetic fancy, and fostered in his imagination the elements of an ideal life where the beauty and purity and freshness of untainted Nature reigned supreme. The accident of his lameness, by incapacitating him for violent exercise out of doors, ministered to the development of this spiritual tendency, and threw him back upon the allurements of a refined idealism. Daphnis became to him the embodiment, the concrete image, of eternal youthhood, of adolescence in the abstract, the attribute of an idealised humanity. To lead the pure Daphnis life of simplicity, stainlessness, communion with beautiful souls, was to lead the highest life. To find one's bliss in sunshine, flowers, and the winds of heaven—in both the physical and moral spheres—was to find the highest bliss. Why should not he, Austin Trevor, cripple as he was, so live the Daphnis life as to be himself a Daphnis?

No wonder a boy like this was voted unsociable. No wonder Sandy and Jock despised him as a muff, and the young ladies deplored his unaccountably elusive ways. The truth was that Austin simply had no use for any of them; his life was complete without them, it contained no niche into which they could ever fit. Lubin was a far more congenial comrade. Lubin never bothered him about football, or cricket, or horse-racing, never worried him with invitations to horrible picnics, never outraged his sensibilities in any way. On the contrary, Lubin rather contributed to his happiness by the care he took of the flowers, and the intelligence he showed in carrying out all Austin's elaborately conveyed instructions. Why, Lubin himself was a

sort of Daphnis—in a humble way. But Sandy! No, Austin was not equal to putting up with Sandy.

There was, however, one gentleman in the neighbourhood whom Master Austin was gracious enough to approve. This was a certain Mr Roger St Aubyn, a man of taste and culture, who possessed a very rare collection of fine pictures and old engravings which nobody had ever seen. St Aubyn was, in fact, something of a recluse, a student who seldom went beyond his park gates, and found his greatest pleasure in reading Greek and cultivating orchids. It was by the purest accident that the two came across each other. Austin was lying one afternoon on a bank of wild hyacinths just outside Combe Spinney, lazily admiring the effect of his bright black leg against the bright blue sky, and thinking of nothing in particular. Mr St Aubyn, who happened to be strolling in that direction, was attracted by the unwonted spectacle, and ventured on some good-humoured quizzical remark. This led to a conversation, in the course of which the scholar thought he discovered certain original traits in the modest observations of the youth. One topic drifted into another, and soon the two were engaged in an animated discussion about pursuits in life. It was in the course of this that Austin let drop the one word—Art.

"What is Art?" queried St Aubyn.

Austin hesitated for some moments. Then he said, very slowly:

"That is a question to which a dozen answers might be given. A whole book would be required to deal with it."

St Aubyn was delighted, both at the reply and at the hesitation that had preceded it.

"And are you an artist?" he enquired.

"I believe I am," replied Austin, very seriously. "Of course one doesn't like to be too confident, and I can't draw a single line, but still——"

"Good again," approved the other. "Here as in everything else all depends upon the definition. What is an artist?"

"An artist," exclaimed Austin, kindling, "is one who can see the beauty everywhere."

"*The* beauty?" repeated St Aubyn.

"The beauty that exists everywhere, even in ugly things. The beauty that ordinary people don't see," returned Austin. "Anybody can see beauty in what are *called* beautiful things—light, and colour, and grace. But it takes an artist to see beauty in a muddy road, and dripping branches, and drenching rain. How people cursed and grumbled on that rainy day we had last week; it made me sick to hear them. Now I saw the beauty *under* the ugliness of it all—the wonderful soft greys and browns, the tiny glints of silver between the leaves, the flashes of pearl and orpiment behind the shifting clouds. Do you know, I even see beauty in this wooden leg of mine, great beauty, though everybody else thinks it perfectly hideous! So that is why I hope I am not wrong in imagining that perhaps I may, really, be in some sense an artist."

For a moment St Aubyn did not speak. "The boy's a great artist," he muttered to himself. His interest was now excited in good earnest; here was no common mind. Of art Austin knew practically nothing, but the artistic instinct was

evidently tingling in every vein of him. St Aubyn himself lived for art and literature, and was amazed to have come across so curiously exceptional a personality. He drew the boy out a little more, and then, in a moment of impulse, did a most unaccustomed thing: he invited Austin to lunch with him on the following Thursday, promising, in addition, that they should spend the afternoon together looking over his conservatories and picture-gallery.

So great an honour, so undreamt-of a privilege, sent Austin's blood to the roots of his hair. He flourished his leg more proudly than ever as he stumped victoriously home and announced the great news to Aunt Charlotte. That estimable lady was fingering some notepaper on her writing-table as her excited nephew came bursting in upon her with his face radiant.

"Auntie," he cried, "what do you think? You'll never guess. I'm going to lunch with Mr St Aubyn on Thursday!"

Aunt Charlotte turned round, looking slightly dazed.

"Going to lunch with whom?" she asked.

"With Mr St Aubyn. You know—he lives at Moorcombe Court. I met him in the woods and had a long talk with him, and now he's going to show me all his pictures—*and* his engravings—*and* his wonderful orchids and things. I'm to spend all the afternoon with him. Isn't it splendid! I could never have hoped for such an opportunity. And he's so awfully nice—so cultured and clever, you know—"

"Really!" said Aunt Charlotte, drawing herself up. "Well, you're vastly honoured, Austin, I must say. Mr St Aubyn is chary of his civilities. It is very kind of him to ask you, I'm sure, but I think it's rather a liberty all the same."

"A liberty!" repeated Austin, aghast.

"He has never called on me," returned Aunt Charlotte, statelily. "If he had wished to cultivate our acquaintance, that would have been at least the usual thing to do. However, of course I've no objection. On Thursday, you say. Well, now just give me your attention to something rather more important. I intend to invite some people here to tea next week, and you may as well write the invitations for me now."

Austin's face lengthened. "Oh, why?" he sighed. "It isn't as though there was anybody worth asking—and really, the horrid creatures that infest this neighbourhood—. Whom do you want to ask?"

"I'm astonished at you, speaking of our friends like that," replied his aunt, severely. "They're not horrid creatures; they're all very nice and kind. Of course we must have the MacTavishes——"

"I knew it," groaned Austin, sinking into a chair. "Those dear MacTavishes! There are nineteen of them, aren't there? Or is it only nine?"

"Don't be ridiculous, Austin," said Aunt Charlotte. "Then there are the Miss Minchins—that'll be eleven; the vicar and his wife, of *course*; and old Mr and Mrs Cobbledick. Now just come and sit here——"

"The Cobbledicks—those old murderers!" cried Austin. "Do you want us to be all assassinated together?"

"Murderers!" exclaimed Aunt Charlotte, horrified. "I think you've gone out of your mind. A dear kindly old couple like the Cobbledicks! Not very handsome, perhaps, but—murderers! What in the world will you say next?"